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DIVINE FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION

Abstract: I argue that divine forgiveness is God's openness to reconciliation with us, the wrongdoers, with respect to our wrongdoing. The main advantage of this view is that it explains the power of divine forgiveness to reconcile us to God when we repent. As I show, this view also fits well with the parable of the prodigal son, which is commonly taken to illustrate divine forgiveness, and it accounts for the close connection between divine forgiveness and Christ's atonement. Finally, I demonstrate that this view is particularly well-suited, although not committed, to the idea that God forgives us without our repentance.

The parable of the prodigal son provides a powerful illustration of forgiveness (Luke 15:11-32).

The son asks for his share of the inheritance and, after receiving it, leaves home and squanders it on wild living. When he has nothing left, he hires himself out to take care of pigs, and he longs to eat the pods that the pigs are eating. Eventually, he comes to his senses, realizing that his father's servants have food to spare. He journeys home to repent and to ask his father to treat him like one of the servants. While he is still a long way off, his father sees him and has compassion on him. The father runs to his son, embraces him, and, when the son expresses repentance, does not even give him the chance to ask to be like the hired help. Instead, the father directs his servants to bring out the best robe, a ring, and sandals for his son and to prepare a great feast to celebrate his return.

The forgiveness bestowed by the father in the parable of the prodigal son, meant by Jesus to represent divine forgiveness, beautifully exemplifies and supports the account of divine forgiveness that I develop and defend in this paper. On this account, divine forgiveness is openness to reconciliation with the wrongdoer with respect to the wrongdoing. In the parable,

the father is clearly open to reconciliation with his son: he runs to his son and embraces him; he throws a party for his son and puts the best clothes on him. Through these actions, he demonstrates to the repentant prodigal son and to those around them that they are reconciled, that the son's status as a beloved son is intact. On the view that I defend, the father's openness to reconciliation with his son constitutes his forgiving his son. As the father's forgiveness is a picture of divine forgiveness, I claim that God's openness to reconciliation with us, the wrongdoers, constitutes His forgiving us.

My argument proceeds as follows. In Section I, I set out desiderata that a view of divine forgiveness should plausibly meet. In Section II, I discuss human forgiveness, using an example to make plausible that human forgiveness is openness to reconciliation with the wrongdoer with respect to the wrongdoing and clarifying what it means to be open to reconciliation with a wrongdoer. I turn to divine forgiveness in Section III. Here I argue that, similarly to human forgiveness, divine forgiveness is God's openness to reconciliation with us, the wrongdoers, with respect to our wrongdoing. I first examine the parable of the prodigal son in order to clarify and support this view of divine forgiveness. I then make the case that this view meets the desiderata that a view of divine forgiveness should meet, including accounting for the close connection between divine forgiveness and Christ's atonement. Finally, I show how this view, when considered in conjunction with Christ's atonement, is well suited to the idea that God forgives us one-sidedly – i.e., without our repentance – although it is also consistent with the idea that God does not forgive us one-sidedly. Note that I will work within the Christian context, but I think that many of the arguments below could be modified for other theistic traditions.

I. Desiderata for a View of Divine Forgiveness

In this section, I set out desiderata that a view of divine forgiveness should plausibly meet.

These desiderata are not individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for a view of divine forgiveness but are instead intuitive features of divine forgiveness. Hence, for a view of divine forgiveness to be plausible, it should meet a significant number of these desiderata and, if it does not meet one, provide a reasonable explanation for why it does not. These desiderata therefore provide resources for assessing views of divine forgiveness. All but the last of the desiderata apply to any account of forgiveness, whether divine or human forgiveness, and the last applies only to divine forgiveness in the Christian context.

Start with the desiderata that apply to both divine and human forgiveness. First, a view of divine forgiveness should distinguish forgiving an offender from excusing him. An excuse shows that an agent is not responsible for some harm done, but when God forgives us for wrongdoing, He continues to view us as responsible for it.

Second, a view of divine forgiveness should distinguish forgiveness from other ways of no longer blaming an agent while still holding that the agent is responsible for the harm, such as ignoring the offense or simply moving on from it. If God just ceased to bring to mind our wrongdoing or acted like it did not happen, He would not blame us, but He also would not have forgiven us.

This idea connects to a commonly held point about human forgiveness: that forgiveness is incompatible, or at least at odds, with resenting an offender. In fact, the most prominent account of human forgiveness is that forgiveness is relinquishing resentment toward the

wrongdoer.¹ Resentment, as P.F. Strawson points out, is a negative emotional response to the ill will or indifference expressed in someone's action toward oneself, and it is a form of blame.² As such, resentment seems at odds with forgiveness. Yet forgiveness is not the only way to relinquish resentment. We can also relinquish it by putting the offense out of our mind or moving on from it. A view of forgiveness must say what sets forgiveness apart from these other ways of relinquishing resentment. More generally, then, whether or not God can have emotions like resentment, a view of divine forgiveness must say how divine forgiveness differs from other ways in which God could cease to blame us for our wrongdoing.

Third, a view of divine forgiveness should allow the conceptual possibility of God's forgiving us without our repenting – what I call *one-sided forgiveness*. This desideratum does not imply that God actually forgives us without our repenting, as God may have good reason not to do so or some aspect of His divine nature may be inconsistent with His doing so.³ A view of divine forgiveness itself, however, should not rule out the possibility of divine one-sided forgiveness.

To see why, first notice that humans can bestow one-sided forgiveness. Louis Zamperini provides a powerful real-life case.⁴ Taken captive by the Japanese during World War II, Zamperini was mercilessly tortured and kept in a state of near starvation as he moved amongst Japanese prisoner-of-war camps. Matsuhiro “The Bird” Watanabe, a sadistic prison guard, especially brutalized him. When the Japanese surrendered, Zamperini regained his freedom and returned home a war hero. Yet he continued to be haunted by nightmares that began while he

¹ See, for example, Butler, *Fifteen Sermons*; Murphy, “Forgiveness and Resentment;” Murphy, *Getting Even*; Strawson, “Freedom and Resentment,” 76.

² Strawson, “Freedom and Resentment,” 75-77.

³ In Section III.4, I consider and reject some arguments that God has good reason not to forgive us one-sidedly, and in Section III.5, I consider and reject an argument that the divine nature is incompatible with forgiveness.

⁴ The following information about Zamperini's life is from Jacobs, “Lucky Louis Zamperini” and from Zamperini, “‘Unbroken’s’ Louis Zamperini.”

was a prisoner of war, and to cope with the nightmares and with despair, he drank heavily. His life turned around in 1949, when he converted to Christianity. At the moment of his conversion, Zamperini forgave his prison guards. In an interview many years later, he said:

[Upon converting to Christianity,] I got off my knees and somehow I knew I was through getting drunk. I knew it. I also knew that I forgave all my guards including “The Bird.” I think proof of that is I had nightmares every night about “The Bird” since the war. The night I made my decision for Christ, I haven’t had a nightmare since – 1949 till now! That is some kind of a miracle.⁵

Zamperini then traveled to Japan as a missionary in 1950, meeting with some of his former prison guards and expressing forgiveness to them. His expressions of forgiveness were so powerful that, according to Zamperini, some of them even converted to Christianity as a result.

When Zamperini said that he forgave his prison guards without repentance on their side, we should take this at face value. He is not using the term “forgiveness” incorrectly; he really did forgive them. We should therefore accept that humans can forgive one-sidedly.⁶ Further,

⁵ Zamperini, “‘Unbroken’s’ Louis Zamperini.”

⁶ Both Charles Griswold and Richard Swinburne argue against the possibility of one-sided forgiveness, but I think that their arguments are problematic. Griswold argues that one-sided forgiveness is not forgiveness because it compromises the moral point of forgiveness. Specifically, he says that the offer of forgiveness without the offender’s repentance “would likely be interpreted by the offender (and possibly third parties as well) as condonation or excuse making – either amounting to collusion with wrong-doing. Obviously this would compromise the moral point of the act.” (Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 121.) We should not accept Griswold’s argument. To start, the idea that the offer of one-sided forgiveness would likely be interpreted as condonation or excuse-making does not entail that it is. This argument is at best an argument against *expressing* one-sided forgiveness to those who might misinterpret it. Further, if one-sided forgiveness did entail condonation or excusing-making, which I doubt, the correct conclusion to draw would be that we morally *should not* forgive one-sidedly, rather than that we *cannot* forgive one-sidedly. Of course, if one-sided forgiveness merely amounted to condonation or excuse-making, then perhaps we should reject its possibility. But again, Griswold has given us no reason to think that this is so, and as cases like that of Louis Zamperini illustrate, we intuitively take one-sided forgiveness to be distinct from condonation and excuse-making.

As for Swinburne, he states that we should reject the possibility of one-sided forgiveness on the grounds that forgiveness is normally considered to be a good thing but one-sided forgiveness is not a good thing, since it treats the offense as not having been done. (Swinburne, *Responsibility and Atonement*, 85-87.) If Swinburne is correct that one-sided forgiveness is not a good thing, which I doubt, the correct conclusion again is that we *should not* forgive one-sidedly, not that we *cannot*. To compare, it may not be a good thing for victims to forgive repentant wrongdoers for horrendous evils. (Consider the intense criticism of Eva Kor, an Auschwitz survivor, for forgiving

there seems to be nothing about the nature of forgiveness itself that would preclude divine one-sided forgiveness while allowing human one-sided forgiveness. Thus, if God does not or cannot forgive one-sidedly, this result should not be settled by a view of what divine forgiveness is but rather by an argument that God, for whatever reason, does not or cannot forgive us without our repentance. Notice that the same can be said for whether God forgives at all: if God does not or cannot forgive, a view of what divine forgiveness is (or would be) should not settle this issue.

Fourth, a view of divine forgiveness should not only allow the possibility of one-sided forgiveness but should also allow it to be virtuous. The one-sided forgiveness that Louis Zamperini bestowed on his former prison guards is so powerful and beautiful because it displays incredible virtue. A view of divine forgiveness should not foreclose the possibility that God displays such virtue in one-sided forgiveness.⁷ In fact, in the parable of the prodigal son, the father seems to bestow one-sided forgiveness. After all, even while the son is a long way off, and so even before the father knows that his son has repented, the father has compassion on his

repentant former Nazis.) Yet, if that is so, it just shows that we should not forgive repentant wrongdoers for horrendous evils, not that we cannot. Further, contrary to Swinburne, forgiveness need not treat the offense as not having been done, as I make clear in Section II in defending the view that forgiveness is openness to reconciliation. Thus Griswold and Swinburne have given us no reason to reject the intuitive view that one-sided forgiveness is possible. In fact, given the prevalence of cases in which we think that one-sided forgiveness occurs, such as the Zamperini case, we should accept not only that one-sided forgiveness is possible but also that it occurs. As another example, consider the forgiveness expressed to an unrepentant Dylann Roof by the family members of those he murdered at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, SC, in July 2015.

⁷ Anthony Bash raises the following difficulties for the view that one-sided forgiveness is typically virtuous: a) such forgiveness may allow the wrongdoer to escape personal accountability for the wrong, b) such forgiveness may undermine the incentive and opportunity of the wrongdoer to right the wrong, c) the wrongdoer may not learn a lesson, d) such forgiveness requires the victim to do more than God, who just forgives the repentant, and e) such forgiveness can leave wrongdoers “bewildered, even amused,” when they do not know or care that they acted wrongly. (Bash, *Forgiveness*, 44.) Yet consideration e) is not an argument against the virtuousness of one-sided forgiveness but rather an argument against expressing one-sided forgiveness to wrongdoers unless they are in a position to receive it properly. As for considerations a) – c), the view that forgiveness is openness to reconciliation avoids these implications, as I discuss in footnote 13 below, since the wrongdoer must repent in order for actual reconciliation to take place. Finally, consideration d) wrongly assumes that one-sided forgiveness, if virtuous, is required. Further, there may be reasons why humans but not God should forgive one-sidedly. Yet the important point is that a view of divine forgiveness should not rule out the possibility that God forgives one-sidedly and is virtuous in doing so.

son, runs to him, and embraces him. This one-sided forgiveness is virtuous, and as mentioned above, it is meant to be a picture of divine forgiveness.⁸

Fifth, a view of divine forgiveness should account for the power of divine forgiveness to reconcile repentant wrongdoers to God. At least in the context of close human relationships, forgiveness is sought to repair the relationship, and when forgiveness is then granted, the relationship is often restored.⁹ This connection between forgiveness and reconciliation is clearly displayed in the parable of the prodigal son: the father's forgiveness and the son's repentance restore their relationship to a father and son relationship of good standing. Similarly, when we ask God for forgiveness, we seek to reestablish a relationship with Him, and His forgiveness reconciles us to Him. A view of divine forgiveness should explain why God's forgiveness reconciles repentant offenders to Him.

So far, I have put forward desiderata for a view of divine forgiveness that any view of forgiveness must meet. I see one further desideratum for a view of divine forgiveness in the Christian context: it should account for the connection between divine forgiveness and Christ's atonement. According to Christian Scripture and tradition, God's forgiving us is somehow bound up with the person of Christ and, specifically, with Christ's atonement. For example, Ephesians 1:7 says about Christ: "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace..." (NRSV). A view of Christian divine

⁸ It is possible that the father knows that the prodigal son has repented just from the fact that he returns. Anthony Bash seems to take this interpretation. (Bash, *Forgiveness*, 99.) Even if that is so, the father still seems to forgive his son one-sidedly, given how immediately he has compassion on his son and runs to him. Yet even if the parable does not illustrate one-sided forgiveness, that does not undermine the central argument in this paper, as that argument does not depend upon interpreting the parable as one-sided forgiveness.

⁹ Many philosophers and theologians writing on forgiveness acknowledge that forgiveness ordinarily or ideally aims at reconciliation or is about restoring relationships. See, for example, Bash, *Forgiveness*, 38; Swinburne, *Responsibility and Atonement*, 107; Adams, "Forgiveness: A Christian Model," 299; Stump, "Love, by all accounts," 36-37; Pettigrove, "The Dilemma of Divine Forgiveness," 459. However, none of these authors advocates the view that divine forgiveness is openness to reconciliation. Throughout this paper, especially in the footnotes, I highlight how that view differs from these other authors' views and why we should prefer it.

forgiveness should be compatible with and make sense of how Christ's atonement is connected to divine forgiveness.

II. Human Forgiveness: Forgiveness as Openness to Reconciliation

In this section, I draw on a picture of human forgiveness that I support elsewhere: that human forgiveness is openness to reconciliation with the wrongdoer with respect to the wrongdoing.¹⁰

Specifically, I argue for this view:

Openness-to-Reconciliation View: X forgives Y for Y's wrong action (or pattern of wrong actions) W in virtue of X's being open to reconciliation with Y with respect to W.

I cannot here repeat the entire argument for the Openness-to-Reconciliation View of human forgiveness. Instead, I will first use an example to clarify the view and make it plausible and will then address a couple of objections to it. Doing so will set the stage for my argument in the next section that this view of human forgiveness plausibly extends to divine forgiveness. (In what follows, for ease of exposition, I typically suppress the "with respect to W" clause, except when necessary for clarity. Yet note that this clause is important, since we can forgive someone for some but not all of the wrongs that she has committed against us, which is especially clear when we are unaware of some of them.)

Consider an example of human forgiveness in a close relationship. Imagine that a close friend has betrayed your confidence, telling your gossip-prone colleague about your frustrations with comments made at a recent faculty meeting. When you find out, you are angry, and your close friend is repentant. She asks for forgiveness. In asking for forgiveness, your friend

¹⁰ Strabbing, "Forgiveness and Reconciliation."

acknowledges that she acted wrongly in betraying your confidence and that she is responsible for it. Yet she is doing more than that: she is seeking reconciliation with you. Now consider your response. First imagine that you remain angry and refuse to forgive. You are not yet open to reconciliation with your friend, and your friendship remains harmed. Next, imagine instead that you express forgiveness to her. If your forgiveness is genuine, you and your friend are reconciled. What makes it the case that you forgive your friend, thus reconciling with her? I claim that you forgive her for betraying your confidence in virtue of being open to reconciliation with her, the wrongdoer, with respect to betraying your confidence. You and your friend are reconciled because you are both open to reconciliation – you through forgiveness and she through repentance.¹¹

I should be clear about what I mean by being “open to reconciliation.” In one sense, you could respond to your friend like this: “I am open to reconciling with you. But first, I want you to make it up to me by letting me borrow your car for the weekend.” Or you could say: “I am open to reconciling with you. But first I need some space to cool off before we can work through this.” The sense of openness to reconciliation in these two statements is not what I have in mind. As I understand openness to reconciliation, the first statement amounts to: “I *will be* open to reconciling with you, *if* you let me borrow your car for the weekend.” The second amounts to: “I *will be* open to reconciling with you *after* I have some time to cool off.” After all, these statements do not express forgiveness but rather that forgiveness will be forthcoming if or

¹¹ Certain epistemic conditions must also be met in order for reconciliation to take place with respect to the wrongdoing – e.g., you must know or reasonably believe that your friend is repentant for that wrongdoing. I set aside these epistemic conditions, since they are not necessary for being *open* to reconciliation with respect to the wrongdoing and so are not necessary for forgiveness on my account. Although my argument does not hinge upon it, you might question the idea that you must know or reasonably believe that your friend is repentant in order for reconciliation to take place. After all, as Cheshire Calhoun vividly illustrates, you can forgive an unrepentant wrongdoer and choose to continue a close relationship with her. (Calhoun, “Changing One’s Heart.”) In such cases, though, you are not reconciled with the wrongdoer *with respect to her wrongdoing*. Instead, you forgive her for the wrongdoing and choose to continue the relationship in spite of not being reconciled with respect to the wrongdoing. I thank an anonymous referee for raising this issue.

after a certain condition is met. Instead, as I understand it, you are open to reconciliation with your friend in virtue of having attitudes and intentions toward her that restores your friendship to a friendship of good standing, if your friend's attitudes and intentions are what they need to be to restore the friendship to a friendship of good standing – i.e., she is appropriately repentant, has the attitudes required to be a trusted confidant going forward, etc. We can think of your being open to reconciliation with your friend as your playing your part in the reconciliation, so that all that remains is for her to do her part.

Importantly, being open to reconciliation with your friend does not require you to have exactly the same attitudes and intentions toward her as you had before she betrayed your confidence. What matters for reconciliation is that you have the attitudes and intentions required for a friendship of good standing. Hence, you can be open to reconciliation with your repentant friend while, say, finding it more difficult to confide in her at first, as long as that does not prevent you from restoring a friendship of good standing. On my view of forgiveness, therefore, you can forgive someone without having the exact same attitudes and intentions toward her after the offense, which is the right result.

Further, notice that you can be open to reconciliation with your friend even if she were not repentant, since playing your part in the reconciliation does not require her to play her part. This is crucial because it shows that the view that forgiveness is openness to reconciliation allows one-sided forgiveness. Further, it reveals another way in which you can be open to reconciliation with your friend while having different attitudes and intentions toward her after the offense. Notice that the appropriateness of some attitudes and intentions within a relationship depends upon the other person's having certain attitudes and intentions. Thus, if your friend were unrepentant, you can be open to reconciliation with her without having some

attitudes and intentions required for a friendship of good standing if those attitudes and intentions depend for their appropriateness on attitudes and intentions that your friend lacks. But in this case, in order to be open to reconciliation with your friend, you must be prepared to have those attitudes and intentions if and when your friend has the attitudes and intentions that she should have. For example, if your friend is unrepentant, you can be open to reconciliation with her without intending to confide in her, since she lacks the attitudes and intentions required to be a worthy confidant. However, to be open to reconciliation with her, you must be prepared to intend to confide in her again once she repents and has the attitudes and intentions required to be a worthy confidant.¹² Thus the view that forgiveness is openness to reconciliation does not have the implausible result that forgiving an unrepentant friend means that you must trust her again in spite of her lack of repentance.¹³

I have just shown that the view that forgiveness is openness to reconciliation meets the desideratum of allowing one-sided forgiveness. I will conclude this section by discussing one other desideratum that a view of forgiveness must meet, as it highlights the main advantage of the view presented here over other views of forgiveness. I will wait until the next section, where I discuss divine forgiveness specifically, to show that this view of forgiveness meets the other desiderata.

¹² In “Forgiveness and Reconciliation,” I claim that we should understand being prepared to have certain intentions or attitudes toward the wrongdoer as having conditional intentions or attitudes toward her. For example, you are prepared to intend to confide in your friend again once she repents in virtue of having the following conditional intention toward her: to confide in your friend if she repents.

¹³ Hence the Openness-to-Reconciliation View does not have the upshot that Richard Swinburne worries about with respect to one-sided forgiveness: namely, that the forgiver must act like the offense had not been done. (Swinburne, *Responsibility and Atonement*, 85-87. See footnote 6 above.) The Openness-to-Reconciliation View also avoids Anthony Bash’s worries about the virtuousness of one-sided forgiveness, discussed in footnote 7 above. (Bash, *Forgiveness*, 44.) On the Openness-to-Reconciliation View, the forgiven unrepentant wrongdoer does not escape personal responsibility for the wrong, still has incentive to right the wrong, and may reasonably still learn a lesson because being openness to reconciliation with him, and so forgiving him, does not require having attitudes toward him that are appropriate only if he were repentant. Hence the wrongdoer still faces relational consequences for his wrongdoing and still has the incentive of restoring the relationship.

Recall that a view of forgiveness should account for the power of forgiveness to effect reconciliation with a repentant offender. The view that forgiveness is openness to reconciliation with the wrongdoer directly accounts for this power, and it directly explains why forgiveness is sought and bestowed to bring about reconciliation. In this respect, the Openness-to-Reconciliation View has a substantial advantage over other views of forgiveness. Consider again the most prominent account of forgiveness, which claims that forgiveness is relinquishing resentment. As I argue elsewhere,¹⁴ one of the problems with this view is that it fails to account adequately for forgiveness's power to effect reconciliation. This is because letting go of a negative emotion, on whatever grounds, does not capture the emotional movement *toward* the offender that is essential for reconciliation. Dana Nelkin's view that forgiveness is releasing the wrongdoer from personal obligations incurred by his wrongdoer falls prey to the same concern.¹⁵ By focusing just on letting go of personal obligations, it cannot explain the emotional movement toward the offender necessary for reconciliation.

Of course, relinquishing resentment and releasing the wrongdoer from personal obligations incurred by his wrongdoing, although insufficient for forgiveness, are important and perhaps necessary features of forgiveness. The view that forgiveness is openness to reconciliation with the wrongdoer explains why that is so: relinquishing resentment and releasing the wrongdoer from personal obligations incurred by his wrongdoing are, at least often, necessary for the victim to be open to reconciliation with the wrongdoer. This view, then, has the advantage of explaining the features of forgiveness that other views take to constitute forgiveness.¹⁶

¹⁴ Strabbing, "Forgiveness and Reconciliation."

¹⁵ Nelkin, "Freedom and Forgiveness."

¹⁶ The Openness-to-Reconciliation View also accounts for the intuitive pull of Richard Swinburne's idea that forgiveness is accepting a wrongdoer's atonement. Swinburne says that "[y]our acceptance of my reparation,

Before turning to divine forgiveness, I should briefly respond to two significant concerns that one might have about this view of human forgiveness.¹⁷ First, one might worry that this view implausibly entails that, in order to forgive, you must be open to restoring a previously existing close relationship with someone who has seriously wronged you.¹⁸ For example, one might worry that this view implausibly entails that, in order to forgive an abusive partner, the abused partner must be open to continuing on as partners.¹⁹ Contrary to this objection, the view presented here not only avoids that problematic implication but also better explains forgiveness in such cases than other views. This is because, by connecting forgiveness to the relational concept of reconciliation, the Openness-to-Reconciliation View reveals that we can forgive on different relationship levels, depending upon which relationship we are open to restoring. For example, you may forgive your disloyal friend as a person but not as a friend in virtue of being open to restoring a relationship of good will with her but not a friendship. Similarly, the abused

penance and, above all, apology, is forgiving” (Swinburne, *Responsibility and Atonement*, 85). In accepting my atonement, you acknowledge my openness to reconciliation with you and demonstrate your openness to reconciliation with me. We are thereby reconciled by your acceptance of my atonement. (My offered atonement also commonly plays the role of *bringing about* your openness to reconciliation with me.) John Hare makes a similar point about Swinburne’s view, claiming that in my offering atonement and in your accepting it, we each do our part in restoring the relationship. As Hare then says, this shows that forgiveness is consistent with accepting reparation. (Hare, *The Moral Gap*, 229.) Note that Swinburne’s idea is not the essence of forgiveness, since it incorrectly does not allow one-sided forgiveness, as I discuss in footnotes 6 and 13 above.

¹⁷ I consider both of the following objections and respond to them in more depth in Strabbing, “Forgiveness and Reconciliation.” I thank an anonymous referee for asking me to say more about the first one and to address the second one in this paper.

¹⁸ Many philosophers who claim that forgiveness ideally or ordinarily restores relationships or aims at reconciliation raise this issue in denying that forgiveness must involve openness to reconciliation. Glen Pettigrove sums it up well, saying “[o]rdinarily forgiveness aims at reconciliation. It need not: it is possible to forgive someone at the same time that one realizes one cannot go on with them in the old way” (Pettigrove, *The Dilemma of Divine Forgiveness*, 459). Marilyn McCord Adams and Anthony Bash also raise this worry. (See Adams, “Forgiveness: A Christian Model,” 299 and Bash, *Forgiveness*, 58.) It may be worth mentioning that Anthony Bash also denies a tight connection between forgiveness and reconciliation in the other direction, saying that the restoration of a relationship can occur without forgiveness, since two people can restore their relationship after wrongdoing without forgiveness taking place. (Bash, *Forgiveness*, 59.) However, such a case does not count against the view presented here, on which forgiveness is openness to reconciliation *with respect to the wrongdoing*. In such cases, the relationship is not restored with respect to the wrongdoing even though the parties decide to continue the relationship.

¹⁹ Jeffrie Murphy raises this example in order to resist a tight connection between forgiveness and reconciliation. (Murphy, *Getting Even*, 14-15.)

partner may forgive the abuser as a person but not as a partner in virtue of being open to restoring a relationship of good will but not being open to continuing on as partners.²⁰

Of course, if the abuser repents and asks for forgiveness and the abused partner responds, “I forgive you and wish you well, but I do not want to continue our relationship,” the abuser will likely not feel forgiven.²¹ However, the view that forgiveness is openness to reconciliation easily explains this: in asking for forgiveness, the abuser is asking for forgiveness *as a partner*, and he does not receive forgiveness on that relationship level. Thus, by revealing that we can forgive on different relationship levels, the view that forgiveness is openness to reconciliation explains why we think both that the abused partner has forgiven the abuser and that the abuser may reasonably think that he has not been forgiven.

The idea that we can forgive on different relationship levels also shows how the Openness-to-Reconciliation View is superior to another popular view: forgiveness as foreswearing hostile attitudes toward the wrongdoer *plus* having some kind of positive regard toward him.²² Different versions of this view propose different candidates for positive regard. For example, Eve Garrard and David McNaughton suggest good will, Aurel Kolnai suggests

²⁰ Eleanore Stump, following Aquinas, claims that forgiveness involves love and so involves two desires: the desire for the good of the wrongdoer and the desire for union with him. (Stump, “Love, By All Accounts,” 36-37.) She then adds that, if the wrongdoer has destroyed the prior relationship with his wrongdoing, the desire for union with him involved in forgiveness “can appropriately come to no more than the sort of desire for union involved in the generic love of humanity provided for in Aquinas’s account of love” (36). This idea has resonances with my idea of being open to reconciliation with someone as a person. However, the Openness-to-Reconciliation View differs from what Stump says here in two significant ways. (Note that Stump does not take herself to be putting forward a view of what forgiveness is.) First, being open to reconciliation with someone involves a constellation of attitudes and intentions that, together with the right attitudes on the other’s part, would constitute the particular relationship at issue, whereas Stump focuses on just two distinct desires. Second, Stump says that, if the wrongdoer has repented and has not destroyed the relationship with his wrongdoing, then the victim has not forgiven him if she withdraws from the former relationship. I disagree. On the view that I advocate, in these cases, the victim may still forgive him as a person, even if she has not forgiven him as a party to the close relationship and even if she *should* forgive him as a party to the close relationship.

²¹ Glen Pettigrove makes a similar point. (Pettigrove, “Forgiveness without God?”, 522.)

²² This formulation of the general view follows Pettigrove, *Forgiveness and Love*, 8-9.

trust, David Novitz suggests compassion, and Jean Hampton suggests reapproval.²³ This view improves upon the view that forgiveness is forswearing resentment, since it rightly brings into forgiveness some emotional movement toward the offender. The problem with this view, however, is that it only accounts for forgiveness's power to reconcile some relationships but not others. Consider Garrard and McNaughton's view that forgiveness is forswearing hostile attitudes towards the wrongdoer plus having some degree of good will toward him. This view may adequately describe how forgiveness effects reconciliation with a repentant wrongdoer who is a mere acquaintance, but it is too weak to explain how forgiveness effects reconciliation with a repentant wrongdoer in a close relationship, since more than good will is required to restore close relationships. This point generalizes. However, we understand positive regard, it can account for the power of forgiveness to reconcile some relationships but not others, since different kinds of relationships have varying degrees of intimacy and require different positive attitudes to restore them. The view that forgiveness is openness to reconciliation avoids this problem. It also explains *which* positive attitudes are needed in specific cases of forgiveness: namely, those required for restoration of the particular relationship at issue.

The idea that we can forgive on different relationship levels is crucial for assessing the Openness-to-Reconciliation View as a view of human forgiveness. Yet this important nuance likely does not come into play with respect to divine forgiveness. This is because we can assume, based on Scripture such as the parable of the prodigal son, that God is open to restoring an intimate relationship with all of us, and so on the view that I advocate, He forgives us on that

²³ Garrard and McNaughton, "In Defense of Unconditional Forgiveness;" Garrard and McNaughton, *Forgiveness*; Kolnai, "Forgiveness;" Novitz, "Forgiveness and Self-Respect;" Hampton, "The Retributive Idea."

intimate relationship level.²⁴ (I will have a bit more to say about this relationship in the next section.)

I will discuss the second objection more briefly. One might worry that the view that forgiveness is openness to reconciliation cannot account for the fact that we can forgive the dead. That is not so. On this view, to forgive a wrongdoer who is now dead is to be open to reconciliation with him, which means having attitudes and intentions toward him such that, if he were alive and repentant, you would be reconciled to each other. You can have such attitudes and intentions toward a dead person because having them does not depend upon the other person's attitudes and intentions or even upon whether he is still capable of having attitudes and intentions. Of course, if there is no afterlife, reconciliation could only be hypothetical, but that is not a problem, since being open to reconciliation with a wrongdoer does not require *aiming* at reconciliation but simply requires having those attitudes and intentions toward him that constitute being open to reconciliation.

III. Divine Forgiveness

So far, I have set out desiderata that a view of divine forgiveness should plausibly meet, and I have made a brief case for the view that human forgiveness is openness to reconciliation with the wrongdoer with respect to the wrongdoing. In this section, I argue that divine forgiveness is God's openness to reconciliation with us, the wrongdoers, with respect to our wrongdoing. In other words, I argue for this view:

²⁴ Interestingly, in the parable of the prodigal son, the son repents and asks to be like one of the servants, thus seeking to reconcile with his father on a lower relationship level, because he takes himself not to be worthy of being his father's son anymore (Luke 15:18-19). In restoring the father/son relationship, the father then forgives him on a deeper relationship level than he expects. Hence we can see how forgiveness functions on different relationship levels even in this parable.

Openness-to-Reconciliation View of divine forgiveness: God forgives a wrongdoer Y for a wrong action (or pattern of wrong actions) W in virtue of being open to reconciliation with Y with respect to W.

For ease of exposition, and because we can assume that God would forgive us for all of our transgressions when He forgives us, I typically suppress the “with respect to W” clause in the discussion below, but it is worth noting that God forgives us with respect to specific transgressions.

III.1 The Parable of the Prodigal Son

Return to the parable of the prodigal son. As mentioned above, I take this parable to illustrate divine forgiveness.²⁵ The repentant prodigal son returns home, hoping just to be a servant in his father’s household. Instead, the father forgives him, and they are reconciled, the son’s status as beloved son restored. Notice that the father’s expressions of forgiveness – running to his son, embracing him, and then joyfully celebrating his return – are expressions of his openness to reconciliation with his son. This is so, I claim, because the father forgives his son in virtue of being open to reconciliation with him. Because this parable is a picture of divine forgiveness, it

²⁵ Martha Nussbaum objects to this common understanding of the parable of the Prodigal Son, claiming that the parable illustrates God’s unconditional love rather than His forgiveness. This is because, Nussbaum says, the parable does not explicitly refer to forgiveness, and the father does not go through a process of thinking about his resentment and choosing to give it up. (Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness*, 81.) We should not accept Nussbaum’s interpretation. To start, the parable can illustrate forgiveness without referring explicitly to it, especially since the parable explicitly refers to the son’s intention to express repentance to his father and to his expressing it. Further, the father’s actions in response to his son’s expression of repentance are naturally interpreted as expressing forgiveness. After all, the son would have every reason to believe that he had been forgiven based on his father’s actions. More importantly, Nussbaum should not draw such a sharp contrast between unconditional love and forgiveness. The father’s unconditional love for his son plausibly explains his lavish forgiveness. Nussbaum’s fundamental concern seems to be that the father does not go through a process of thinking about and choosing to give up resentment, but even if we accept that foreswearing resentment is necessary for forgiveness, we should not accept that such a process is necessary. The father, due to his unconditional love for his son, could just find that his resentment has vanished when he sees his son. Alternatively, the father could have gone through the process of foreswearing resentment toward his son *before* his son’s return. As Anthony Bash points out, the father has time during his son’s absence to prepare to offer him forgiveness. (Bash, *Forgiveness*, 33.)

supports the idea that God's forgiveness just is His openness to reconciliation with us, the wrongdoers.

Recall that, by the father's being open to reconciliation with his son, I mean that the father plays his part in the reconciliation, so that all that remains for reconciliation is for the son to play his part. In other words, the father is open to reconciliation with his son in virtue of having attitudes and intentions toward his son that would reconcile them, if the son repents and has the attitudes and intentions toward his father that he should have. Again, this does not require the father to have exactly the same attitudes and intentions toward the prodigal son as he had before the son left. He need not act like the offense never happened. Instead, what matters for reconciliation is that the father has the attitudes and intentions required for a father-son relationship of good standing. Thus, he can be open to reconciliation with the prodigal son while intending to give everything that he has left to the older son, who remained by his side. Further, as discussed above, if the prodigal son were unrepentant, the father can be open to reconciliation while only being prepared to have those attitudes and intentions required for a good father-son relationship whose appropriateness hinge on the son's repentance.

Similarly, by God's being open to reconciliation with us, I mean that He does His part in reconciling with us – i.e., He has those attitudes and intentions toward us that would reconcile us to Him, if we repent and have the attitudes and intentions that we should have. God's attitudes and intentions toward us need not be the same as they would have been if we had never sinned. All that matters for reconciliation with God is that our relationship with Him can be restored, and hence He can be open to reconciliation with us while, say, desiring that we had never behaved in certain ways, since presumably such a desire would not stand in the way of a restored relationship with Him. Further, if we do not repent, God can be open to reconciliation with us

while just being prepared to have those attitudes and intentions required for a good relationship whose appropriateness hinge upon our repentance.

In saying this, I assume that God has attitudes and intentions toward us. If I am wrong about this, I do not take it to be a strike against the Openness-to-Reconciliation View of divine forgiveness in particular. If God does not have attitudes and intentions toward us, it is difficult to see how He could have a relationship with us at all, let alone be able to forgive us, as forgiveness takes place in the context of a relationship. I am not assuming that God's attitudes and intentions toward us can change. It could be that God is outside of time, and his attitudes and intentions toward us are timelessly such that He is open to reconciliation with us with respect to the wrongs that we commit. He timelessly plays His part in the reconciliation. Or, for a particular person Y, it could be that He is unchangeably not open to reconciliation with Y-before-repentance and unchangeably open to reconciliation with Y-after-repentance, two time slices of Y.

You may wonder: what exactly is this relationship that God is open to restoring in forgiving us? This is a difficult theological question. Scripture compares a right relationship with God sometimes to a parent-child relationship, sometimes to a marriage relationship, and sometimes to a friendship. I assume, then, that a right relationship with God has elements of – or at least analogues to – each of these kinds of intimate human relationships, but I will not attempt to flesh this out. Instead, I just take for granted that we can have an intimate relationship with God and that this intimate relationship is the one that He is open to restoring when He forgives us. (Yet even if I am wrong about this, note that forgiveness takes place in the context of a relationship, and so you can substitute in whatever kind of relationship you take to hold between God and us when we repent and He forgives us.)

I have claimed that the parable of the prodigal son supports the view that divine forgiveness is God's openness to reconciliation with us. You might raise the following worry about that claim: although the father expresses forgiveness, he goes beyond that in expressing openness to reconciliation to his son. In other words, you might worry that the father's forgiving his son is necessary but insufficient for being open to reconciliation with him. If that were so, then we should not analyze forgiveness in terms of openness to reconciliation.

The father's expressions of being open to reconciliation with his son are certainly lavish, and forgiveness does not require such a lavish response. But being open to reconciliation does not require such a lavish response either. The father could have expressed openness to reconciliation with his son in a more restrained way, such as simply embracing his son and welcoming him back. Hence the fact that the father does more than is required for forgiveness is not a strike against the view under consideration because he also does more than is required for openness to reconciliation. Hence the parable of the prodigal son not only illustrates divine forgiveness but also illustrates how extravagantly God expresses that forgiveness. Further, remember that forgiveness has the power to effect reconciliation with a repentant offender. This would not be so if forgiveness were insufficient for being open to reconciliation with the offender.

In sum, by making vivid the deep connection between God's forgiveness and His openness to reconciliation with us, the parable of the prodigal son supports the view that divine forgiveness is openness to reconciliation with us, the wrongdoers.

III.2. Meeting the Desiderata

In this section, I argue that the view of divine forgiveness as openness to reconciliation with us, the wrongdoers, meets the desiderata set out in Section I. To start, if divine forgiveness is God's openness to reconciliation with us, then our repenting and His forgiving us straightforwardly results in reconciliation between us and Him.²⁶ Thus this view explains the power of divine forgiveness to reconcile repentant wrongdoers to God, and it explains why, in seeking forgiveness from God, we seek reconciliation with Him.²⁷

This is a major advantage of the view. If we took divine forgiveness to be analogous to other views of human forgiveness, the resulting view could not adequately account for how divine forgiveness brings about reconciliation between God and a repentant offender. This is because, as we have seen, letting go of a negative attitude or releasing an offender from obligations or punishment does not account for the emotional and attitudinal movement toward the offender essential for reconciliation. Further, as I claimed above, even replacing resentment with a positive attitude like good will is not enough to restore an intimate relationship. This is clearly illustrated in the parable of the prodigal son. The father does not just let go of negative emotions or adopt some positive attitude such as good will toward the prodigal son; he embraces his son and welcomes him back.

Next, the view of divine forgiveness as openness to reconciliation distinguishes forgiveness from excuse. God's being open to reconciliation with us presumes that we acted wrongly and are responsible for it. After all, if we had an excuse for our wrongdoing, then

²⁶ I assume here that the relevant epistemic conditions are met. See footnote 11 above.

²⁷ As Glen Pettigrove points out, we take consolation in the idea of God's forgiving us because we take it to mean that we can have an intimate relationship with Him again. (Pettigrove, "The Dilemma of Divine Forgiveness," 459.)

reconciliation with God would not be necessary; what would instead be necessary is an understanding between God and us that we are not responsible for our wrong actions.

Further, this view of divine forgiveness distinguishes forgiveness from other ways of ceasing to blame the agent, such as ignoring the offense or merely moving on from it. When God is open to reconciliation with us with respect to our offenses, he does not ignore those offenses or merely move on from them. Rather, he is open to engaging with us with respect to those offenses so that our relationship with Him can be restored with respect to them.

Turn now to one-sided forgiveness. Just as in the case of human forgiveness, the view that divine forgiveness is openness to reconciliation with the wrongdoer allows one-sided forgiveness. This is because divine forgiveness, on this view, does not require reconciliation but only openness to it. Hence, even if we are not repentant, God can play his part in reconciling with us, having those attitudes and intentions towards us that would reconcile us to Him, if we were to have the right attitudes and intentions for reconciliation with Him. As discussed above, it is a separate question whether God can or does forgive one-sidedly. The important point is that this view of divine forgiveness does not itself rule out the possibility. (In Section 3.4 below, I consider the question of whether God does forgive us one-sidedly.)

Further, this view of divine forgiveness allows divine one-sided forgiveness to be virtuous. There is nothing in the idea of God's being open to reconciliation with us that rules out its being virtuous. As discussed above, being open to reconciliation with a wrongdoer does not require acting as if the offense did not happen or as if the wrongdoer acted correctly or was not responsible for the offense. It does not require having attitudes and intentions that are inappropriate given the attitudes and intentions of an unrepentant wrongdoer. Hence God can forgive us one-sidedly while acknowledging that our relationship with Him is not on good terms

until our attitudes and intentions toward Him and toward our wrongdoing are what they should be. This is the right result. It leaves open the possibility that God can display virtue in one-sided forgiveness, just as Louis Zamperini displayed virtue in one-sidedly forgiving his prison guards and just as the father displays virtue in one-sidedly forgiving the prodigal son.

So far, I have considered the desiderata that any view of forgiveness should meet, and I have shown that my view of divine forgiveness meets them. Turn now to the desideratum for a view of Christian divine forgiveness: it should account for the close connection between divine forgiveness and Christ's atonement. Jesus expresses this connection at the Last Supper, when he says of the cup of wine: "for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:28 NRSV).

The view that divine forgiveness is openness to reconciliation meets this desideratum. To see this, first notice that Scripture and Christian tradition claim that Christ's atonement reconciles us to God. For example, Romans 5:10 says: "[f]or if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life" (NSRV). And Colossians 1:21-22 says: "[o]nce you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight..." (NRSV). Because Christ's atonement reconciles us to God, it is reasonable to think that the atonement is crucial, perhaps even essential, for God's being open to reconciliation with us. After all, if we accepted that Christ's atonement reconciled us to God only because it was crucial for *our* being open to reconciliation with God, then we would be denying the close connection between the atonement and God's forgiving us in the first place, since God cannot be open to

reconciliation with us without forgiving us, no matter how we understand divine forgiveness.²⁸

Hence, if we understand God's forgiving us in terms of His being open to reconciliation with us, as I claim, then Christ's atonement is crucial, perhaps essential, for God's forgiving us.²⁹

Of course, the view that divine forgiveness is God's openness to reconciliation with us just shifts the explanatory burden from understanding why Christ's atonement is important for divine forgiveness to understanding why it is important for reconciling us with God. Yet it is not a problem to shift this burden. The view that divine forgiveness is God's openness to reconciliation with us still explains the close connection between Christ's atonement and God's forgiveness, given that the atonement reconciles us to God, as Scripture and Christian tradition say. Further, the view that divine forgiveness is openness to reconciliation should not say more than this, as it should remain neutral amongst the various accounts of how and why the atonement reconciles us to God.

The explanatory power of this view of divine forgiveness with respect to the atonement is particularly evident when we consider again the prominent view that forgiveness is foreswearing resentment. The idea that divine forgiveness is foreswearing resentment toward us is too weak to explain the connection between divine forgiveness and the atonement. After all, even if we accepted the controversial claim that God can feel resentment, it does not seem that He would

²⁸ That is to say, God cannot be open to reconciliation with us *with respect to our wrongdoing* without forgiving us for that wrongdoing. See footnote 18 above.

²⁹ Anthony Bash says that "the writers of the Christian Scriptures do not obviously link forgiveness and reconciliation," even though both are facets of the atonement. (Bash, *Forgiveness*, 62.) You might worry that this counts against the idea that divine forgiveness is openness to reconciliation, but it does not. To start, as Bash points out, reconciliation in Scripture is often discussed in collective contexts, whereas forgiveness is often discussed in interpersonal contexts (61). Yet clearly reconciliation takes place in interpersonal contexts, and forgiveness is crucially connected to that, as even Bash acknowledges when he says that forgiveness is about restoring relationships (38). Further, as Bash points out, Paul seems to link forgiveness and reconciliation through the idea of justification: in Romans 5:6-11, Paul connects justification and reconciliation (59), and in Romans 4:6-8, Paul links justification to divine forgiveness (131). Bash does not call this an obvious link between forgiveness and reconciliation, it seems, because of misplaced philosophical concerns about a) the relationship between forgiveness and reconciliation, which I address above in footnote 18, and b) the relationship between divine forgiveness and justice, which I discuss in Section III.4. Finally, it would often be redundant to explicitly connect forgiveness and reconciliation. After all, where reconciliation is discussed, forgiveness would then be presupposed.

need Christ to atone for our sins in order to foreswear it. Reconciliation, on the other hand, is conceptually linked to atonement, and so the view that divine forgiveness is openness to reconciliation with us is not too weak to explain why there is an important connection between forgiveness and the atonement.

I have just argued that the view that divine forgiveness is God's openness to reconciliation with us meets the desiderata set out in Section II. I will next address an objection and then turn to the question of whether God forgives us one-sidedly.

III.3. An Objection

Consider the following objection: if God requires Christ's atonement in order to reconcile with us, then doesn't placing that condition on reconciliation with us entail that He is not open to reconciliation with us and so does not forgive us on the view that I am advocating?³⁰ After all, for God to be open to reconciliation, I claimed that He must do His part in the reconciliation so that reconciliation with Him just depends upon our attitudes and intentions. So if God imposes a further condition on reconciliation, it seems analogous to the above example, where you respond to your repentant friend: "I am open to reconciling with you. But first I want you to let me borrow your car for the weekend." As I said in discussing that example, when you say this, you are not open to reconciliation with your friend in the requisite sense, but rather will be open to reconciliation with your friend if she meets that condition. Thus, on the view that forgiveness is openness to reconciliation, you have not forgiven your repentant friend. Similarly, by imposing the condition of the atonement, it may appear that God fails to forgive us on the view that divine forgiveness is openness to reconciliation with us.

³⁰ I thank Paul Draper for raising this objection.

In response, note this about the friend example: if you indeed stipulate that you will reconcile with your friend if she allows you to borrow her car for the weekend and if she complies, then the condition that you set for being open to reconciliation with her is met. Given that (and assuming that you were correct in your assessment of how your attitudes and intentions toward your friend would change after borrowing her car), you are then open to reconciliation with her in the requisite sense. Thus, on the view that forgiveness is openness to reconciliation, once your friend meets that condition, you forgive her. Similarly, given that God requires the atonement for reconciliation with us and that condition has been met (and assuming any other conditions, if they exist, have also been met), He is open to reconciliation with us and so forgives us on the view that I advocate.

Of course, it is an important question whether it is morally bad to impose conditions on being open to reconciliation. We would certainly think better of you if you were open to reconciliation with your friend without first having her meet the condition of lending you her car for the weekend. Might it be morally better for God to be open to reconciliation with us without first requiring any conditions, including the atonement, to be met?

Although I cannot do justice to this question here, notice three things. First, because Christians accept that Jesus is God, God Himself actually meets the atonement condition; it is not a condition that we must meet. A morally significant difference therefore exists between God's requiring the atonement and your imposing a condition on your friend. Hence we cannot conclude from the friendship example and examples like it that it would be morally better for God not to impose any conditions on being open to reconciliation with us. Second, the atonement is central to the Christian understanding of how we are reconciled to God, and so it

does not seem to be a gratuitous condition to impose, unlike the condition of having your friend lend you her car.

Third, because the atonement is central to our reconciliation with God, it is reasonable to think that good arguments can be given for the idea that it is morally better for God to require the atonement than not to impose any conditions on being open to reconciliation with us. I give such an argument elsewhere.³¹ There I appeal to the expressive function of punishment to argue that God, in his position of authority over us, must express the appropriate level of condemnation of our sin through punishment; otherwise, He fails to disavow our sin and uphold the status of His laws, thereby undermining His moral goodness and authority, respectively. The atonement allows God to fulfill the expressive function of punishment without our suffering the punishment for sin that we deserve but cannot bear – namely, spiritual death. Hence, due to the atonement, God can express the appropriate level of condemnation of our sin, thereby upholding His moral goodness and authority, while also keeping open the possibility of reconciling with us. If this is right, then it is morally better for God to have the atonement as a condition on being open to reconciliation with us. Although I cannot defend that argument here, arguments like it can be given for the idea that it is morally better for God to require the atonement to be open to reconciliation with us than not to impose any conditions at all.

We could also take another tack in responding to this objection. Rather than thinking of the atonement as a condition that must first be met in order for God to be open to reconciliation with us, we might instead think of the atonement as a penance that we must offer in order for reconciliation to take place between God and us. This could happen in either of two ways. First, following Richard Swinburne, we could say that God forgives us once we repent and apologize,

³¹ Strabbing, “The Permissibility of the Atonement as Penal Substitution.”

since we have Christ's atonement to offer to God as a reparation and penance for our sin.³² On the view that divine forgiveness is God's openness to reconciliation with us, this means that God becomes open to reconciliation with us once we repent and apologize, since Christ's atonement serves as our reparation and penance. On this route, we maintain the idea that Christ's atonement is essential for God's forgiveness.

Second, on the view that forgiveness is openness to reconciliation, a person can forgive *while* requiring penance, if that penance is necessary for the wrongdoer to have the attitudes and intentions required for reconciliation.³³ In such cases, in requiring penance, the victim just insists that the wrongdoer do his part in the reconciliation, which is consistent with the victim doing her part. To illustrate, you could be open to reconciliation with your repentant friend while requiring penance from her if otherwise she would feel too much in your debt to return to a friendship of equals. Or, you could be open to reconciliation with a wrongdoer who is not sufficiently repentant while requiring penance, if that were necessary for the wrongdoer to realize the seriousness of her wrong. Similarly, then, it may be that God is open to reconciliation with us – and so forgives us, on the view advocated here – while requiring us to offer the atonement as our penance, if that were necessary for us to do our part in the reconciliation. For example, maybe our offering that penance is necessary for us to feel free of guilt and self-condemnation. Or maybe we can only properly realize the seriousness of our sin in offering Christ's atonement to God as our penance. On this route, unless Christ's atonement plays an independent role in bringing about God's forgiveness, God's forgiveness does not depend upon

³² Swinburne, *Responsibility and Atonement*, 161.

³³ I thank Mark Johnston and Sherif Girgis for bringing this point to my attention and Kyla Ebels-Duggan for helpful discussion about it.

the atonement after all, although our reconciliation with God still does. Of course, the atonement could still *express* God's forgiveness on this route.³⁴

Contrary to the above objection, then, God forgives us even though He requires the atonement. This is because the atonement either is a condition on God's forgiveness that has already been met or a penance that we must offer. The atonement could also be both, as these options are not mutually exclusive.

III.4. Divine One-Sided Forgiveness

I turn now to the question of whether God forgives one-sidedly on the view that divine forgiveness is openness to reconciliation with us. The answer depends upon what conditions God places on being open to reconciliation with us. If God requires our repentance to be open to reconciliation with us, then He does not forgive us one-sidedly. If He does not require our repentance to be open to reconciliation with us, then He *may* forgive one-sidedly. To determine whether and when He does, we must determine the conditions under which He is open to reconciliation with us to see whether and when those conditions are met. For example, suppose that the atonement is the only condition on God's being open to reconciliation with us. In that case, God forgives us all one-sidedly. After all, the atonement is accomplished and does not depend upon our repentance, and even those who repent are forgiven one-sidedly, since God would already be open to reconciliation with them. (This does not imply that God would be open to reconciliation with a wrongdoer with respect to a particular wrong *before* the wrong is

³⁴ If this route is correct, it could explain Anthony Bash's claim, discussed in footnote 29, that the Scripture writers do not obviously connect forgiveness and reconciliation, even though both are aspects of the atonement. Forgiveness could be an aspect of the atonement by expressing God's forgiveness, and reconciliation could be an aspect of the atonement by playing a crucial role in our being open to reconciliation with God. Note that this is consistent with divine forgiveness as openness to reconciliation.

committed. God could just be open to reconciliation with the wrongdoer as soon as the wrong is committed.)

It is an advantage of this view of divine forgiveness that it leaves open whether God forgives one-sidedly and, if He does, under what conditions. As discussed above, whether God forgives one-sidedly should not be settled by a view of what divine forgiveness is. Instead, determining the conditions under which God forgives is a complicated theological issue, and this view of divine forgiveness rightly allows theology as well as philosophy to do work here. For example, in Matthew 6:15, Jesus says, “but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (NRSV). Here Jesus appears to say that forgiving others is a condition on God’s forgiving us. Yet, on the other hand, Colossians 3:13 says: “Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive” (NRSV). This verse appears to say that our forgiving others is not a condition on God’s forgiving us but is rather an obligation that emerges from the fact that God has forgiven us (at least those who have already repented). I will not attempt to resolve this issue. The point is that we need both theological and philosophical reflection to determine the conditions under which God forgives us, and the view that divine forgiveness is openness to reconciliation makes room for this reflection.

Importantly, this view of divine forgiveness also provides guidance for such reflection, since it says that the conditions that must be met for God to forgive us just are the conditions that must be met for God to be open to reconciliation with us. This can be helpful. For example, someone who denies that everyone receives salvation might reason as follows: our repentance must be a condition on God’s forgiveness because otherwise everyone would receive salvation. My view says that this reasoning is flawed. Salvation plausibly requires reconciliation with God,

but God's being open to reconciliation with us does not entail that we are all reconciled with Him. For reconciliation with God to happen, we must do our part: we must repent. (But that is not to say that we can do our part on our own. It may be that our repentance can only happen because of God's work in us.) Hence, on the view that divine forgiveness is openness to reconciliation, God's forgiving us one-sidedly does not entail that we are reconciled with God and so does not entail that everyone receives salvation.

I have just shown that divine forgiveness as openness to reconciliation is consistent with God's either forgiving us one-sidedly or not forgiving us one-sidedly, depending upon whether our repentance is a condition on His being open to reconciliation with us. Yet I believe that this view is particularly well suited to the idea that God forgives us one-sidedly. This is because it is reasonable to think that, due to Christ's atonement, God has done His part in reconciling with us, so that all that remains is for us to do our part in reconciling with Him by repenting. In other words, it is reasonable to think that, due to the atonement, God has those attitudes and intentions toward us that would reconcile us to Him, if we repent so that we have the attitudes and intentions required for reconciliation with Him. By accepting this, we take a strong understanding of the atonement, on which the atonement itself brings about God's readiness to reconcile with us. This seems more plausible to me than accepting that the atonement functions just to make it the case that He *will be* open to reconciling with us if we just repent. After all, reconciliation requires our repentance anyway, and so there seems to be no gain in God's requiring repentance just to be open to reconciliation with us once the atonement is accomplished. Further, the idea that God forgives us one-sidedly fits well with the parable of the prodigal son. As mentioned above, I take this parable to illustrate divine forgiveness, and the

father in the parable seems to forgive his son one-sidedly, running to his son and embracing him before he even speaks.

A significant advantage of accepting that God forgives us one-sidedly is that it allows God to display the beauty and virtue of one-sided forgiveness. The one-sided forgiveness that Louis Zamperini bestowed on his cruel prison guards is beautiful and virtuous, and we would expect God to display such beauty and virtue in his forgiveness too. In fact, we may find Zamperini's forgiveness so beautiful and virtuous because it points to the beauty and virtue of God's perfect forgiveness. Of course, there could be reasons why God should not or cannot forgive one-sidedly that do not apply in Louis Zamperini's case. But if we accept that God forgives us one-sidedly and is virtuous in doing so, it makes the most powerful and beautiful cases of human forgiveness like God's forgiveness, and I take that to be a significant benefit.

You could object to the idea that God forgives us one-sidedly as follows: it seems that we should ask God for forgiveness, but it does not make sense to do so if He has already forgiven us.³⁵ In response, first keep in mind that this is not an objection to the view that divine forgiveness is openness to reconciliation but rather to my idea that God only requires the atonement, and not our repentance, as a condition on forgiving us. Next, I admit that it sounds odd to ask for forgiveness that has already been bestowed. But remember that asking for forgiveness plays a particular role: it expresses repentance. Thus, when we ask God to forgive our sins, we express repentance for those sins, and our repentance is necessary for reconciliation with God. So we could think of asking for God's forgiveness as a way of expressing repentance so that reconciliation with God can ensue. We could equally say, "I repent of my sins." Finally, if God forgives one-sidedly, even those who fail to repent are forgiven, but they have not

³⁵ I thank Brandon Warmke for this objection.

appropriated that forgiveness. We could then think of asking for forgiveness as asking to take on or appropriate that status of being forgiven, which makes sense even if we are already forgiven.

Consider one final objection: if God forgives us one-sidedly, He either overlooks sin rather than taking sin seriously,³⁶ or He acts unjustly because forgiving an unrepentant wrongdoer lets the wrongdoer get away with the wrongdoing.³⁷ The view that forgiveness is openness to reconciliation avoids this objection. Reconciliation with God still requires the wrongdoer's repentance, and as I have pointed out, being open to reconciliation with the wrongdoer does not require having attitudes toward him that are inappropriate given his lack of repentance. Hence, on the reasonable assumption that God does not have inappropriate attitudes toward unrepentant wrongdoers and does not act like their relationship with Him is restored, divine one-sided forgiveness still takes sin seriously and does not let the wrongdoer get away with wrongdoing. It is therefore not unjust.

III.5. Can God Forgive Us?

I have argued that divine forgiveness is God's openness to reconciliation with us, the wrongdoers. This is a conceptual argument, telling us what divine forgiveness is. It is a separate question whether God can and does forgive us. It may be that God cannot forgive us because forgiving us is somehow incompatible with His nature. By determining what divine forgiveness is, we gain the resources to approach the question of whether God can forgive. In fact, we can think of the argument in this paper as establishing a premise about the nature of divine

³⁶ Richard Swinburne raises this objection. (Swinburne, *Responsibility and Atonement*, 153.)

³⁷ Anthony Bash raises this worry. (Bash, *Forgiveness*, 127-129.)

forgiveness that can be used in an argument for either the conclusion that God forgives us or for the conclusion that God cannot or does not forgive us.

Although I think that God's nature is compatible with His forgiving us, there are arguments to the contrary. For example, Anne C. Minas argues that the divine nature makes divine forgiveness impossible.³⁸ She makes this argument using a few different understandings of forgiveness, but not the one that I have put forward. The closest that she comes to that account is in her discussion of forgiveness as relinquishing resentment. As she points out, to resent an offender, the injured party must take the offense personally, and taking an offense personally causes a breach in the relationship which forgiveness can heal. She then claims that God cannot take an offense personally because taking an offense personally is a human imperfection.

Even on the view that forgiveness is relinquishing resentment, I do not think that Minas's response works. Contrary to Minas, I doubt that taking an offense personally is automatically a human imperfection. Taking an offense personally, as expressed in resentment, is often a perfectly appropriate response that upholds the dignity of the victim, claiming that she does not deserve to be treated in that way. Yet even if such a response shows that God cannot forgive us if forgiveness were relinquishing resentment, it does not show that God cannot forgive us on the view that divine forgiveness is openness to reconciliation. This is because sin prevents us from having an intimate relationship with God even if He does not take our offenses personally, since we can assume that He cannot or will not have an intimate relationship with those who have attitudes and intentions that result in wrongdoing. After all, such wrongdoing and attitudes are contrary to the basic standards of the intimate relationship that we should have with God, which

³⁸ Minas, "God and Forgiveness."

include our keeping His commands and desiring to keep His commands.³⁹ The upshot is that, if this view of divine forgiveness is correct, Minas has not shown that it is impossible for God to forgive. A different argument would be needed, showing how being open to reconciliation with us is incompatible with the divine nature.

IV. Conclusion

I have argued that divine forgiveness is God's openness to reconciliation with us, the wrongdoers with respect to our wrongdoing. As I have shown, this view of divine forgiveness fits well with the parable of the prodigal son, which I take to illustrate divine forgiveness. It also meets the desiderata that a view of divine forgiveness should plausibly meet: it distinguishes forgiveness from excuse; it distinguishes forgiveness from other ways of ceasing to blame the agent, such as forgetting about the offense or just moving on from it; it permits God to forgive one-sidedly and allows that to be virtuous; it explains why divine forgiveness effects reconciliation between God and us when we repent; and it explains the close connection between divine forgiveness and Christ's atonement.

The main advantage of this view of divine forgiveness is that it accounts for the essential connection between God's forgiveness and our reconciliation with Him. When we repent, God's forgiveness reconciles us to Him. If we extend other views of human forgiveness to divine forgiveness, such as forgiveness as relinquishing resentment or as releasing a wrongdoer from debt or punishment, such views fail to account for the power of God's forgiveness to reconcile us to Him when we repent.

³⁹ John Hare makes a similar point, saying that offenses against others are offenses against God that block our relationship with God, since they offend against the basic standards of our relationship with Him, which include our keeping His law. (Hare, *The Moral Gap*, 225.)

Finally, I discussed the question of whether God forgives us one-sidedly. Although the view that divine forgiveness is openness to reconciliation with us is consistent with either option, I claimed that it is particularly well suited to the idea that God forgives us one-sidedly, since it is reasonable to think that, through the atonement, God has played His part in reconciling with us, such that all that remains is for us to play our part by repenting. If this is right, then the beauty and virtue of human one-sided forgiveness, such as that displayed by Louis Zamperini, is a reflection of divine forgiveness.⁴⁰

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