CHAPTER 1

Measuring and Defining Forgiveness

The concept of forgiveness carries a heavy weight — more than it can bear. It means so many things to so many people who consider it from different frames of reference — from academicians influenced by grand theological teachings to secular researchers trying to reduce abstruse concepts into manageable, bite-size units that can be studied in laboratory settings. What has evolved is a mishmash of concepts that often do nothing more than confuse and pressure those who are seeking relief from suffering. What is missing is a concrete, down-to-earth vision of forgiveness — one that is human and attainable.

—Janis Abrahms Spring

Through angry tears, Ellen reported that she had caught George in yet another extramarital affair—his fourth in their six-year marriage.* She had asked him to leave and would not take him back unless he agreed to counseling. George proudly justified his own behavior in light of the fact that Ellen herself had actually taken

* Case studies used in this book, while disguised, are based on true cases from my counseling experience. Names are changed for privacy.

their three-year-old son and moved in with an old boyfriend the year prior. After finding her and talking her into moving back in with him, George soon had his next affair to pay her back. At this point, Ellen interrupted to defend herself: "But I only moved in with Frank to get back at you for all of your affairs." George shot back with, "Having an affair is one thing, but taking my son away from me—this is going too far!" Needless to say, the session ended with a heavy feeling that we were just beginning a long and painful journey together.

A week later, it was as if I were dealing with a completely different couple. Both were smiling (although Ellen's smile was a bit more contrived) and George's posture and gait exuded confidence. When I remarked on the change, George proudly proclaimed, "We talked this week and Ellen has forgiven me for all of my affairs and now we are back living together." To my amazement, Ellen confirmed this was true. "Yes," she replied, "I have to forgive him. After all, I did have an affair, too, and I did take his son away and even though I don't go to church very often, I know God wants me to forgive." Turning to George, I asked if he had truly forgiven Ellen. He paused for a couple of seconds, as if he were deciding, and then said, "Sure, why not, as long as she promises never to do it again."

This exchange reveals several assumptions about forgiveness not unique to George and Ellen. The first and most salient assumption is the belief that forgiveness is something that can happen rather quickly, that the effects of years of cruel and demeaning behavior can be reduced as a result of one or two discussions. For Ellen and George, forgiveness is apparently a discrete act in time (not a process) that forever resolves an offense.

Another assumption of Ellen's is that personal wrongdoing on the part of the victim modifies or cancels out the sin of the perpetrator. Through her one affair, Ellen has forever forfeited her right to be upset with George for his many affairs. We might argue that four (affairs) to one hardly seems equal, but the fact remains that vows of faithfulness were broken on both sides. Perhaps George's point about Ellen taking their son away helps to even the score. The formula might be something like "one affair + taking the son = four (or more) affairs without taking the son." For George, however, the scales are still not quite balanced. Ellen still owes him somehow for the severity of her betrayal and thus he can postpone his forgiveness of her.

Finally, Ellen recognizes that God probably has something to do with forgiveness. She remembers her religious upbringing that stressed forgiveness as a response to a command of God. As painful as her life has turned out, she cannot afford to face the anger of whatever God might exist. So she tries to forgive George as best she knows how and hopes that one day he will forgive her and they can live with a little less pain.

Do George and Ellen's assumptions about forgiveness reflect anything close to what forgiveness really is? By what criteria should I, as a counselor, judge their views on forgiveness? Moreover, as a Christian, should I allow my faith to influence my professional views on forgiveness? Is there a distinctly Christian view of forgiveness or is all forgiveness the same? These questions and many more consistently emerge in my encounters with people who seek to forgive and be forgiven.

Four Conclusions of Forgiveness Literature

Contemporary research in the area of counseling and psychology points to a renewed interest in the topic of forgiveness. What was once viewed as at best a mere religious idea, and at worst a pious reinforcement for weakness, is now seen as an increasingly effective tool in helping people deal with interpersonal pain. We may draw several conclusions from this quarter century of research that can help us in our attempt to define and understand forgiveness.

Forgiveness is Good For You

The first and most common conclusion is that forgiveness, whatever it is, is *good* for us. Although some depict the relationship between forgiveness and health as an "unanswered question,"[1] the overwhelming conclusion of most writers in this area is that forgiveness brings at least some health benefits, including but not limited to: lower blood pressure,[2] reduced hypertension,[3] and overall better cardiovascular health.[4] Furthermore, people who are more forgiving report less stress and fewer stress-related symptoms and overall health problems.[5] One study suggests that the benefits of forgiveness could even penetrate to the cellular level,[6] while another claims that forgiveness can even reduce the severity of psoriasis.[7]

The benefits of forgiveness are not limited to the physical realm, however. Those who "take the time to go through the forgiveness

process" become "psychologically healthier."[8] One of the earliest studies in this area found that forgiveness could alleviate symptoms of depression, anxiety, and even paranoia.[9] Forgiveness also builds self-esteem and eliminates the unhealthy side effects associated with holding a grudge. Apparently, as the title of one work claims, *It feels good to forgive*.[10] Morally, it builds character and contributes to overall emotional maturity.[11] Forgiveness appears to be so effective for such a wide range of problems that it is even being considered as an empirically supported treatment—the title coveted by those who present new interventions, as such treatments are usually accompanied by increased third-party reimbursements.[12] Robert D. Enright confidently states that "forgiveness works."[13] Yet some are concerned that the benefits of forgiveness have been exaggerated. Jeffrie G. Murphy wonders if forgiveness is becoming a "universal panacea for all mental, moral, and spiritual ills."[14] Despite these questions, there is some evidence from the current research that forgiveness is good for us.

If emphasizing the positive does not work, a corollary of this kind of research is that *not* forgiving is *bad* for us. Not only does it increase the chances for ulcers, high blood pressure, and ostensibly, all of the other disorders that forgiveness would help alleviate; but it also allows anger to fester, thereby causing all kinds of additional damage. Some authors compare unforgiveness to the "fight or flight" mechanism in that it serves well as a self-protective measure for a very short time, but no human was meant to live in that state permanently.[15] Others equate unforgiveness with anger and thus emphasize forgiveness as a useful way to reduce all of the potential harm that can come from suppressed resentment.[16] Hence, if unforgiveness promotes emotional conditions that have already been shown to be dysfunctional, then any intervention that reduces or eliminates such symptoms would clearly be healthy and beneficial. Thus, as an antidote to all of the toxic side effects of unforgiveness, some kind of forgiveness procedure seems to fit the bill nicely.

Factors that Correlate with Forgiveness

Another major theme of the research goes this way: since forgiveness is so good, it must be advantageous to identify factors that help or hinder the act of forgiveness. Anyone familiar with psychological theory will recognize the various attachment styles usually formed early in life and

used as relational templates from then on. It should come as no surprise that those with secure attachment styles seem to have an easier time with forgiveness. In addition, certain personality traits and conflict resolution styles also correlate with a greater ability to forgive. These are just some of the variables that positively correlate with forgiveness, while, not surprisingly, rumination or brooding does not correlate as highly.

Design of Forgiveness Assessment Tools

A third conclusion from current research is that the newly discovered power of forgiveness has spawned a new cottage industry—the creation of assessment tools for measuring a person's level of forgiveness.[17] These scales, in typical research fashion, assign a numerical value to either someone's level of forgiveness or her propensity to forgive. Again, if forgiveness is beneficial, it is incumbent upon researchers and counselors to be able to assess whether and to what degree clients are correctly performing such a powerful technique. There are at least two counseling related concerns with these tools aside from the diversity of definitions of forgiveness.[18] First, the designer of the scale must assign some kind of quantitative threshold as a target for the client to reach. This could create pressure on the client to aim for a particular score rather than struggle with what forgiveness might mean in her particular situation. The second concern is the fact that this kind of research can only provide a snapshot of where the client might be in a specific moment in time. Where she is on a trajectory might be harder to measure (repeated administrations of the same test risk being corrupted by practice effect). If the process of forgiveness is often a winding road with lots of turns, the value of measuring one particular location is questionable.

Construction of Forgiveness Models

The final theme of contemporary forgiveness literature which can aid us in defining forgiveness is the actual methodology—a "how-to manual," essentially. This is the most theoretical of the four themes and thus not technically research in the purest sense of the word. Not surprisingly, for this reason and others, the conclusions about how to do forgiveness are varied; to date, there are close to 20 different step-by-step models. A cursory study noting the number of steps required to forgive (average of 5 with a standard deviation of 2) reveals the wide diversity. One method advocates as many as 16 steps! Can all of these recipes possibly produce the same dish?

Assessing Two Common Forgiveness Models

Although each model has its own distinctive formula, surveying two of the more dominant paradigms of how to carry out forgiveness will at least provide some sense of what is usually portrayed as forgiveness. These are Enright's four-phase model and Everett L. Worthington's five-step model.[19] Because these are two of the shorter models, many of the concepts mentioned are expanded upon in the other models. A comparison of these two models gives a sense of how the various models relate. The following chart outlines the two models and shows where they overlap.

Enright	Worthington
Uncovering the Anger	Recall the Hurt
	Empathizing with the Offender
Deciding to Forgive	Altruistic Gift of Forgiveness
Working on Forgiving	Commit Publicly to Forgive
	Hold onto Forgiveness
Discovery and Release	

Enright

Enright's four-phase model is actually much more involved than just four discrete steps; there are several sub-points under each phase. The first phase, Uncovering the Anger, assumes that the victim is repressing or denying the appropriate anger related to the offense. The anger eating away at the victim is what causes so many of the injurious side effects mentioned above. In Enright's model, "unforgiveness" is another term for anger, specifically unresolved anger. If this anger is not faced squarely, no real forgiveness can occur. Like spoiled food, it must be expunged in order for the body to feel better. Denying the poison only makes things worse.

Once the anger has been faced and released to some degree, the potential forgiver next needs to decide to forgive. The implication here is that

if the victim makes the decision, it is more likely to be real and therefore completed. A person rarely does something without first deciding to do it. The actual decision somehow reduces ambivalence and anxiety. Deciding to forgive (especially after the anger has run its course) is similar.

Curiously, somewhere between Steps 2 and 3, actual forgiveness takes place. By Step 3 the forgiver is "working on" following through with the decision of Step 2. Forgiveness can be hard work and thus continual reinforcement may be needed to make forgiveness feel real. Although the model does not spell out when this actually happens, it is eventually cause for joy. An emerging recognition on the part of the victim that she has indeed forgiven her offender brings a new sense of relief. Those negative side effects that come with unforgiveness evaporate, while all of the positive blessings that accompany forgiveness emerge.

Worthington

Worthington's model begins similarly, although he broadens the emotional response to involve recalling the hurt. This hurt may include anger but is not limited to it. Feelings of sadness, betrayal, pain, and many other emotions must be faced openly and honestly. Again, to deny the pain (in whatever form) only makes things worse.

At this point Worthington inserts a second preliminary step before the actual step of forgiveness: Empathizing with the Offender, in which empathy means the victim imagines herself in the shoes of the offender. "Why did he do it? How intentional was it? How could I, if I were he, ever do such a thing?" are all questions victims should explore as they attempt to project themselves into the minds of the offenders. The assumption here is that to whatever degree the victim can empathize at all with the offender, forgiveness will come that much more easily. This step comes before the actual step of forgiveness because it provides the victim a bridge from thinking of her own pain (Step 1: Recall the Hurt) to thinking of the pain of the offender, which eventually leads to forgiving him. The victim first embraces her own pain and is prepared through this empathy to feel the pain of the offender, which in turn paves the way for forgiveness.

Worthington's decision step is framed in terms of an altruistic gift to the offender. Since presumably the victim has already made the switch in her mind from thinking of her own pain to thinking of

the pain of the offender, the forgiveness is free ("a gift") and for his sake. It is this supposed "other-centeredness" that makes the decision possible, but it is still a *decision* to forgive—which remains undefined. Like Enright, Worthington does not include a step that explains or describes the actual forgiveness and therefore, we are left to assume that it occurs somewhere between Steps 3 and 4.

Following such a decision to forgive, there is often a great deal of residual pain and resentment. Worthington explains this as the emotions not keeping up with the will. In other words, we can decide to forgive (and presumably even do it) and still not "feel" like everything has been resolved. One of the ways to accelerate this reuniting of the emotions with the will is to commit publicly to forgive. It is as if the will says to the emotions, "We are now going on the public record with this decision, so you had better catch up." Going public with a decision makes reneging just a little bit more difficult (although not impossible). Even after a public pronouncement, a gap can still exist between what a person has done and how she feels about the whole situation. For some people forgiveness is hard and long and thus has to be "worked through" (Step 5).

From this brief survey of two dominant views of forgiveness, it is clear that models may overlap at some points, and yet, there are significant differences. For example, Enright makes anger the main emotion that needs to be faced, whereas Worthington broadens it to hurt. Worthington adds the step of empathy as preliminary to the actual decision to forgive, whereas Enright moves directly from facing anger to deciding to forgive. Finally, Enright's model ends with a sense of joy and release, but Worthington leaves his forgivers still struggling to hold on to whatever forgiveness they were able to muster. These divergences, revealed in a comparison of just two of the shorter models, multiply in examinations of the longer models of forgiveness.

If the major models cannot provide coherent definitions of forgiveness, is there any hope for a universal definition? Although a great deal of measuring is being done by those conducting empirical forgiveness researches, the theoretical foundation (from which any ultimate definition must be derived) is lagging behind. Worthington even laments that "one important yet unresolved conceptual issue is the definition of forgiveness."[20] Others also concede that no "gold standard" or "consensual definition" of forgiveness exists.[21] Some forgiveness writers assume such

familiarity on the part of their readers that they never even attempt to define the word.[22] Another way some authors attempt to bring clarity is to prefix the term with an adjective. One attempt to provide a forgiveness classification scheme is that given by F. LeRon Shults and Steven J. Sandage, who identify at least three types of forgiveness: *therapeutic*, *forensic*, and *relational*.[23]

Forgiveness Taxonomy

Therapeutic Forgiveness

The first and most common type of forgiveness is *therapeutic* forgiveness. As the name implies, this type of forgiveness is concerned primarily with the healing power of forgiveness *for the victim*. Those who are wounded at the hands of others often continue to suffer emotional discomfort long after the sin has been perpetrated. While therapeutic forgiveness may have some healthful benefit if practiced immediately, it is more often advocated as a balm for the wound of ingrained resentment that refuses to heal itself over time. This raw sore of toxic, slow-burning anger needs to be lanced so healing can finally occur. Whatever forgiveness means, it eventually leads to some kind of resolution in the mind of the victim whereby neither the original offense nor the subsequent resentment can cause any fresh pain. Because forgiveness is presented as a remedy for resentment, many forgiveness writers equate forgiveness and healing.

Lewis B. Smedes clearly advocates for this position,[24] and he is usually cited as a spokesperson for this type of forgiveness.[25] Echoing Smedes, the majority of contemporary forgiveness researchers, in their attempts to identify and measure the benefits of forgiveness, work from the same basic framework. If there are clear beneficial side effects for those who can manage somehow to forgive, it behooves a victim to forgive in order to experience these benefits. Indeed, the promise of feeling better has become the primary market strategy for forgiveness. The more the benefits of forgiveness are identified, the more a person should *want* to forgive so as to reap these rewards. Whether it is appropriate or morally defensible to forgive in a particular situation is not the point. Since it is in the victim's *best interest* to forgive, she should go ahead and do it (definitional ambiguity aside). In other words, the primary motivation for forgiveness becomes

either to reap the benefits of forgiveness (it is good for me) or to eliminate the negative side effects of not forgiving (unforgiveness is bad for me).

Concerns with Therapeutic Forgiveness

There are at least three concerns with this type of forgiveness. The first concern is that if personal healing becomes the primary objective, forgiveness can too easily be seen as a means to an end rather than as an end itself; that is, forgiveness becomes a path to emotional, physical, and even spiritual wholeness rather than a remedy for sin, as it is presented in Scripture and Christian theology. If it is merely a non-theologically-driven psychological technique, then it can be employed in multiple settings (even non-Christian) and the outcomes measured. If this intervention proves to be statistically successful, it could even be elevated to that coveted category—empirically supported treatments—as some are even now advocating.[26] It is not unrealistic to predict that if present trends continue, one day soon insurance companies will pay for some kind of forgiveness therapy as a proven treatment for a multitude of emotional ills.

The question is, will the forgiveness reimbursed by the insurance companies in any way resemble the forgiveness taught in Scripture? Nigel Biggar points out that the ultimate result of viewing forgiveness primarily through a therapeutic lens is that forgiveness becomes more materialistic and less theological.[27] He cites Worthington's emphasis on the relationship between the "fight or flight" mechanism and the "neurobiological foundation" of forgiveness (in contrast to the relatively little said by Worthington about the theological foundations of forgiveness) as evidence of this reductionist trend.[28] For example, Biggar mentions a book edited by Worthington[29] in which the portion of the book devoted to psychological research on forgiveness clearly overshadows the one chapter addressing theological perspectives.

In contrast to Worthington and others, Katheryn Rhoads Meek and Mark R. McMinn[30] warn of at least two dangers in ignoring the biblically and theologically rich roots of forgiveness to pursue some short-term therapeutic gain. First, because the precedent for human forgiveness is divine forgiveness, the victim must face the universal brokenness that comes with a biblical view of sin. Facing another's sin always involves a fresh opportunity to look at the victim's own failings. This insight cannot come except and until the victim sees that depravity

has cursed all and that none really deserves God's grace. However, once the victim tastes God's unmerited favor, she is in a position to "lovingly identify" with her offenders and see them holistically rather than just view them as people who wronged her. In other words, forgiveness helps us grow in empathy as well as insight, so if we ignore the biblical data on forgiveness, *we as victims* will be worse off (i.e., less insightful and less empathic). The deeper reason, however, why the scriptural teaching on forgiveness cannot be ignored, is that when we forgive, we are modeling God. Therefore, failure to embrace true biblical forgiveness would not be honoring to Him.*

Meek and McMinn's points are a helpful corrective to the materialistic view of forgiveness typically presented, but even their approach focuses on the advantages and disadvantages of forgiveness *for the victim* and thus it is similar to the basic tenet of therapeutic forgiveness in which the victim will benefit from forgiving (or lose out by not forgiving).

A second and not totally unrelated concern with therapeutic forgiveness is that it often reinforces the victim's tendency to focus on herself and her pain, prompting a primarily self-motivated demand for healing. Those who see forgiveness as more of a virtue than a clinical intervention are troubled by the potential self-centeredness of therapeutic forgiveness.[31] Apparently, God's only role in this drama is to facilitate the healing, while the offender need not play any role whatsoever. The victim becomes preoccupied with her own discomfort and thus risks a self-absorption that eventually becomes addictive. In contrast, many of the most moving stories about forgiveness in Scripture involve the rich blessing that forgiveness is *to the offender*.

Indeed, God is the most common forgiver in Scripture. More passages refer to God's forgiveness of humans than humans' forgiveness of each other. Clearly, His forgiveness brings with it incredible riches *for the forgiven*. For example, Psalm 32:1 claims, "*Blessed* is the man whose sin is forgiven" (emphasis added). Here it is the *forgiven one* (i.e., the offender) who is described as blessed, not the forgiver. This is not to say that God derives no pleasure or subjective benefit from forgiving His wayward people. It was, after all, for the *joy* that was set before Him that He endured the cross (Heb. 12:2), and the heavenly Shepherd experiences

* This will be the subject of Chapter 4.

great delight when one of His wayward sheep is found (Luke 15:1–7). However, the overwhelming beneficiaries of God's forgiveness are those who receive it. God's forgiveness, in contrast to therapeutic forgiveness, is other-centered. To put it another way, God does not forgive so He can get a good night's sleep.

A final concern, and the one mentioned by Shults and Sandage, is that therapeutic forgiveness tends to marginalize the relational aspects of forgiveness.[32] Since the primary goal of therapeutic forgiveness is healing for the victim, the relationship with the offender becomes almost irrelevant. As image-bearers of a triune God, we were created for relationship, first with God and then with each other. We are not relationally autonomous but rather derivative. Thus, we more fully live out our created destiny to the degree that we are connected with each other.[33] Part of this connection is to become practiced at forgiving one another.

Forensic Forgiveness

Therapeutic forgiveness, as its label implies, is usually advocated in the domain of psychology and psychotherapy, whereas the second type of forgiveness listed by Shults and Sandage, namely *forensic* forgiveness, more commonly relates to issues of theology. This kind of forgiveness usually involves the metaphor of paying the price for sin, whether in the legal realm or in the marketplace. With its theological emphasis, it is this type of forgiveness that is typically associated with Christian orthodoxy.

Concerns with Forensic Forgiveness

One of the major themes of Shults and Sandage's book, however, is that to give the forensic aspects of forgiveness primary or foundational explanatory power is to severely limit the relational and interpersonal richness that is just as important to a fuller understanding of forgiveness. Forensic forgiveness is limited to a "transaction…in which one party agrees not to exact what the law requires,"[34] followed by the warning not to stretch the metaphor too far.[35] The question is never asked, "Why is the demand for punishment dropped?" or "Why is the debt cancelled?" By ignoring this question, Shults and Sandage somehow use both the illustrations of a child petulantly mouthing words while storming off and of nations forgiving other nations' debts as two examples of the same semantic field.[36]

Several additional questions are relevant to Shults and Sandage's understanding of forensic forgiveness. First, does the Bible support such a limited view of forgiveness—one that only sees forgiveness as some kind of legal transaction? Since Shults and Sandage link traditional theological understandings of forgiveness with this category, is this a legitimate characterization of the historical, evangelical understanding of forgiveness in the first place? And finally, to the degree that the authors have constructed a straw man of forensic forgiveness, are they risking creating more problems than they are attempting to solve by "revising" or "improving on" traditional understandings of forgiveness? While defining forgiveness in *exclusively* forensic terms is obviously reductionistic, diminishing the forensic elements of forgiveness seems a lot worse. The authors conclude, "All of this suggests that salvation is about more than a forensic application of forgiveness."[37] Of course it is about more, but is it ever about less?

Relational Forgiveness

The third option cited by Shults and Sandage (and their preference) is *relational* forgiveness. This definition presumes all of the orthodoxy of forensic forgiveness but deliberately emphasizes the interpersonal experience involved during a rupture and possible reconciliation of a relationship. As the authors put it, "The New Testament *occasionally* uses penal and financial metaphors for salvation, especially in the context of parables, but as we shall see, the *overarching* meaning of forgiveness is manifesting and sharing redemptive grace. In Christian theology, salvation is about grace."[38] Of course, this construal presupposes the restricted definition of forensic forgiveness mentioned above. A broader (and more biblical) definition of forensic forgiveness would still emphasize the foundational aspects of the transaction but also recognize that any such transaction is between people and thus the relational elements can never be excluded.

Other Types of Forgiveness

There are other categories of forgiveness mentioned in the literature. One type frequently championed is that which consists exclusively of activity by the victim. Almost all contemporary therapeutic forgiveness writers celebrate that this powerful intervention is wholly within the

power of the victim alone. Thus, the lack of participation on the part of the perpetrator is no threat to the process. Waiting for the offender to repent (or be involved at all) only restores to the offender power that the victim can possess through forgiveness. Most of the forgiveness authors sing the praises of this method of forgiveness, but it was a pastor/theologian who accurately coined the term "unilateral forgiveness."[39] Although the source of the wound may be *interpersonal*, the healing which comes through forgiveness does not necessarily have to be; it can be purely *unilateral*.

Add to this list *dispositional* forgiveness, which characterizes one victim with a forgiving spirit, in contrast to another who is able to practice *situational* (specific event) forgiveness,[40] and the labels go on and on. But does adding an adjective to the term "forgiveness" resolve the problem of definition issues? It does not help much if the adjective is clearer than the noun it is modifying. What if we are clear about terms like "unilateral," "therapeutic," "forensic," and other modifiers, but still do not understand forgiveness itself? The definition becomes even more clouded when two opposing adjectives are used to describe the same construct. For instance, how can forgiveness be both unilateral and interpersonal at the same time? How can the offender be involved and not involved at the same time?

To use a biblical example, when did the father *actually forgive* his wayward son (Luke 15:1–32)? Was it when he saw his son coming down the road? Was it in response to his son's repentance speech (vs. 21)? If so, this would be an example of *interpersonal* forgiveness—a *transaction between* the father and the son. But what if the father forgave the son long before, maybe even as the son was leaving? This type of forgiveness would be *unilateral* as it did not involve any action on the part of the son at all. Is the term "forgiveness" broad enough to include the father's loving attitude toward his son as he was leaving *and* his restoring response upon his return?*

With the diversity of forgiveness definitions, are we as Christians free to pick and choose the definition that suits us or works for us?

* Of course, it must be remembered that the story of the prodigal son is not an allegory but rather a parable Jesus told to make one primary point: God experiences joy when that which was lost is found. Therefore, care must be exercised before interpreting every detail of the story. I only use it here because it is frequently referenced by forgiveness writers and to illustrate the point about the diversity of forgiveness definitions.

Has forgiveness become a vague inkblot onto which we project our own idiosyncratic meaning? For a Christian, this is not an option. Whatever forgiveness means, it must be first rooted in Scripture and Christian theology, its original home before current research discovered it. Additionally, because forgiveness is an imperative for believers, God must have had something in mind when He commanded it.

In the case of George and Ellen mentioned earlier, it is obvious that they are guilty of a great deal of sin against one another. In light of the current confusion over what forgiveness means, we can perhaps at least excuse their lack of clarity and consistency concerning forgiveness. But this still does not absolve them of the call to forgive one another. As a counselor I must help them negotiate a more accurate and meaningful definition of forgiveness so when they actually do forgive one another, it will have more substance and permanence.