



Role of Forgiveness in The Grief Process for Children in Crisis

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ABSTRACT: Children are a group of people who often experience trauma, which then leads to a cycle of cycle. Various psychological help has been sought but has not addressed spiritual recovery. This study discusses forgiveness in the process of children who are in crisis so that spiritual development occurs in children. The author uses various library sources and analyzes the biblical text in discussing the topic. This study uses hermeneutical approaches to promoting biblical texts as applicable to everyday life. Forgiveness plays an essential role in the recovery process. Children need help identifying what they are grateful for regarding the forgiveness process. Gratitude produces liberation and leads to hope, thus leading to change that results in spiritual healing. To help children forgive, children need reconciliation with the creator. To meet this need, spiritual directors play an important role in assisting children to meet their spiritual needs. Spiritual directors can help traumatized children replace their distorted view of themselves, others, and God with a proper view of the truth. This study aims to involve the contribution of existing practical theology to propose the idea of the role of forgiveness in the grieving process for children experiencing a crisis.

Keywords: Forgiveness, Grief Process, Children in Crisis, trauma, spiritual development

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INTRODUCTION

Children are a group in the community that often experience abuse and various forms of pressure. This includes biological, psychological, social, and communal pressures which are factors that lead to detrimental effects (Siantz, 1999). The research of Frederick & Goddard (2007) has found that the poor in Australia experience a complex process of poverty as adults because of childhoods where they experienced various forms of abuse. In short, abuse experienced as a child has a significantly negative effect on children when they become adults.

Cases of sexual abuse occur in various places and age ranges. According to research done by Griffith et al. (2018), sexual abuse even occurs in public transportation. Generally, the

community responds harshly towards sexual abuse in rideshare spaces like Uber. Cassino & Besen-Cassino (2019) also note that sexual harassment cases frequently in work places. This problem has an effect on the psychological, physical, and economic wellness and prosperity of its victims. The problem of sexual abuse also happens on college campuses, researched by Cipriano et al. (2022). Unfortunately, accurate statistic can be hard to come by because victims may be afraid to report their experiences because they don't want to relive their trauma or they are afraid they might not be believed.

Violence or sexual abuse happens to children, too. Kitinger (2015) explains that children are especially vulnerable and are especially susceptible to sexual abuse. The reasons cannot be disassociated from the reality

of their relative innocence and passivity. Basu and Banerjee (2020) explain that based on data from the World Health Organization (WHO), more than 10% of children and teens have experienced mental health problems. Based on Basu and Banerjee's (2020) research, sexual abuse is a significant factor in influencing children's and teens' mental health. This reality demands the need for intervention and actions that are focused on cultivating victims' mental health. Brown et al., (2020) has uncovered frequent cases of sexual abuse toward female teens before they even leave middle school. This is caused by a culture that has been allowed to develop which permits sexual abuse, with resulting high levels of abuse and sexual violence on teenagers.

Abuse and violent experiences that children experience can cause feelings of grief that continue on later in life. Because of that, children need help to escape from the crises that they face. According to Davis (1989), group counseling can help children who experience grief. Through grief therapy, a person can walk through a counseling process where it is the expressed hope that each of the counselees will experience four particular goals: awareness, expression of emotions, working through problems, and creativity & joy. Meanwhile Breggin and Stolzer (2020) suggest a psychological approach to help those who have experienced crisis. These efforts can become an entrance or starting point to handle trauma and crisis. But all this being said, these approaches do not address solutions to problems that cause spiritual trauma. So, McPhillips et al., (2020) argues that the institutionalization of the trauma counseling approach is effective in opposing the concept of narrow psychological hazards by developing an approach to trauma as a

dangerous system with a complex impact on the family, society and the nation. But the findings of McPhillips' et al., (2020) research also did not address the restoration of trauma that caused spiritual crises. According to Gultom et al., (2022) handling problems with children and teens needs to be accompanied by a spiritual director and spiritual guidance.

Crises that children experience need to be handled well. Von Boch-Galhau (2018) says that the problem of abuse and violence towards children causes long-term trauma. Personal trauma a person experiences influences his spiritual life (Mahoney et al., 2007). Because of that, von Boch-Galhau (2018) suggests that a psychological approach in dealing with violence and abuse. Violence, grief, and various other conditions can cause negative emotions which can be both temporary and long-term. According to Záhorcová et al., (2020), dealing with negative emotions requires forgiveness in multiple steps until positive emotions are experienced. Goins (2013) puts forward multiple ways to talk about forgiveness and reconciliation. So, the question is, what role does forgiveness have in the spiritual development of a child? Do the actions of forgiving and receiving forgiveness have important supporting roles to play in children's emotional and mental development, particularly when dealing with trauma?

Unfortunately, there seems to be a relative dearth of literature focusing on the field of forgiveness and reconciliation in relation to children's psychological and spiritual well-being for most children, their understanding concerning forgiveness is parallel or almost the same as their understanding of reconciliation. Goins (2013) discusses a way to apply a process of forgiveness concerning children who have

experienced crisis. The issue, though, is that Goins' (2013) research does not discuss the implementation of a process of forgiveness on the spiritual development of children. That being the case, how can those helping or serving children apply these psychological insights in the process of children's spiritual development.

Based on the brief discussion of the research above, the rest of this article will answer the question, "how can the practice forgiveness in the grief process of a child who is currently experiencing crisis lead to spiritual growth and development?"

METHOD

This research is library research. The main source of this article comes from the book *Healing for Hurting Hearts*. The two main chapters of the book that serve as a reflective foundation for the author are "Forgiveness and Reconciliation in the Healing Process" by Stephanie Goins and "From Spiritual Damage to Spiritual Healing" by Christa Foster Crawford. It seems that these two concepts, namely, forgiveness and reconciliation, are easy enough to understand and will help bring spiritual healing into the life of the abused child. The author uses other library sources as a comparison so that this research can provide scientific contributions in the field of counseling for children. The author pays attention to the theological dimension in this research, thus suggesting key theological principles from the Bible. To provide theological advice and support, the author analyzes several biblical texts related to the issues discussed (Cameron, 2010; Smith, 2016). The results of the analysis from various library sources and several biblical texts are

presented descriptively. This study uses hermeneutical approaches to promoting biblical texts as applicable to everyday life.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Initial Process Getting Started Application of Forgiveness

After studying Goins's (2013) and Crawford's research, I became aware of how important it is for children who have been abused to name and confess that an offense has been committed against them. According to Goins (2013), if the child does not mention or confess that some kind of wrongdoing has been committed against him or her, there will be no experience of forgiveness. In the forgiveness process, a person changes his or her attitude or feelings toward the offender – this is the process for overcoming negative emotions and attitudes toward offenders and working towards an attitude of love or good will. Other attitudes related with forgiveness are hatred and empathy. Goins (2013) mentions that it is difficult to practice empathy. People have a greater tendency to think about revenge rather than forgiving. When humans what to take vengeance after experiencing some slight or offence, it is difficult to think clearly. This is in line with what is written in Leviticus 19:17. When humans take vengeance, they are increasingly brought to the point of doing evil (Kugel, 1987). Because of this reality, forgiving is an important attitude in the healing process. Forgiving means have an attitude of empathy or even love towards one's offender (Enright et al., 1992). Empathy can become a strong influence in the process of forgiveness both for adults and children. Theologically, God has given the ultimate example of forgiving humans

who sin and oppose Him. God gave this example (and the ability to follow it) in order to lead to the healing of humanity.

The change in an adult's attitude and behavior and primarily in children's attitudes and behavior takes time. It is a long process, not a one-time event. Before forgiveness can occur, there needs to be an inquiry into the offense. Theologically, this is an important process in true life renewal or change. The Apostle Paul reminds us of the importance of examining oneself before partaking in the Lord's Supper (1Co 11:28-29). To enjoy fellowship and a restored relationship with the Lord, humans need to be aware of their offenses against God and surrender their lives to the renewing work of the Holy Spirit (Henry, 1706). Goins (2013) comments that although one's past cannot be changed, one's relationship with that past *can* be changed. Remembrance and forgiveness are important processes to undertake so that one is no longer enslaved to past memories. Remembering past events make humans aware that all humans sin. Forgiveness is an important step to take, as Jesus himself showed when he restored the relationship between humans and God. Through His sacrifice on the cross, Jesus accomplished forgiveness for humanity, who broke his commands (Chan, 2009).

I want to reflect on two questions which Goins (2013) asks in her article. The first is: How can children understand and talk about forgiveness? How can the forgiveness process be facilitated amongst children? Additionally, how can counselors or caretakers help children in this process of forgiveness?

Children, in fact, approach forgiveness in their own unique manner. According to Goins (2013), children connect their desires and abilities to forgive with God. Children are able

to understand forgiveness in the framework of the Lord Almighty's plan, besides the fact that forgiveness is a basic requirement of the Christian faith. Religion is often a powerful source of strength and comfort, encouraging the development and emergence of virtue (Exline, 2002). Children also connect forgiveness with hope. Because of this reality, a counselor needs to explore children's perception of God; a correct perception of God then becomes a source of hope for said children. This perception includes seeing God as the source of hope and help in order to experience restoration. If children's perception of the Lord strays from what is true, children will feel that the Lord is not the source of hope that gives healing and restoration of life.

If we want to see children grow in their capacity to forgive, their basic needs must be met. Goins (2013) and Maslow mention that a feeling of safety is the basic need of humans (Kaur, 2013; McGuire, 2011). But the basic need of humanity is not safety. Humanity's basic need is true forgiveness from God. This forgiveness is for humans who are broken and sinful. Fulfilling this basic necessity will help the forgiveness process to occur in the first place. Children who are in a crisis as a result of sexual abuse have difficulty in forgiving their offenders. An understanding of God who created humanity in the likeness and image of God can help children experience a better and restored self-image. Their understanding of God who incarnated in order to redeem and forgive humanity can help them have a clearer picture of how great God's forgiveness is. These two images or ideas (the *imago Dei* and the incarnation) need to be utilized by counselors so that children genuinely experience God's love which gives hope a humanity that

sins as well as experiences crisis as a result of sin.

Conditions That Make It Easier for Children to Forgive

According to Goins (2013), it is very important for spiritual directors to help children identify what they are thankful for at any given moment, perhaps related with the forgiveness process. Thankfulness is a process that frees a person mentally, emotionally, and spiritually, as well as leads to an experience of true hope. The ability to stand firm while undergoing a process of forgiveness is strengthened if there is a relationship with a caretaker (usually, parents; but if parents are not around, then a parent-like figure). If a child has a close relationship with another who deeply cares for them, he will feel safe. All these factors contribute to the forgiveness process. The coming-along of the faith community is very important to help children experience healing from trauma on the road to forgiveness (Collins & Scott, 2019).

Goins (2013) comments that forgiveness in itself is freeing, and this sense of freedom from past hurt births hope. Where there is hope, there is certainty of the possibility for the kind of change which brings about spiritual healing. In order to help abused children to get on the road of spiritual healing, forgiveness is the first step in this process. I also believe that this process must happen for abused children are able to grow spiritually. Morton et al., (2019) explains that God's forgiveness operates through self-forgiveness (as well as forgiving others).

According to Crawford (2013), when children and teens in a crisis experience a traumatic event or undergo physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual development, their spirituality will be impacted. Oftentimes it is

easy to observe the effects of physical, mental, and emotional abuse towards children, but it is difficult to know the impact of violence on a child's soul. Crawford (2013) comments that many physical, mental, and emotional problems, along with accompanying behavior is a spiritual problem. If children and teens in crisis want to experience true healing and grow spiritually, children must know and take hold of this need for themselves (Puchalski, 2001). If children fail to obtain this need, this can seriously hamper their spiritual development.

Once again, Crawford (2013) states that the core of a person consists of their spirit. Spiritual brokenness touches the deepest part of humanity. The failure to overcome this brokenness can ruin a child. Spiritual brokenness affects the way children view themselves, others, and the Lord (Benkert & Doyle, 2009; McBride, 2014; Pargament et al., 2008). This distorted view of self will lead to a misunderstanding of being created in God's image (Berrett et al., 2007; Liebert, 2019). Crawford (2013) notes that instead of children feeling safe in relation to their status as God's children, children are being bombarded with four main lies: low self-image, self-hatred, shame, and worthlessness. Not uncommon, this problem then causes crises that are even deeper like suicide attempts and so forth. The issue of a distorted self-image needs to be handled until there is life transformation (Seeger & Griffin Padgett, 2010).

Spiritual brokenness also causes misguided views concerning others. Crawford (2013) says that feeling betrayed and violated because of abuse and sexual exploitation sends a false message to children concerning how they should view the world around them, and ruins their relationships with others. This lie

takes root in three main areas: the decision to start a relationship with someone, difficulty in trusting others, and dangerous self-preservation.

Spiritual brokenness also causes misguided and erroneous views about the Lord and weakens a child's deepest sense of certainty. According to Crawford (2013), children are attacked by lies about the existence and character of God which causes further spiritual crisis. This happens when a child who has been abused begins to question or doubt their faith, God's goodness, and even His existence. Crawford (2013) says that if children question everything that has ever happened to them, including what is good and evil, along with God's existence and character ruins children's spiritual formation often brings them into spiritual and existential crises. Children in crisis need spiritual healing. Their spiritual development cannot develop without spiritual healing.

In serving children who are experiencing crisis, their spiritual needs are their most basic needs. According to Crawford (2013), children need reconciliation with their Creator, Jesus Christ. Spiritual healing can only happen through a restored relationship with God. When Adam and Eve disobeyed God, God drew humanity to Himself for the purpose of reconciliation (Averbeck et al., 2013; Gaebelein et al., 1990). A children's counselor needs to prioritize this reality of reconciliation in ministry to children in crisis. The role of counselors and spiritual leaders in this process is to become a model in both word and deed.

Children in crisis have a distorted view about themselves (Harper et al., 2003; Sandoval et al., 2009). As caretakers and advisors, spiritual directors must help children replace the lies they believe with God's truth and

values. Genesis 1:27 shows us that God created humanity according to His image and likeness. James 3:9 applies to concept of the *imago Dei* to command believers to not curse or degrade other believers, because all people have worth by virtue of being created specially by God. Spiritual directors need to help. Thus, this truth is foundational for developing one's self worth. Spiritual directors and leaders need to help children who are experiencing crisis to replace feelings of self-hatred with the truth of God's love, as gleaned from Genesis 1:27 and James 3:9. Spiritual leaders also need to help children replace the lie that they're not important with the truth that they are valuable to the Lord (Ps 139:1-18; Mat 10:29-31). Children need to understand that God knows their steps, created their inmost being, and knit them together in their mothers' womb (Ps 139:13). Matthew 10:29-31 also shows that God cares for His people, and nothing happens apart from His permission. Humanity is more valuable than birds that are always provided for. Therefore, God's people do not need to fear because God cares for humanity more than birds. This teaching is full of hope for humanity. Spiritual directors can help children understanding that there is hope for restoration and hope in Christ.

In sum, in order for children in crisis to start growing spiritually, they must replace their distorted views and conceptions of God with the truth of who God is. They need to replace their doubt with knowledge of God's sovereignty. They need to know that God created them for a single purpose (Jer 29:11; Eph 2:10). Spiritual directors need to make children aware of and experience Christ as their redeemer and their hope. As Crawford (2013) puts it, "the key to spiritual healing is applying the truth of God to lies."

CONCLUSION

The need for every child in their spiritual healing is different. Every child is unique and requires a time and process that is also unique. Therefore, there is not a single way to go about helping every child experience spiritual healing. The grief that children experience in crises also causes spiritual brokenness to the point that children are more susceptible to bad behavior. Besides that, spiritual brokenness can cause children to lose their sense of identity. Ministry to children in crisis need time and no small effort. Because of that children who experience crisis need help from people are ready with their whole heart to help them. Children need help to identify what they are thankful for in their forgiveness journey. Thankfulness will be an essential part

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