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## How Adult Christians Incorporate Their Faith with the Psychology of Forgiveness: A Qualitative Methods Study

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HOW ADULT CHRISTIANS INCORPORATE THEIR FAITH WITH THE PSYCHOLOGY OF  
FORGIVENESS: A QUALITATIVE METHODS STUDY

by

Sonia Marta Pinero Lucci

A Dissertation Submitted in  
Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy  
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at

The University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee

May 2020

## ABSTRACT

### HOW ADULT CHRISTIANS INCORPORATE THEIR FAITH WITH THE PSYCHOLOGY OF FORGIVENESS: A QUALITATIVE METHODS STUDY

by

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The University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee, 2020

Under the Supervision of Marty Sapp, Ph.D.

This study examines Christian adult's perceptions, practices of, and tendencies towards the phenomenon of forgiveness. Research in the field up to this date is valuable in understanding forgiveness theory, efficacy of forgiveness models, as well as the impact of religion and spirituality on forgiveness. However, research has progressed to reduce forgiveness, as well as religion and spirituality to its parts, thus research has moved away from the complete, whole concepts of forgiveness and faith. Lately, research has attempted to fill this gap by understanding how people of faith forgive, though faith groups likely perceive and practice forgiveness differently. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate one faith group's forgiving. Specifically, it will investigate how Christians define forgiveness, how and why Christians forgive, their experiences of forgiving across time and situations, their development in forgiving, as well as how forgiving is part of Christian identity. A theory of Christian forgiveness, recommendations for practical applications, and implications for further research is provided.

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## Chapter I

### Introduction

On June 17<sup>th</sup>, 2015, a mass shooting occurred during a bible study at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, killing nine church members, and wounding one. On October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2006, five Amish children were bound, shot, and killed before the perpetrator completed suicide at the West Nickel Mines Amish School near Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Rather than responding with hatred or vengeance, these communities were reported to respond with forgiveness.

Exploring these events further, a daughter of a church member at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church member expressed, "You took something very precious away from me and I will never talk to her ever again. I will never be able to hold her again. But, I forgive you" (Holland, 2015). One would wonder how this individual came to this decision. Why would forgiving be a better solution than attempting to gain revenge? Alana Simmons, another church member who lost her father to the perpetrator stated, "Everyone's plea for your soul is proof that they lived in love, and their legacies will live in love. So, hate won't win" (Holland, 2015). One may wonder why this individual has a stance of love or positivity despite experiencing injustice. What may have influenced this individual to take this stance? Felecia Sander, mother of victim Tywanza Sanders disclosed, "We welcomed you Wednesday night in our Bible study with open arms. You have killed some of the most beautiful people that I know...Tywanza Sanders is my son, but Tywanza was my hero. But, as we say in Bible study, we enjoyed you, but may God have mercy on you" (Holland, 2015). Why would one who experienced hurt wish the offender well? One may wonder what role God played in this individual's life in their being able to forgive. In regard to the later, *Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy* (Kraybill, Nolt, & Weaver-Zercher, 2007)



details the event of the five killed at the schoolhouse and expounds on the Amish communities' offering of forgiveness as influenced by their faith. What role did faith or beliefs play in helping the individuals in this community come to this decision about forgiveness? Additionally, one might wonder how long these individuals have been practicing forgiveness, as well as how these individuals developed in their forgiving practices to the point they responded in this way soon after experiencing the hurt. Why did individuals from these communities forgive so eagerly? Their worldview and resolution of anger may come into play. These ways of responding pique a sense of wonder and curiosity, as well as motivation to explore this practice in greater depth.

Due to the mystery of forgiveness, religious scholars, psychologists, anthropologists, and other professionals have sought to understand this phenomenon, and how this act or way of being leads to a break in the hatred and vengeance cycle in order to foster peace and well-being among individuals who have been wronged. This study intends to do the very same. This introductory chapter is intended to offer an overview of the study, including a brief description of related background information, a statement of the problem, an explanation of why the study is significant, and a preview to the literature review detailed in Chapter II. This dissertation aimed to address several gaps in the literature by understanding Christian forgiveness, as little research has been conducted to fully understand this phenomenon as expressed through Christian voice. Further missing is what the forgiveness process looks like across time and situations for Christians, as well as how Christians have taken on forgiveness as part of their identity and developed their forgiving over time.

Psychology and theology have been at odds with one another in psychology's history, yet religion and spirituality has been a recently growing area of study within the last few decades. Scholars have become interested in knowing whether faith impacts, shapes, or informs forgiving.

While human beings have been teaching, preaching, practicing, studying, and receiving counseling in forgiveness for thousands of years, the science and study of forgiveness was sparse up until the mid-1980s. Psychologists and social scientists became increasingly interested in this phenomenon and paved the way for the study of forgiveness. Early work in forgiveness included the theorizing of what forgiveness is and entails, as well as what it looks like procedurally. Currently, those psychological forgiveness models have been used by the majority of forgiveness researchers and studied extensively. Interestingly, research has shown tremendous evidence for the positive effects of forgiving (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; Worthington, 2001; Wade, Hoyt, Kidwell, & Worthington, 2014).

Researchers would later start a movement to reduce forgiveness to its parts, which fractured and distorted the phenomenon of forgiveness (Kim & Enright, 2016). For example, forgiveness would be dichotomized into trait and state forgiving, as scholars wondered what makes a forgiving person (McCullough, 2001). Personality researchers would go on to complete studies understanding and describing what a forgiving person tends to be and act like, all the while negating the fact that this theory would suggest certain individuals only have the ability to forgive while others do not, based upon their personality. Kim and Enright (2016) would then later offer a comprehensive and sound critique of how forgiveness, a moral virtue, has been reduced in the literature. Specifically, Kim and Enright (2016) argued for a dimensional understanding of forgiveness where individuals would have the potential to grow in their forgiving over time and situations with the aim of maturity or perfection of this virtue (Kim & Enright, 2016). This study is interested in exploring the phenomena of forgiveness maturation, as this research has yet to be done.

Further, scientists began to wonder whether one's faith or religion was connected to a tendency to forgive (Davis, Hook, Worthington, & Hill, 2013). Scholars questioned whether

religious affiliation would help or hinder the forgiveness process, religiously oriented individuals would forgive more readily than non-religious people, or religion and spirituality would have an influence on the forgiveness process at all (Kidwell, 2009). Through years of study, scholars began to find empirical evidence that indeed religion has an effect on people's forgiving (Fox & Thomas, 2008; Davis, Hook, Van Tongeren, Gartner, & Worthington, 2012; Escher, 2013; Davis, Worthington, Hook, & Hill, 2013; Rye, 2005; Worthington, Sandage, & Berry, 2000). Researchers would begin to create forgiveness models incorporating religious beliefs and practices, as they found integrated models to be particularly successful with individuals of faith (Rye, 2005; Worthington, Johnson, Hook, & Aten, 2013).

Historically, like with the study of forgiveness, social science research on religion has also reduced to be described only by its certain parts rather than explaining its wholeness and complexity (Escher, 2013). Previous research, for example, has focused mostly the connection between forgiveness and parts of religion, such as religious activity, teachings, or affiliation (Worthington, 1988), though one would wonder if these concepts fully explain faith. Recently several researchers (Kidwell, Wade, & Blaedel, 2012) attempted to study how and why people of faith forgive through qualitative inquiry due to the gap in gathering a holistic understanding of forgiveness among people of faith. They would go on to investigate how religious people perceive and practice forgiveness in their lives, as well as attempt to understand how religious beliefs may promote forgiveness (Kidwell, Wade, & Blaedel, 2012). While they offered valuable insight into how people of faith forgive, the researchers did not offer an in-depth perspective on a homogeneous sample to understand this complex phenomenon to a particular group. Further, the researchers focused on state forgiveness, or forgiving a particular offense, which is only one piece of forgiveness. An understanding of how an individual faith group perceives and practices forgiveness, especially how they have developed over

time in their forgiving, has not yet been proffered.

In searching the database for the intersection of religion/ spirituality or faith and forgiveness, few recent studies exist, which has been echoed recently by scientists (Kidwell, Wade, & Blaedel, 2012). At this time, researchers know little about the influence of religion or faith on forgiveness, especially the values, principles, and methods promoting forgiving for Christians. The field has yet to gather a holistic understanding of how individuals of faith perceive and practice forgiveness, as religion and spirituality has only recently been recognized in the psychology field. However, with past research describing the significant connection between religion and forgiveness, this is an important and relevant area to explore. As most religions value forgiveness (Rye, 2005), though have varied perceptions on what this looks like, an individual analysis of each faith group and their perceptions on the phenomenon of forgiveness is additionally needed. In sum, questions continue to remain regarding how and why a specific faith group may forgive.

Further, the concept of forgiveness as a developmental process on a continuum (Kim & Enright, 2016) has not been explored. At this time, researchers have focused on forgiving specific occurrences of offenses, or they have focused on tendencies to forgive based upon one's personality. While there is extensive research in both separately, research focusing on the convergence of the two is lacking. If forgiveness is to be used in the counseling, church, school, or other settings, it will be important to gather a developmental understanding of forgiveness in order to assess where an individual is at in their forgiving (Kim & Enright, 2016).

The purpose of this study will be to address this gap in the literature by starting with a qualitative analysis of the psychology of how and why Christian adults forgive. The hope is to explore what forgiveness means to Christians, as well as Christian's motivations to forgive others in order to understand what beliefs and values may encourage Christians to forgive. Questions include

(1) How is forgiveness defined by Christians? (2) Why do Christians forgive? What motivates or influences Christians to forgive? To what degree has their faith beliefs influenced their forgiving perceptions and behaviors? (3) How do Christians forgive? What beliefs and strategies do Christians use to forgive? (4) How have Christians forgiven across the lifespan (i.e., childhood, adolescence, and adulthood)? How have Christians developed in their forgiving perceptions and practices across time? Lastly, (5) How have Christians incorporated forgiveness into their identity? The purpose of this work is to provide researchers, clinical practitioners, and clergy members with a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of Christian forgiveness.

Results of this study could provide information that leads to a deeper understanding of the developmental nature of forgiveness, as well as forgivingness being part of one's identity. Moving forgiveness research forward includes understanding forgiveness as a dimensional, dynamic process rather than reducing it to its parts (e.g., state, trait forgiveness; Kim & Enright, 2016). Secondly, it moves research forward by embracing multiculturalism by recognizing spirituality as a salient aspect into one's cultural identity. Specifically, it will provide further insight into one's faith identity and how that impacts forgiveness.

In regard to how results could be used to lead to an improvement in the lives of Christians, results of this study could guide improvements in treatment approaches and program development. Themes gathered from the qualitative portion of this study could be used to adapt current process models of forgiveness, as well as create new forgiveness manuals intended for clinicians and educators among mental health facilities and churches. This guide will be able to be implemented with individuals who wish to incorporate their faith in forgiveness therapy. Further, a developmental model of forgiveness will give clinicians a clearer picture of where a Christian individual would land on the continuum of forgiveness in order to help Christians continue their maturing in forgiveness,

granted the individual would choose and desire this. Additionally, forgiveness concepts relevant to this population will be able to be studied in more depth by researchers.

The next chapter will review literature relevant to the proposed study in order to gain a deeper understanding of the foundational work of forgiveness that has been done in the psychological and religious research community. Of interest is the psychology of forgiveness and related theories, debates between developmental and static models of forgiveness, as well as the psychology of religion/spirituality or Christianity and forgiveness literature. There is a great deal of research available when studying these topics separately, though there is little research studying the convergence of these parts. Overall, research in the psychology of religion and spirituality, especially within forgiveness, is filled to this date with reductionist methods, models, and interventions, while in-depth work in understanding Christian's perceptions of forgiveness is sparse. The use of qualitative research methods will allow for Christian groups to discuss their own perception, beliefs, and stories about forgiving across their life, and the depth work through qualitative inquiry will allow for a novel analysis that has not previously been done.

## Chapter II

### **Literature Review**

In order to provide context and basis to the current study, a thorough examination of the psychological and theological literature is conducted. This chapter will provide a review of literature and historical perceptions of forgiveness across prominent psychological and theological scholars that are relevant to this study. First, literature describing the psychology of forgiveness will be described. This section will include foundational theories on forgiveness, as well as a review of empirical research regarding psychological forgiveness interventions. Personality and developmental theories on forgiveness, such as forgiveness state/trait theories and mature forgiveness, will be discussed. The second section of this chapter will review forgiveness theory as applicable to the study of religion and spirituality. Research will include a critique of secular study on forgiveness, biblical examination of forgiveness, historical literature on the integration of psychology and religion/spirituality or faith, and a review of empirical research regarding forgiveness with Christians. The third section of the chapter reviews and critiques research examining how forgiveness treatment approaches, theories, and other variables have been applied and/or related to Christians.

#### **Emergence of Forgiveness Theory**

Individuals and communities at large have been teaching, practicing, and studying forgiveness, especially within religious and philosophical communities, as well as religious counseling settings, for thousands of years. Not until the early 1980s was forgiveness taken seriously as a therapeutic technique, potentially due to its historical ties to religion (Fitzgibbons, 1986; McCullough & Worthington, 1994). Psychologists and social scientists are relatively new explorers of forgiveness even though theologians have written and studied this concept extensively

(see Bowser, 1999 for a thorough bibliography on theological and secular writings on psychology pre-1999).

In the early 1980s, forgiveness became of interest to a small number of theorists and scientists who set out to create methods on how to forgive. Lewis B. Smedes, Th.D., a renowned Reformed Christian former theologian and professor of theology at Fuller Theological Seminary, pioneered his theory on forgiveness in 1984 (Smedes, 1984). In his first published book on forgiveness, *Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve* (1984, p. 18), Smedes expressed, “The act of forgiving, by itself, is a wonderfully simple act; but it always happens inside a storm of complex emotions. It is the hardest trick in the whole bag of personal relationships . . . We forgive in four stages [hurt, hate, healing, and the coming together]. If we can travel through all four, we achieve the climax of reconciliation.” Despite a promising model, there is an absence of empirical research on Smedes’ (1984) process model, and scientists have debated whether reconciliation is a part of the forgiving process.

### **The Psychology of Forgiveness**

The study of forgiveness slowly worked its way towards the psychological field following the Templeton Foundation’s initiation to fund forgiveness research, which had never previously been done. Scientists like Robert D. Enright, Ph.D., licensed psychologist and professor of educational psychology at the University of Wisconsin – Madison, and Richard P. Fitzgibbons, M.D., licensed psychiatrist, paved the way for forgiveness as an approach to psychotherapy. Together, they co-authored *Helping Clients Forgive: An Empirical Guide for Resolving Anger and Restoring Hope* (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000), which included years of research in forgiveness, as well as a guide for applying forgiveness in therapy regardless of theoretical orientation. Enright and Fitzgibbons (2000, p. 29) define forgiveness this way, as adapted by North (1987), who connected forgiveness as



a virtue grounded in benevolence and mercy toward the offender: “People, on rationally determining that they have been unfairly treated, forgive when they willfully abandon resentment and related responses (to which they have a right) and endeavor to respond to the wrongdoer based on the moral principle of beneficence, which may include compassion, unconditional worth, generosity, and moral love (to which the wrongdoer, by nature of the hurtful act or acts, has no right).” Enright and colleagues proposed forgiveness to be a process – one of moral development (Enright, Gassin, & Wu, 1992; Enright & Human Development Study Group, 1991) – and to this day, Enright strongly asserts the stance of forgiveness being a moral virtue (for a detailed argument for forgiveness as a moral virtue, see Kim & Enright, 2016).

Enright and the Human Development Group (1991) created the first psychological process model of forgiveness, which included 18 steps. In Enright’s book *Forgiveness Is A Choice: A Step-by-Step Process for Resolving Anger and Restoring Hope* (2001), he details his evolved forgiveness process model to include 20 steps under a sequence of four phases: “Uncovering Phase,” “Decisional Phase,” “Working Phase,” and “Deepening Phase.” In each phase, the survivor processes through their undeserved hurt by an offender in order to resolve deep wounds and find freedom from their past. The first phase includes uncovering the hurt by facing emotions like anger, shame, and guilt; exposing themselves to the offense; and, understanding how anger and resentment affects psychological and physical health (Enright, 2001). Once the survivor successfully uncovers their hurt, they explore the decisional phase, where the survivor experiences a need for change from their situation and makes the decision to forgive (Enright, 2001). Following a decision to forgive, the survivor works toward understanding their offender through empathy and compassion, as well as accepting pain and forgiving (Enright, 2001). Finally, after the challenging work has been completed, the survivor discovers meaning and purpose through their suffering and forgiving, which

results in the experiencing of freedom from emotional and psychological pain, love towards the offender, and connectedness with themselves and others (Enright, 2001).

The concept of forgiving may seem contradictory, as forgiving would be giving the person a gift they do not deserve; yet, Enright (2001) stated that forgiving is more beneficial for the individual than for the offender, as it brings empowerment and transformation to the forgiver. Through various studies performed, individuals who have forgiven offenders and past offenses were able to overcome negative thoughts, feelings and behaviors, and, in-turn, develop positive thoughts, feelings and behaviors (Enright, 2001). Enright (2001, p. 26-31) also explained his view that forgiving is a choice, and it is not, “Condoning or excusing; forgetting; justifying; calming down; pseudo-forgiving (i.e., saying, “it was nothing”); and reconciliation (related, yet different).” He additionally expressed that forgiveness is also more than, “Accepting what happened; ceasing to be angry; being neutral toward the other; and, making oneself feel good” (Enright, 2001, p. 26-31). This model supports a process to validate injustice experienced, as well as encourage forgiveness in order to deal with hurts and accompanying feelings of anger, bitterness, resentment, shame, anxiety, and guilt.

With Enright’s pioneering research of forgiveness in the field of psychology, with over 100 scholarly articles, books, and various other publications, he would go on to be known as the “trailblazer” of forgiveness research (Enright, 2001). Enright’s work has been considered, “The current gold standard against which all other research models and clinical models must be measured” (Worthington, 2006). Enright has taken a neutral position on issues of religion and spirituality, focusing more on what forgiveness looks like psychologically, with an existential focus in line with Victor Frankl (Kim & Enright, 2015), in order to make the concept of forgiveness adaptable to individuals of various backgrounds. In summary, Enright’s (2001) model focuses on healing deep

wounds through a psychological, process-oriented model for severe offenses rather than less severe offenses, with a diverse population.

Roughly around the time forgiveness became of interest to social scientists in the mid-1980s, Everett L. Worthington, Ph.D., researcher and professor at Virginia Commonwealth University, started conducting research in forgiveness and reconciliation. Despite being grounded in biblical forgiveness, Worthington studied interpersonal forgiveness, which he and colleagues defined as, “A motivation to reduce avoidance or retaliation (or revenge) against a person who has harmed or offended one, and to increase conciliation between parties of conciliation if safe, prudent, or possible” (Worthington, Sandage, & Berry, 2000). Worthington (2006) set a new path by separating forgiveness into two categories, namely *decisional forgiveness* and *emotional forgiveness*, as well as considering reconciliation as a part of the forgiving process. Worthington (2006) describes decisional forgiveness as the behavior of forgiving, whereas emotional forgiveness is the change of negative emotions (e.g., anger, resentment, hatred, hostility, fear) to positive emotions (e.g., love, compassion, empathy, sympathy). He further coined the term *unforgiveness*, or a lack of forgiveness due to emotions like resentment, bitterness, fear, and hatred (Worthington, 2001).

Worthington pioneered the Pyramid Model REACH forgiveness model, as described in his book *Five Steps to Forgiveness* (Worthington, 2001), which include the following five steps: 1) Recall the hurt (R), 2) Empathize with the offender (E), 3) Give an Altruistic gift of forgiveness (A), 4) Commit to Change (C), and 5) Hold on to forgiveness (H), which is otherwise known as the REACH forgiveness intervention. Through this process, participants are taught the dialectic of negative emotions (e.g., bitterness, hostility) and positive emotions (e.g., empathy, compassion), and learn to forgive (Worthington, 2001). Like Enright, Worthington asserted that survivors have successfully forgiven when a reduction in negative thoughts, emotions, and motivations toward their

offender, as well as an experience of positive thoughts, emotions, and motivations, has occurred (Enright, 2001; Worthington, 2005). They both describe forgiving to be giving the gift of love.

In comparison to Enright's (2001) model, Worthington's (2001) model is short-term and emotion-focused, which means there may be a significant difference in treatment duration. It has been specifically tailored to individuals who have experienced less severe offenses, with research samples saturated by college students. Though the theoretical foundation of Worthington's (2001) model is secular, much of his work was influenced by religious principles (see McCullough, Sandage, & Worthington, 1995). In searching the database, it appears Worthington and colleagues have added a significant amount of research proving forgiveness' usefulness, especially with college-aged participants and couples. In regard to the various process models, Enright's (2001), as well as Worthington's (2001), models have been used by the majority of forgiveness researchers, and there is monumental evidence showing their usefulness (Wade, Hoyt, Kidwell, Worthington, & Nezu, 2014).

There are several other intervention models of forgiveness that are markedly less popular and studied, though offer alternative methods of forgiving. Co-authoring several articles alongside of Worthington, Michael E. McCullough, Ph.D., professor in the department of psychology at the University of Miami and scholar in evolutionary sciences, became interested in investigating forgiveness as a psychological process due to the emerging research on the benefits of forgiveness. McCullough and colleagues took a minimized approach to forgiveness, and defined it to be, "... an intra-individual, pro-social change toward a perceived transgressor that is situated within a specific interpersonal context" (McCullough, Pargament, & Thorensen, 2000, p. 9). Further, McCullough and colleagues conceptualized forgiving as a 2-factor motivational (i.e., avoidance and revenge) system, where survivors are motivated to forgive based on a social cost and benefit exchange

analysis (McCullough, Rachal, Sandage, Worthington, Brown, & Hight, 1998). McCullough emphasized forgiving to be an empathy-based, prosocial process where forgiveness leads to less negative emotions or motivations, and to more positive emotions and motives over time (McCullough, 2001). Additionally, McCullough (2001) proposed that certain individuals are inclined to have a forgiving personality, which would lay the groundwork for the separation of forgiveness into state and trait, as discussed later.

Frederic Luskin, Ph.D., professor at the Institute for Transpersonal Psychology and director of the Stanford University Forgiveness Projects, additionally hopped on the forgiveness bandwagon and created his nine steps to forgiveness process model, which can be found in his book *Forgive for Good: A Proven Prescription for Health and Happiness* (Luskin, 2002). Luskin's forgiveness intervention model incorporated cognitive-behavioral techniques and focused on promoting forgiveness as a stress-and-coping model or meaning-focused coping strategy (Luskin, 2002). Luskin described forgiveness to be, "... the feeling of peace that emerges as you take your hurt less personally, take responsibility for how you feel, and become a hero instead of a victim in the story you tell... Forgiveness means that even though you are wounded you choose to hurt and suffer less. Forgiveness means you become a part of the solution" (Luskin, 2002, p. 69). In searching the database, there are few studies using his model.

In summary, scholars in forgiveness do not show complete consensus on the operational definition of forgiveness, and each scholar approaches or places emphasis on various parts to forgiveness in a unique way. While Smedes and Worthington believe reconciliation to be essential in the forgiveness process, Enright believes this is a related concept though not required due to potential risk to the vulnerable survivor. While Enright and McCullough focus on an ongoing, developmental process of forgiveness, Worthington believes in a short-term, emotion-focused view

of forgiveness. Despite these differences, there are common elements of forgiveness; specifically, the models generally overlap on what forgiveness does and does not entail. They both focus on promoting forgiveness by having clients recall the transgression or hurt they had experienced, experience the emotions that go along with the event, and move into a process of changing thoughts, emotions, and behaviors towards the transgressor. Differences in what forgiveness means and looks like may continue to leave scientists, counselors, and clients in confusion.

### *Empirical Research on Forgiveness*

Forgiveness has been studied across individuals, couples, groups, and communities, and scholars have evidenced the effectiveness of forgiving, especially for relational offenses. According to scholars, there are primarily four levels of forgiveness: intrapersonal, relational, organizational, and group (See Bright & Exline, 2012 for a discussion on the four levels of forgiveness). A fifth level for consideration includes divine forgiveness or the divine-to-person forgiveness (Davis, Hook, & Worthington, 2008; Kim & Enright, 2014), which is later discussed. Of all the forgiveness levels, the relational or interpersonal level of forgiveness has been the most extensively studied among the psychology field (Bright & Exline, 2012; Wade, Hoyt, Kidwell, & Worthington, 2014). According to Wade and Worthington (2003), forgiveness intervention studies have generally focused on defining forgiveness, helping survivors in recalling the hurt towards them, building empathy for the transgressor, helping survivors to recognize their own past wrong-doing towards others, and encouraging a commitment to forgive their offenders.

In a meta-analysis conducted by Wade, Hoyt, Kidwell, Worthington, & Nezu (2014), exploring the efficacy of 54 experimental psychotherapeutic intervention studies to promote forgiveness, results indicated that experimental researchers have primarily used Enright (2001) and Worthington's (2001) models of forgiveness; and, researchers have typically implemented

forgiveness intervention experiments in a group format. Of note, Worthington's (2001) model has not been used in individual intervention studies or in long-term interventions with individuals who have experienced severe offenses, yet his REACH model has shown to be particularly effective with couples (Wade, Hoyt, Kidwell, & Worthington, 2014). As discussed, these scholars have primarily focused on helping individuals with interpersonal forgiving practices. Through their meta-analysis, Wade, Hoyt, Kidwell, and Worthington (2014) found that treatment modality, treatment dosage, time, and type of offense mattered when considering resolution of past offenses. Interestingly, Wade, Hoyt, Kidwell, and Worthington (2014) found that using Enright's, Worthington's, or another forgiveness treatment model did not make a difference in treatment outcomes, though studies using theoretically grounded forgiveness interventions were reported to be more effective than alternative treatments in resolving past offenses. Specifically, interventions grounded in forgiveness were more effective than alternative treatments, and the amount of time spent in treatment mattered.

A brief overview of several intervention studies is described. There is substantial evidence to show the efficacy of forgiveness intervention for those who have experienced severe hurt and injustice(s). Through randomized experimental studies, forgiveness-promoting interventions have led to significant mental health improvements for incest and emotional abuse survivors, as well as post-abortion men (see Coyle, Enright, & Kendall, 1997; Freedman & Enright, 1996; Reed & Enright, 2006); for example, those who went through forgiveness interventions were found to have significantly greater improvements in forgiveness, depression, anxiety, posttraumatic stress, hope, anger, grief, and meaning in suffering in comparison to individuals who were in the non-intervention control group, and these improvements were maintained during post-treatment follow-up. Extending to individuals of low socioeconomic status (SES), group forgiveness interventions have also led to significant decreased rumination, as well as increased offense-specific forgiveness and forgiveness

intentions with adult male homeless individuals (see Loudon-Gerber, Duffey, Dizinno, Haberstroh, & Karcher, 2008).

While relatively new, forgiveness researchers like McConnell, Hall, and Fincham have extended the study of forgiveness to the intrapersonal or self-forgiveness domain. Forgiveness researchers have primarily focused on what factors promote self-forgiving behaviors and have theorized what factors may promote self-forgiving behaviors, such as shame, empathy, and perceived forgiveness from God (McConnell & Dixon, 2012; Hall & Fincham, 2005, 2008). Additionally, Enright (1996) and Worthington (2006) have offered stage models of self-forgiveness based on their interpersonal forgiveness theories. Regarding original data studies, John McConnell, a researcher and professor at Wheaton College, has recently dedicated his research focus to gathering quantitative data on self-forgiveness, particularly factors to self-forgiveness. At this time, there remains to be a significant gap in the intrapersonal forgiveness literature, with limited original data studies on self-forgiveness.

Forgiveness intervention is particularly effective with couples and families. Randomized experimental studies using forgiveness interventions with couples show evidence for greater marital intimacy and reconciliation (Alvaro & Sphar, 2001; Worthington et al., 2015), as well as marital communication (Ripley & Worthington, 2002). In a study examining forgiveness and marriage education with 112 special-needs, adoptive parents, scholars Baskin, Rohody, Schoolmeesters, and Ellingson (2011) found that the treatment group receiving a 36-contact hour intervention showed statistically significant improvements on forgiveness, marital satisfaction, and depressive symptoms, in comparison to the control group, with improvements remaining after 3.5 months. Further, experimental forgiveness interventions with adolescent and adult children of parents who had transgressed against them led to increased secure attachments (see Lin & Enright, 1998), hope,



positive attitudes towards parents, self-esteem (see Al-Mabuk, Enright, & Cardis, 1995), as well as reduced anxiety (see Al-Mabuk, Enright, & Cardis, 1995; Lin & Enright, 1998).

Forgiveness interventions have been implemented across the lifespan, from children and adolescents to older adults who have experienced interpersonal offenses. In younger ages, process-based forgiveness interventions have been found to promote development in children's understanding of forgiveness and improve forgiveness attitudes (see Hui, & Chau, 2009), foster adolescent social-cognitive development and overall forgiving (see Gassin & Enright, 1995a), as well as increase empathy (see Beck, Vail, & Crawford, 2005; Hui & Chau, 2009). Additionally, with adolescents, forgiveness has led to a reduction in anger due to feelings of resentment (see Beck, Vail, & Crawford, 2005; Lin & Enright, 1998); decrease in anxiety, anger, and depression (see Lin & Enright, 1998); and, reduction in aggression among those incarcerated (see Klatt & Enright, 2008). Experimental-control studies using forgiveness education with youth in school settings show significant improvement in self-esteem (see Hepp-Dax & Alexander, 1996); attitude towards school, attitude towards teachers, self-reliance, relationships with parents, interpersonal relationships, angry temperament and reaction, grades in school, school discipline, and actual forgiveness (see Gambaro & Enright, 2002); regulation of anger, empathy building, changes in attributional bias, reduction in school violence, and delinquency behaviors (see Park & Enright, 2003); as well as, empathy building and reduction of aggression (see Park & Enright, 2003; Schechtman, Wade, Khoury, & Wagner, 2009). Transitioning to older generations, Ingersoll-Dayton, Campbell, and Ha (2008) conducted an experimental study with older adults and found that individuals who received process-oriented forgiveness intervention had experienced long-term improvement in depression symptoms and forgiving, as well as short-term improvement of physical health.

Experimental-control studies implementing forgiveness interventions have found promising results for those with substance abuse or health-related conditions. For example, implementing forgiveness therapy has led to long-term, significant improvement in anger, depression, anxiety, self-esteem, forgiveness, interpersonal relationships and vulnerability to drug use in inpatient substance-dependent clients (see Lin, Mack, Enright, Krahn, Baskin, & Sobell, 2004), as well as restoration for adult children of alcohol-dependent parents (see Osterndorf, Enright, Holter, & Klatt, 2011). Further, forgiving has also been found to decrease anger-induced myocardial ischemia in patients with coronary artery disease (see Waltman, Russell, Coyle, Enright, Jolter, & Swoboda, 2009).

The positive psychology concept and practices of forgiveness have been found to be particularly successful, therapeutic, and healing. Forgiveness therapy leads to a reduction in unwanted feelings (e.g., anger, shame, guilt, sadness) and harbored resentment, a promotion of physical health, improved learning, increased productivity, and an experience of positive feelings (Enright, 2001). Randomized control studies have found that forgiveness-promoting interventions have led to a reduction in negative ideations and feelings about the offense roughly 2 to 3 times more than those who did not receive forgiveness intervention (Harris, Luskin, Norman, Standard, Bruning, Evans, & Thorensen, 2006). When individuals understood the psychological process of forgiving completely, chosen to forgive freely, engaged in the process slowly, and had support in engaging in this process, those individuals had better physical and psychological well-being (Wade, Hoyt, Kidwell, & Worthington, 2014). Further, studies have found forgiveness-promoting treatments are effective years following treatment, where participants continue to experience a reduction in vengeful ideation, unforgiveness, negative reactions to their offenders, and psychological symptoms, such as depression, anxiety, and stress (Blocher & Wade, 2010; Wade, Worthington, & Haake, 2009). Interestingly, in comparison to alternative treatments, participants who have undergone

forgiveness therapy have expressed preference for forgiveness-promoting interventions compared to alternative treatments through qualitative inquiry (Blocher & Wade, 2010).

In addition to the efficacy of forgiveness interventions as evidenced by empirical study, there are several barriers to the forgiveness process. Researchers have asserted that forgiving is difficult, and that everyone struggles with unforgiving at times (Wade & Worthington, 2003). Those who have experienced more severe offenses have a lesser tendency to forgive, though have responded better to forgiveness interventions, leading in greater effect at post-treatment and follow-up for individuals experiencing more severe offenses (Wade, Hoyt, Kidwell, & Worthington, 2014). Further, forgiveness takes time. Researchers have found that the amount of forgiveness is related to time that the survivors empathizing with the transgressor, with brief interventions leading to lower rates of forgiving (Worthington, Kurusu, Collins, Berry, Ripley, & Baier, 2000). The process of unpacking negative feelings, re-exploring the offense, gaining empathy and compassion for the offender, and deciding to forgive requires sufficient processing, which may cause a level of distress to what may seem like an unbearable amount of time. Further, the forgiving itself may be a barrier. In a qualitative study exploring the lived experiences of 11 adults over age 40 who have received forgiveness therapy for an interpersonal transgression, Browne (2009) found that the forgiveness process was difficult, complex, and unstable, with obstacles like anger, rumination, and adverse health responses making the process of moving past unforgiveness challenging. Further, survivors may not naturally desire to forgive (Wade & Worthington, 2003).

Despite significant barriers to forgiving, several aids have been found to support individuals going through the forgiveness process. One aid – empathy – has been linked as a strong mediator in changing participants' forgiveness behavior across studies. Empathy has led to increased forgiveness towards the offender (Sandage & Worthington, 2010), even more so in situations where

an apology from the offender has been received (McCullough, Worthington, Rachal, & Insko, 1997). Empirical studies have additionally found that dispositional forgiveness and attempts to forgive an offense or offenses led to more positive feelings towards forgiving (Wade & Worthington, 2003). In the study mentioned above consisting of the 11 adult individuals who received forgiveness therapy, the greatest aid was reportedly survivors' motivations to let go of unforgiveness in order to find freedom from the transgression, negative thoughts and feelings, as well as stress (Browne, 2009). Wade and Worthington (2003) also recommended a focus be made on reducing unforgiveness, especially when survivors are struggling with avoidance and revenge.

#### *State and Trait versus Mature Forgiveness*

Forgiveness has been dichotomized and measured as trait and state forgiveness, particularly by personality psychologists. Trait forgiveness, also identified as dispositional forgiveness, has been described as the tendency to consistently forgive across time and situations, whereas state forgiveness has been the label for forgiveness of a specific offense. Roberts (1995), a philosopher, first theorized forgiveness as a personality trait and started the movement about what makes a forgiving person, which was echoed by McCullough (2001). Roberts (1995, p. 159) expressed, "Forgivingness . . . is a virtue in that it is a disposition to 'abort one's anger at persons one takes to have wronged one culpably, by seeing them in the benevolent terms provided by reasons characteristic of forgiving.'" Following this theory, psychologists became interested in understanding whether certain kinds of people were more forgiving than others, which motivated research studying dispositional forgiveness independently. McCullough (2001) asserted that those having personality traits like agreeableness, emotional stability, and spirituality were more likely to have a disposition to forgive, or trait forgiveness, while those with tendencies to struggle with anger, rumination, emotional sensitivity, narcissism, hostility, and trusting others, have been found to be

positively correlated with unforgivingness (see Mullet, Neto, & Rivière, 2005). This theory would suggest certain individuals have the ability to forgive while others do not, based on personality factors.

Currently, there are three main self-report forgiveness instruments to measure forgiveness as a personality trait. The Transgression Narrative Test of Forgiveness (TNTF) by Berry, Worthington, Parrot, O'Connor, and Wade (2001) was the first created and validated brief measure of forgiveness that was able to be used across a variety of forgiveness perspectives. Participants would rate how likely they would forgive transgressions across five hypothetical scenarios, ordered from least to most severe offense. Several limitations to this test are evident. First, the TNTF was validated among university-attending students and does not offer a diverse sample generalizable to the population at large, and secondly, this test does not measure what participants would realistically do if faced with this transgression in real-life situations, rather, it focuses on individuals' intentions. Later, the Heartland Forgiveness Scale (HFS; Thompson & Snyder, 2003) and the Trait Forgiveness Scale (TFS; Berry, Worthington, O'Connor, Parrot, & Wade, 2005), were created and validated to measure dispositional forgiveness of self, others, and situations. In both the HFS (Thompson & Snyder, 2003) and TFS (Berry, Worthington, O'Connor, Parrot, & Wade, 2005), forgiveness is generally measured by whether the individual being administered the test believes they are a forgiving person. Further, measures assessing trait forgiveness focus more on the tendencies to forgive, and they fail to address whether they have actually engaged in these behaviors in the past. It is questionable whether the formulated questions assessing tendencies to forgive accurately measure forgiveness; for example, the tendency toward letting things go may not be adequately addressing a true tendency to forgive a person. Further, people may have tendencies to forgive, though without evidence of actually forgiving across time and situations, how can one be considered a forgiving

person? See Kim and Enright (2016) for a comprehensive critique of these measures.

Enright and colleagues offer sound critique of the state and trait forgiveness phenomenon. Kim and Enright (2016) have asserted that confusion currently exists in the psychological community about what forgiveness is and what is not considering it has been reduced and categorized into two separate concepts, which they believe has changed the essence of what forgiveness really is: “If the construct of forgiveness is seen as a moral virtue, then seeing it as part of the psychology of personality, particularly as a ‘personality trait,’ is to reduce the term *forgiveness* to less than what it is, making the construct too simplistic and distorted and thus resulting in confusion likely to be hindering therapeutic sessions” (Kim & Enright, 2016, p. 33). While some theorists have supported a categorized version of forgiveness, Enright and colleagues conceptualize forgiveness as a moral virtue that can mature or develop across time and circumstances, as if on a continuum from managing anger to loving the transgressor (Kim & Enright, 2016). Hence, Kim and Enright (2016) created the term *mature forgiveness*, where individuals have the potential to grow in maturity over time and become increasingly forgiving across situations with the aim of maturity or perfection of this virtue. In illustrating this developmental phenomenon, Kim and Enright (2016) explained that just as an athlete becomes increasingly fit through practice across time and situations to the point it becomes part of their identity, individuals have the ability to become increasingly “fit” in their forgiving and embrace forgiveness as a part of their identity and a way of life. This stance is inclusive rather than discriminatory. Rather than assuming one either has the trait or not, this theory would suggest any individual has the potential for forgiveness, as well as developing in their forgivingness. Further, it is empowering, in the sense that individuals have the potential to be increasingly moral, good, and whole.

Limited research has focused on the connection between moral development and forgiveness. In considering the moral development of forgiveness, Enright and colleagues had investigated youth's understanding of forgiveness at various ages and compared it to Kohlberg's stage model of moral reasoning and found that forgiveness understanding and maturity develops with age (Enright et al., 1989). Additionally, theology professors Spidell and Liberman (1981) examined the Christian conceptualization of forgiveness at each stage of Kohlberg's stages of moral development, in which they state that a person comes to a full understanding of their inability to achieve forgiveness through being faithful for God, or taking a works-based and service posture, and instead learns to become faithful with God, realizing that forgiveness can only come from Him through a relationship.

#### *Research Bridging Forgiveness and Religion/Spirituality*

According to Davis, Hook, Worthington, and Hill (2013), the study of dispositional forgiveness naturally became the bridge between the psychological study of forgiveness and the study of religion/spirituality and forgiveness, as scientists wondered whether one's faith or religion was linked to a "forgiving personality" (McCullough & Worthington, 1999). Through the process of asking whether certain people have the disposition to be more forgiving than others, scientists wondered whether religion was connected to a forgiving personality would be more motivated to act congruently with their beliefs and values, thus being more likely to forgive (Davis, Hook, Worthington, & Hill, 2013). As such, scientists wished to address whether religion and spirituality would play a key role in promoting forgiveness.

#### **The Psychology of Religion and Spirituality**

Religion and spirituality, or faith, is an important part of human identity and facet of multiculturalism. In 2015, the Pew Research Center found a large sample of the U.S. population identified as Christian (70.6%), Jewish (1.9%), Muslim (0.9%), Buddhist (0.7%), Hindu (0.7%), and

Sikh or other faith (0.3%). Of the U.S. population, 22.8% identified as unaffiliated, and 0.6% either did not know or refused to identify (Pew Research Center, 2015). Considering the importance of religion and spirituality to people's lives and their identity, there has been a new interest among scholars to uncover the truth of it. Within psychological study, *religiosity* has been defined as one's search toward the sacred (i.e., God, divine) within a community that holds certain beliefs and practices, whereas *spirituality* has been described as one's search for a connection with the sacred or towards nature, humanity or the cosmos (Hill et al., 2000). The latter may attest to why religiosity and spirituality have been dichotomized in the psychological literature, though certainly these constructs may go hand-in-hand. See Oman in Paloutzian and Park (2012, pp. 23 – 47) for deeper descriptions of religion and spirituality, as well as a brief overview on literature conceptualizing religion and spirituality.

Despite the importance of faith to many people's lives, it has been considerably marginalized within the field of psychology and counseling research. Within the study of multicultural psychology, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation have been considered important cultural variables and "religion has been put to a status beneath" these identities (Schlosser, Foley, Poltrock, & Homwood, 2010, p. 454). Perhaps a lack of research in religion and spirituality exists because religion has been seen as antithetical to science; or, perhaps defining and studying the supernatural has been tremendously complex to the point it is avoided. Despite these hesitations, most Americans are religious (Schlosser, Foley, Poltrock, & Homwood, 2010) and individuals continue to consider faith central to their identities. It is surprising that the field has neglected this piece of identity in the past, as psychological principles have been shaped by many religions. Nevertheless, the multicultural psychological study of religion and spirituality is starting to blossom, perhaps because of its importance regarding understanding, explaining, and healing individuals. As a field studying



the human condition, it is time to encourage and be a part of growth in this area.

*The Psychology of Religion/Spirituality and Forgiveness*

Recently, social scholars have become interested in understanding how faith contributes to or shapes the forgiveness process, as forgiveness is highly valued in most religions (Rye, 2005). There has been considerable confusion and disagreement in the research community regarding whether religion helps or hinders forgiveness, individuals of faith forgive more readily than non-religious people, or religion and spirituality has an influence on the forgiveness process at all (see Kidwell, 2009 for further details). Many scholars have provided evidence that one's faith does indeed have an influence on an individual's forgiving.

Scholars have found research providing evidence that individuals are more motivated than before to live congruently with their beliefs and values (Davis, Worthington, Hook, & Hill, 2013), as well as to look to and draw from their faith when forgiving (Rye, 2005). Motivations to forgive are higher among individuals who have a strong religious orientation (Escher, 2013), and religious faith has been found to be the strongest predictor of forgiveness after investigating forgiveness among various faith groups (e.g., Christian, Muslim, Jewish, and secular affiliations; Fox & Thomas, 2008). Coined by Worthington (1988), religious commitment (e.g., frequency of church attendance, participation in church activities like prayer or bible study, belief and support of theological components of faith, and frequency of reference to sacred texts) has been correlated with a greater willingness to forgive (Worthington, Sandage, & Berry, 2000). Further, an individual's relationship and dedication to God, or the sacred, has been correlated with a decline in unforgiveness (Davis, Hook, Van Tongeren, Gartner, & Worthington, 2012), and sanctification, or spiritual development, has been found to be positively correlated with forgiveness over time (Davis et al., 2012). Clearly,

evidence has displayed how influential religion and spirituality has been in shaping the value and practice of forgiveness.

In trying to understand the nature of forgiveness for religious or spiritual people, Davis et al. (2008, p. 294) presented a relational model of forgiveness and spirituality, which includes the relationships between the offender, victim, transgression, and sacred. They tested this model with a sample of college students and public universities and found that relational spirituality was related to forgiveness (Davis et al, 2008). Additionally, Davis et al. (2008), found that those who had anxious and avoidant attachments to the divine, negative religious coping, and viewing the transgression as a divine violation were less likely to be forgiving.

Researchers have brought valuable insight the nature of forgiveness for people of faith; however, they have historically condensed religion and forgiveness to be described by only certain parts rather than explaining its wholeness and complexity (Escher, 2013). Previous research, for example, has focused mostly on the connection between forgiveness and parts of religion such as religious commitment and relational spirituality, which may be too reductionist to adequately measure an individual's religiosity/spirituality and forgiveness practices or beliefs, and researchers may be missing the greater and more complete picture of forgiving for individuals of faith. Additionally, Meek and McMinn (1997) stated that both Christian and secular researchers have disconnected from the historical religious faith roots of forgiveness despite this to be where the most significant examples of healing have been found. Further, research has focused on static religious and spiritual concepts of forgiveness rather than examining these constructs developmentally.

Additionally, research has primarily focused on the relationship between religion and forgiveness, though spirituality and forgiveness have been rarely studied, perhaps because most research in this area has been quantitative and spirituality proves difficult to quantify using

quantitative methods. Qualitative methodology would allow flexibility to understand spirituality and the supernatural through human experience; however, it appears, by combing through the literature, that little in the field of the psychology of religion and spirituality have used this design. While the researchers have found valuable information regarding the relationships between religion/spirituality and forgiveness of specific situations, little is known about the contextual issues influencing faith communities on forgiveness, and researchers still wonder why and how one's faith is related to higher levels of forgiving (Davis, Worthington, Hook, & Hill, 2013).

To address the concerns above, researchers in the psychology of religion/spirituality and forgiveness have recently shifted to gain a contextual and holistic understanding of how and why religion and spirituality are related to forgiveness. For example, in a grounded theory study, Kidwell, Wade, and Blaedel (2012) investigated how religious people from a variety of religious orientations perceive and practice forgiveness in their lives, as well as how religious beliefs may promote forgiveness. Some themes found include: "Asking for God's Help," and "Reading Religious Texts" in order "To Draw Closer to God," and "To Be Like God/Christ;" as well as, "Developing Empathy Towards my Offender," and "Focusing on Positive Qualities of my Offender," in order to "Achieve Peace" and "Decrease Bitterness," (Kidwell, Wade, & Blaedel, 2012, pp. 133-134). This research provides valuable insight on commonalities across religions, though the researchers failed to consider the significant differences in beliefs and practices across faith groups by creating a sample made up of several religious identities. Considering religious groups have exclusive truth claims and differing worldviews, a theory on how religious individuals perceive and practice forgiveness may not be ideal in regard to study and practice. Thus, gaining an understanding of forgiveness according to individual faith groups would be helpful to the research and clinical community.

## **Description of the Population**

Among all of the world's religions, Christianity has been considered to be the most characterized by forgiveness (Marty, 1998; Rye, 2005). Christianity is better defined as a religion of following the gospel message of Jesus Christ. The first Christians were followers of Jesus Christ during his life, death, and resurrection, and the Christian church was formed shortly after Jesus' life on earth. Following, the Catholic Church, which budded in 1<sup>st</sup> Century, and other church denominations, like the Protestant church that formed in the 16 Century, grew to include thousands of Christian church branches, each preaching and believing in Jesus' gospel message for millenia (Fahlbusch, Lochman, Mbiti, Pelikan, & Vischer, 2008). While it would certainly be fascinating and enriching to discuss the history of Christianity in depth, there is simply a lack of space for this. For a thorough and comprehensive description of the history of Christianity, Christian doctrines, various traditions and perspectives, comparisons of the thousands of denominations, and cultural issues, see Fahlbusch, Lochman, Mbiti, Pelikan, and Vischer (2008). Christianity, as noted earlier, is the most identified religion among individuals living in the United States today. While realistically many individuals identify as Christians, though may not hold a Christian worldview or live out the Christian faith, it is never-the-less important to gather insight into the fundamental beliefs of the Christian faith.

The Christian worldview asserts the existence of a God, who is infinite, personal, transcendent, all knowing, sovereign, and good (Sire, 2009, pp. 28-31; Exodus 3:14, Revelation 22:13, 1 John 1:5). God is the external reality, the creator of heaven and earth, who gives order to the world and is the moral lawgiver (Sire, 2009, pp. 31-32, 42-43; Genesis 1:1; Isaiah 45:18-19). He is the creator of human beings, who are made in the image of Him (Genesis 1:26-27) and thus are relational, personal, curious, moral, creative, compassionate, forgiving, and capable of transcending

their environment and situation (Sire, 2009, pp. 32-36). Further, human beings have the potential to know God, His word (i.e., the Bible; John 1:14), and the world around them, so they have the ability to have deep and intimate relationships with God and others (Sire, 2009, 36-38). A Christian theistic worldview posits human beings were created good (Genesis 1:31), though they alienated themselves from God through their wrongdoing, rebellion, and hurt towards Him during the Fall, causing sin to enter the relationship, leading to personal impairment and separation from God (Isaiah 53:6; Zackrison, 1992).

The Christian worldview holds a belief in the triune God, one being in three persons (i.e., Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; Matthew 28:19). God is loving, as He did not forsake humanity when they sinned; rather, he gave humans restoration initially through his moral laws (Romans 3:10-23), and later through His Son, Jesus Christ, who restored humanity to Him through forgiveness and grace (Zackrison, 1992; Sire, 2009). Through Jesus Christ's life, forgiveness at the cross, death, and resurrection, He provided ultimate and perfect healing for the human soul in order to restore the severed relationship with God due to their sin (John 3:16, Romans 5:7-8, 1 John 4:10, 1 Corinthians 15). For Christians, the source of forgiveness is God's grace (Zackrison, 1992). In regard to the meaning of life, the Christian worldview holds a belief in a meaningful sequence of life (i.e., beginning, middle, and end) that fulfills God's wills and purposes for humanity and the world (Sire, 2009, 43-44). That end is when God judges humanity and holds the power to either enter the kingdom of heaven or be eternally separated from God (Hebrews 9:27). Finally, Christian's core motivation in life is to "seek first the kingdom of God" (Matthew 6:33), and to glorify God, as well as to enjoy God forever (Matthew 6:33; Sire, 2009, 44-45). Of note, while the thousands of denominations differ in doctrine, practices, customs, and interpretation of the Bible (Fahlbusch, Lochman, Mbiti, Pelikan, & Vischer, 2008), Christians generally believe the principles listed above.

## *Biblical Forgiveness*

According to Douglas, Hillyer, Bruce, Guthrie Millard, Packer, and Wiseman (1982), the word forgiveness has three Latin roots, which can be explained by God's incredible grace and sacrificial love of bearing human beings' wrong doing or sin by suffering and dying on a cross in order to pay the sinner's life-time of debt so that humankind can restore their relationship with God. God has been described to save and forgive completely (Alexander, Rosner, Carson, Goldsworthy, & Carter, 2000), essentially describing the belief that human beings require saving from their wrongdoing, as there is no possible way to make up all wrong-doings made up in a lifetime. Theologian scholars Alexander, Rosner, Carson, Goldsworthy, and Carter (2000, p. 500) wrote, "No one goes through life without stumbling, so [all are in need of] forgiveness."

Forgiveness is mentioned numerous times in the Old Testament of the Christian Bible, and there are roughly 20 words used to express forgiveness (e.g., *to bear, take away, to forgive, pardon, send away, wipe away, to cover*; Alexander, Rosner, Carson, Goldsworthy, & Carter, 2000). Believed by both Jews and Christians, forgiveness in the Old Testament may be conceptualized as deistic, as divine in nature, where God is the only source of forgiveness (see the book of Psalms). God is mentioned in the Old Testament to be a loving yet just God who requires a sacrificial system of forgiveness where the wrongdoer approaches God with the shedding of animal blood for the atonement of sin, as seen in Leviticus chapter 4. However, the Jewish people hoped for a savior to forgive their sins once and for all in order to be in right relationship with God, which is foreshadowed in Jeremiah 31:34.

There are a limited number of words used to express forgiveness in the New Testament of the Christian Bible in comparison to the Old Testament (e.g., *to grant grace, to pardon, a passing, forgiveness of sins*; Alexander, Rosner, Carson, Goldsworthy, & Carter, 2000). However,

forgiveness is the cornerstone of Jesus' ministry and the New Testament, as theologian scholars Alexander, Rosner, Carson, Goldsworthy, and Carter (2000, p. 501) wrote, "The story of Jesus' life, from infancy to ascension, is dominated by the account of his mission to provide forgiveness." Whereas the Old Testament foreshadows the climax of Jesus' ministry, the New Testament points back to Jesus' ministry. According to biblical scripture, Jesus Christ as fully God, became human through infancy as professed by Isaiah in the Old Testament (Isaiah 9:6, Matthew 1:18-26), lived a sinless life through fulfilling all righteousness by the law provided in the Old Testament (1 Peter 2:22, Matthew 3:15), ministered and lived out the eternal word of God through human body (also known as the gospel message; John 1:1-3, 14), voluntarily gave his life on the cross and shedding his blood for the purpose of demonstrating God's justice (Romans 3:25), redeemed all debt of human-beings to those who would repent and believe in him (John 19:30, Acts 3:19), and ascended into heaven where he is believed to be sitting on the right hand of the father God (Acts 1:9-12, Ephesians 4: 8-10; Alexander, Rosner, Carson, Goldsworthy, & Carter, 2000).

The forgiveness process, as detailed by the Christian Bible, invites an individual to humbly acknowledge their sinfulness and unholiness, repent of their sins, place faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior, as well as accept and experience the undeserved gift of forgiveness given to them freely (1 John 1:9-10, 1 John 2:12, Luke 5:8, Revelation 1:17), which leads to eternal life and true freedom (Alexander, Rosner, Carson, Goldsworthy, & Carter, 2000). As the mouthpiece of God, John wrote, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). Further, for those who would believe in Him, a proclamation would be conducted through baptism, where Christians bury their old life and rise into a new creation through repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Mark 1:4; Alexander, Rosner, Carson, Goldsworthy, & Carter, 2000). Through this, the Bible says that the believing and professing

individual is restored to a full fellowship with God and experiences His healing love (Matthew 5:23-24 and Romans 12:18; Alexander, Rosner, Carson, Goldsworthy, & Carter, 2000). In this way, forgiveness through Jesus acts as a bridge from human beings to God.

Jesus taught nations to forgive through prayer, as he expressed what is known to be the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matthew 6:12; ESV), which is later modeled by Jesus when he prayed for his persecutors in the midst of suffering on the cross from other's transgressions towards him (Luke 23:34; ESV). Jesus additionally gave instruction of forgiving through parables, such as the famous Prodigal Son appearing in Luke 15:11-32. This concept of forgiving was clearly not instinctual to human-beings, as depicted by the apostle Peter, when he asked Jesus, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" (Matthew 18:21, ESV)? Jesus followed with "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times" (Matthew 18:22, ESV). Following Jesus' ministry, the book of Acts describes how Jesus' apostles were given the Holy Spirit to preach the gospel, or the "good news," as instructed by Jesus and to form the Christian church. The Gospel Message of forgiveness was extended beyond Jesus' life on earth to the early Christian church, where the apostle Paul's urged others to, "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you," (Ephesians 4:31-32; ESV). Today, Christians around the world continue to believe, live out, and teach this message.

Beyond gaining an elementary understanding of forgiveness, the Bible urges Christians to work towards maturity in their faith to become increasingly like Jesus. This is illustrated throughout various books where the apostle Paul exhorts others to gain spiritual maturity in order to be firmly rooted in faith and have better moral discernment (Hebrews 6:1-4). Paul describes this maturing to



be based in the Gospel of Jesus with a growing wisdom in grace and knowledge of Jesus as Lord and Savior through the Holy Spirit, the Word of God (i.e., the Bible), and wise teachers (2 Peter 3:16-18, 1 Corinthians 2:6, Ephesians 4:11-14, Hebrews 5:12-14). Later, Paul urged Christians, "Therefore let us move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity" (Hebrews 6:3); meaning, believers have the potential to become increasingly like Jesus. Thus, the secular concept of mature forgiveness as outlined in Enright and Kim (2016), would be fully in line with Christian scripture.

### **The Psychology of Christianity and Forgiveness**

While Christian theologians and writers have centered the Triune God's forgiveness towards human-beings around the importance of interpersonal forgiveness, psychologists have become concerned with understanding Christian's tendencies to forgive, as well as differences between God's forgiveness and human-to-human forgiveness.

#### *Christian Tendencies to Forgive*

Up to this point, there have been few studies attempting to understand tendencies of forgiving among Christians, though information gathered has been valuable. According to the literature, Catholics and Protestants have been found to feel more forgiven by God and to be more forgiving of others than participants who were not religiously affiliated (Toussaint & Williams, 2008). Further, scientists have found that conservative Protestants to have reported higher levels of seeking forgiveness in comparison to moderate, liberal, and Catholic Christians. In another correlational study by Mullet et al. (2003), researchers found that regular church attendees, older adults, and nuns experienced higher levels of willingness to forgive than individuals who were not regular church attendees. Overall, it appears from the little research available, Christians, especially conservative Christians, who attend church regularly, tend to be more forgiving. Further, holding

beliefs such as, "If I do not forgive others, God will not forgive me," and "God says that we must turn the other cheek," have been found to be positively correlated to greater tendencies for interpersonal forgiveness for Evangelical Baptists (Exline, 2008).

Additionally, research studying Christian tendencies to forgive other Christians has been studied, though most have focused on hypothetical offenses, according to Greer (2011). In a study by Greer (2011), they found that Christians who had a stronger level of group identification to their church prior to their experience of a hurt by an in-group Christian offender were less likely to have motivations of revenge and avoidance and more likely to feel benevolently towards their offender. While this study provides valuable information, the sample size was rather small, which limits the power of the results.

Finally, one's relationship to God has influenced tendencies to forgive. For example, Christian college students were less likely to forgive if they had an anxious-avoidant attachment to God (Davis et al., 2008). While these findings are helpful to gain a greater understanding of Christian's tendencies to forgive, these studies did not address the full concept of forgiveness, which includes measuring forgiving specific situations where they had been hurt in their life. While individuals may have particular tendencies forgive, this does not necessarily mean that those individuals had high levels of forgiving offenses throughout their life. In regard to self-forgiveness, researchers have found that a perceived, personal experience of God's forgiveness facilitates and is positively correlated with self-forgiveness (Hall & Fincham, 2005, 2008; McConnell & Dixon 2012).

Further, while there is a plethora of research conducted by the secular psychology research community, there continues to be a discrepancy between their beliefs and values vis a vis those of Biblical forgiveness. Researchers Frise and McMinn (2010) posit that researchers and psychologists

hold secularized views of forgiveness that differ from those of Christian theologians, religious leaders, and Christian clients; for example, through their mixed-methods study, they found that psychologists tend to emphasize forgiveness as an intrapersonal process and explicitly state forgiveness and reconciliation are separate concepts though diverse in how they fit together, while theologians have a tendency to perceive forgiveness as a relational process and considered forgiveness and reconciliation to be an integrated process. In the study, psychologists identified that in some cases such as severe abuse or victimization, reconciliation may be dangerous, whereas theologians did not mention danger in regard to reconciliation.

#### *Meanings, Practices, and Advantages of Forgiving for Christians*

A few researchers have theorized and attempted to understand why Christians forgive. Many Christians identify their reasons to forgive are theological in nature, and they engage in spiritual processes like prayer in the forgiveness process (McMinn, Meek, Dominguez, Ryan, & Novotny, 1999; McMinn et al., 2008). Meek and McMinn (1997) identified motivations for evangelical Christians to forgive include being able to recognize human fallibility and depravity on a universal and individual level, understand the need to both give and receive forgiveness, and focus on extending love, compassion, and gratitude. McMinn et al. (1999) found through qualitative inquiry that evangelical Christians are motivated to forgive interpersonal wounds by “comfort,” “duty,” “relational,” “humility/empathy,” and “Christian beliefs.” Further, Gassin and Enright (1995b) conceptualized that Christians forgive based upon their Christian worldview, as well as their existential search for meaning in suffering. They based reasons for forgiving upon a developmental continuum between, on the lower end, focusing on the self and others, and on the higher end, focusing on their relationship with God and loving others (Gassin & Enright, 1995b).

In regard to how people of faith forgive, Enright and colleagues have found differences in ways human beings forgive each other, as well as ways in which God is seen to forgive human beings (Kim & Enright, 2014). In a mixed-methods study conducted by Kim & Enright (2014, p. 197), divine forgiveness, or forgiveness from God onto humanity, was described by Christian theology students as: “The perfect God forgives perfectly,” “God who is ‘Impassible and Immutable’ Needs Not Change in Forgiving Sinners’,” “God Loves Unlimitedly Whereas Humans Cannot,” and “God’s Forgiveness Involves Dealing with Human Sins.” They state that interpersonal forgiveness appears to not require reconciliation, as in divine forgiveness, and the researchers found interpersonal forgiveness of offenders was described as: “Reconciliation Might Not Occur in Human Forgiveness but God Wants to Reconcile with Sinners,” and “Human Forgiveness Derives from God” (Kim & Enright, 2014, p. 197). Further, Kim and Enright (2015) later assert that while interpersonal forgiveness includes giving love and compassion, divine forgiveness is more than that – it includes God’s forgiveness of sins, humanity’s repentance and acceptance of God’s gift, and humanity’s reconciliation to God.

Christians have been found to often rely on their faith when forgiving (Rye & McCabe, 2014). For example, researchers looked at Lutheran laypeople’s perceptions and practices, as well as lived experiences, of forgiving interpersonal transgressions through a phenomenological qualitative study, and found the following themes: “Spiritual Encouragement,” “Self-Reflection,” “Letting Go,” “Relationship with God,” and “Reconciliation through Taking Responsibility” (Rockenbach, Vail, Malpass, & Small, 2014). While there are few studies examining why and how Christians forgive, conducting further qualitative work in this area will be beneficial.

Forgiving has led to greater well-being for individuals of faith. For example, Akhtar, Dolan, and Barlow (2016) conducted a qualitative study to understand the relationship between forgiving

and psychological well-being, and they found that forgiveness led participants to experience positive feelings and relations with others, reduction in negative affect, spiritual growth and a sense of meaning in life, and a greater sense of empowerment. Furthering the connection between faith and forgiveness, Lutjen, Siltan, and Flannelly (2012) found religious participation has an influence on health by increasing forgiveness and lowering hostility. In conclusion, practicing psychological forgiveness and focusing on one's relationship with God may lead to better overall wellness.

### *Intervention Studies*

Some researchers have investigated forgiveness-promoting treatment among Christians. Most research has focused on understanding the effects of secular and/or religiously integrated forgiveness programs with Christians. For a comprehensive list and discussion of evidence-based, religiously integrated forgiveness programs, see Worthington, Johnson, Hook, & Aten (2013). This section will briefly discuss intervention findings up to this date.

Secular and religiously integrated forgiveness interventions have both been found to be particularly helpful among Christians. In a study conducted by Rye and Pargament (2002), the researchers evaluated the efficacy of a six-week group forgiveness intervention (i.e., randomly assigned to a secular, religiously integrated, or no-intervention comparison condition) for 58 college women who had experienced injustice in a romantic relationship; and, they found that the participants in both intervention conditions showed significant improvements in their forgiveness and existential well-being in comparison to the no-intervention condition. DiBlasio (2010) also found that religiously integrated interventions, such as modeling Jesus Christ's forgiveness, in marital counseling have led couples to seek forgiveness from and give forgiveness to their spouse more often. Regarding forgiveness interventions among Christian divorced individuals, Rye and colleagues conducted a study with 192 divorced individuals and randomly assigned them to one of

three (i.e., secular forgiveness, religiously-integrated forgiveness, or no-intervention comparison conditions) eight-session forgiveness group interventions, and researchers found that both secular and religiously-integrated forgiveness interventions led to significant increases in understanding of forgiveness and forgiveness of their ex-spouse (Rye, Pargament, Pan, Yingling, Shogren, Ito, & La Greca, 2005).

In a study examining the effectiveness of Christian therapy and secular therapy, Wade, Worthington, and Vogel (2007), found that those who had greater religious commitment experienced a greater improvement in their mental health condition when they received a combination of secular and religious interventions. Interventions have also been implemented with clergy members, lay Christians in church-settings, as well as Christian students. In a study by Van Loon (1997), clergy from 11 different denominations showed increased willingness to forgive after receiving forgiveness education through hypothetical vignettes. Lay Christians have also been found to experience improvements in their feelings towards forgiveness and forgiving behaviors compared to those who did not receive the forgiveness-promoting intervention (Jackson & Thurston, 1999). Christians have responded well to forgiveness workshops and a workbook created by Greer, Worthington, Lin, Lavenlock, and Griffin (2014). Additionally, these religiously tailored, psychoeducational workshops on forgiveness have led to greater forgiving among Christian college students (Lampton, Oliver, Worthington, & Berry, 2005). Irrespective of the approach used, it appears forgiveness interventions are overall helpful for Christians. However, researchers also urge the research community to gain more understanding about how one's faith influences the forgiveness of others, and whether people of faith would be more satisfied with religiously-tailored forgiveness interventions (Rye & McCabe, 2014)

*Integrating Christian Worldview in Counseling and Teaching*

As seen across the research, it is important to consider one's faith and worldview, as well as preferences, when implementing forgiveness interventions and educational programs. Individuals of faith generally prefer interventions to include their religious and spiritual values (Rose, Westefeld, & Ansley, 2008), though it appears secular counselors are not as receptive as religious counselors or clinicians in Christian agencies to including religious principles in therapy despite their relatively equal use of secular forgiveness strategies (DiBlasio & Benda, 1991; Wade, Worthington, & Vogel, 2007). Freedman and Zarifkar (2016) discussed the importance of incorporating client's worldview in therapy and how clinicians can work collaboratively with clients to additionally understand the psychological process of forgiving. For example, discussing God's character and Biblical scripture may be important, as Christians likely believe forgiveness cannot be understood apart from God (Cheong & DiBlasio, 2007). Further, incorporating elements of secular forgiveness can be particularly helpful when Christian clients ask questions about how to forgive (Enright & Zell, 1989). Counselors and teachers may utilize an integrated approach to forgiveness with individuals of faith that uses both psychological and theological principles of forgiving, though more holistic and accurate models of religiously integrated models should be developed.

Researchers have generally pushed their own religiously tailored interventions without first seeking Christian's perspectives on forgiveness. Also, much of the research in the field of psychology of religion/spirituality and forgiveness appears to be reductionist. Further, interventions and models created have been developed by the researcher rather than in collaboration with the population. Rather than first making adaptations to secular interventions and then fitting them to the faith community, as Worthington et al. (2007) would advise, a greater understanding of why and how Christians practice forgiveness across time and situations should be conducted in order to

generate a theory developed by both Christian and researchers together. This theory will then be able to inform researchers and clinicians on how to create religiously integrated interventions.

### **Future Directions**

Despite a considerable amount of work in the psychological study of secular forgiveness, as well as between the relationship of religion/spirituality and forgiveness, there are clear gaps that warrant further exploration. Since the mid-1980s, it appears there are several theories and interventions detailing perceptions and practices of forgiveness, which offer a basic groundwork for the psychological study of forgiveness. Overtime, it appears psychological scholars have diverged in their understanding of forgiveness, and currently, there is contradictory information regarding what forgiveness entails. Some research has considered forgiveness to be dichotomized into trait or state forgiveness, though this does not adequately address individual's capacity for forgiveness. Reductionist definitions and study of forgiveness offer valuable information, though they are only one piece to the puzzle. The literature highlights how forgiveness should be inclusive and understood as a developmental process rather than static (Kim & Enright, 2016). Further research understanding forgiveness as an identity that rests on a continuum should be conducted.

Secondly, in searching the database for the topic of the intersection of religion, spirituality, or faith and forgiveness, few recent studies exist, which has been echoed by the researchers who have recently authored articles in this area. At this time, researchers know little about the influence of religion or faith on forgiveness, specifically the values, principles, and methods which promote forgiving for Christians. Of that which has been studied, too often has religion and spirituality been reduced to concepts that do not encompass a holistic understanding of how individuals of faith perceive and practice forgiveness. As most religions believe in forgiveness as a virtue, though have varied perceptions on what this looks like, an individual analysis of each faith group and their



perceptions on the phenomenon of forgiveness is warranted. Gaps remain in the literature specifically in gaining in-depth perspectives on certain faith groups' perceptions and practices of forgiveness, as well as how people of faith develop in their forgiveness. In whole, questions still remain regarding how and why a specific faith group may forgive. Further, scholars have urged different methods to measure forgiveness should be utilized, as quantitative and self-report measures have been the primary modality used in past research (Wade, Hoyt, Kidwell, & Worthington, 2014); thus, qualitative inquiry is warranted. The findings reported in this chapter are valuable stepping-stones for future research.

## Chapter III

### **Methodology**

This chapter will present the methods that were employed in the study. First, the research questions will be identified, followed by a description of the research paradigm. The following section will describe the participants in the study and how they will be recruited, followed by a description of the research team and their training. The anticipated participants in the study will then be discussed. The next section will describe the data collection procedures, including participant recruitment and the interview protocol. Researcher biases and expectations will then be addressed. Finally, the procedures for preparing and analyzing the data will be described, followed by a chapter summary.

### **Research Questions**

This paper aims to address several gaps in the literature by gaining a holistic understanding of Christian forgiveness. Considering there are disagreements regarding whether religion has helped, hindered, or influenced the forgiveness process at all, this study was developed to answer: Why do Christians forgive? Specifically, what motivates or influences Christians to forgive? To what degree has their faith beliefs influenced their forgiving perceptions and behaviors? Additionally, how do Christians forgive? What beliefs and strategies do Christians use to forgive? Further, forgiveness has been conceptualized as a developmental process of forgiving across time and situations, yet questions remain what this process looks like. Further, this development has been theorized to be tied to one's identity, in that those who are more mature in their forgiving, tend to embrace forgiveness as a way of life. This paper will investigate the following: How have Christians forgiven across the lifespan (i.e., childhood, adolescence, and adulthood)? How have Christians developed in their forgiving

perceptions and practices across time? Lastly, how have Christians incorporated forgiveness into their identity?

The purpose of this work entails providing the research, clinical, and religious community with a deeper, holistic understanding of Christian forgiveness as expressed by Christians. Further, by understanding the forgiveness process, as perceived by Christians, the research team will construct a theory, however incomplete, of Christian forgiveness. Incomplete in that this theory is flexible, moving, and imperfect. The purpose of this investigation will be to build a way to explain what forgiveness means within Christianity. Based upon literature and a newly emerging understanding of Christian forgiveness theory, this theory will be able to be implemented with future Christian clients and taught among religious settings. Additionally, forgiveness concepts relevant to this population will be able to be studied more extensively by researchers.

### **Research Paradigm**

The study uses a constructivist paradigm and evolved Grounded Theory (GT) as a methodological format. Considering this study aims to understand the process of forgiveness, as experienced by Christians, and develop a theory to explain the practice or framework of Christian forgiveness, evolved GT is the most appropriate qualitative method. Further, GT will be helpful in bridging the gap between research and practice (Strauss & Corbin, 2014). This section serves to provide a brief, comprehensive description of GT and how it will be employed for this study.

### *Epistemological and Ideological Position*

In terms of ontology and epistemology, the dissertator's worldview is a combination of post-positivist and constructivist. The dissertator believes knowledge is a combination of

discovered and constructed truth. Ontologically, the investigator's worldview has been shaped by their faith, particularly having a Christian worldview. They hold a perception that a single, absolute reality exists beyond us. The dissertator believes in a one true God who only knows the true nature of reality in completeness, and that only God can tell human beings this nature of reality through His relationship with them. The dissertator believes that human beings including researchers, as imperfect as they are, can never completely grasp reality during their lives here on earth. Yet, research can move humanity toward a greater understanding of this reality, and one way in doing so is through gathering an understanding about how human beings perceive and understand the world. Further, the dissertator believes that greater objectivity can be achieved through consensus among people (Strauss & Corbin, 2014), as human beings are made in the image of God, thus reality can be found through consensus across people.

The dissertator also believes that human beings have been given the freedom and responsibility to search for and understand meaning through lived experiences and personal interactions. They believe that each individual constructs meaning in their experiences and have subjective beliefs of how they believe the world to be. Epistemologically, a lean towards constructivism is favored for this study, as the researcher believes that gaining complete objectivity is impossible due to a tendency towards researcher bias. Through a research team, greater objectivity will be warranted. To a point, the researcher will be coming to understand themes across the data through participant voices, as well as recognize subjective bias. Further, the dissertator believes a constructivist paradigm is more appropriate for this study in comparison to a traditional, postpositive paradigm, as they believe each individual interviewed will hold their own reality of experiencing past hurts and what forgiveness means and looks like

to them personally. One interviewee's way of experiencing and forgiving hurts may be different from another's way, though they both offer insight into reality.

## **Research Design**

Grounded Theory (GT) may be conceptualized as a methodology that is laced with depth, richness, and expression of the human experience. Originally created and published in 1967 by two social scientists, Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, GT has been one of the most popular and used methodologies in research to this day (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). As a reaction to positivist and reductionist methods predominantly used at the time while the theory was being created, GT attempted to provide a framework that overlapped empirical research with theory in order to elicit research literally "grounded" in human experience, processes, and behaviors (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This methodological lens focused on the interrelationship between human interaction, socially shared meaning through language, and the truth or reality of human experience (Ralph, Birks, & Chapman, 2015).

Strauss and Glaser came from very different backgrounds, and each held different perceptions and opinions about the meaning and procedures of GT (see Ralph, Birks, & Chapman, 2015, for a detailed discussion on the differences between GT frameworks). While Glaser held a strong post-positivist lens and stood by the notion that GT must rely on objectivity (Glaser, 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), Strauss began to adopt a pragmatic view that included both post-positivism and constructivism due to his beliefs that complete objectivity on the part of the researcher would be impossible due to a certain degree of bias and subjectivity the researcher would bring to the method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). It was then that Strauss and Glaser separated, and Strauss collaborated with Corbin to write their first book in 1990, detailing a systematic approach to conducting GT. Later, Strauss and Corbin would develop what is known

to be evolved GT (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). Through the collection of qualitative data through interviews, data analysis, and theory generation, Corbin and Strauss (2007, p. 107) aspired to create a “unified theoretical explanation” for a particular human process or experience. Simply put, GT theorists aspired to provide novel and innovative theories that would be based in real-world experiences of human beings for the purpose of resembling reality.

Corbin and Strauss’ (2014) systematic approach of evolved GT will be used for this study. This will consist of theoretical sampling or gathering participants to help the dissertator best shape the theory; data collection through semi-structured interviewing in the community several times until the point of saturation; data analysis through a 3-step coding process; theory building; and, writing (Creswell, 2013; Corbin & Strauss, 2014). The purpose of this approach will be to develop a working theory of the process of Christian forgiveness. Creswell (2013, p. 86) describes GT primary researchers as going through a “zigzag” process of visiting “the field” to collect data, going back to conduct analysis, then returning to the field to find new information, going back to compare data the emerging categories or phenomena (i.e., the *constant comparative method*), and so on until saturation is reached and the theory is complete. The hope is that the generated theory of forgiveness reflects the truth or reality of Christians as much as possible.

### **Potential Biases and Expectations**

The role of reflexivity serves a vital purpose in research, as thinking reflexively will assist the researcher and the team, to understand how their personal values, beliefs, and perceptions influence the research process; specifically, their topic choice, method choice, and interpretations made from the data collected. The role of reflexivity is to understand how

researcher identity and positioning; subjectivity; and, trustworthiness of their analysis, interpretations, and findings, inform the research process (Glesne, 2016).

### *Dissertator Bias*

In regard to the interviewer's identity, the dissertator is a Non-Denominational, Christian female who is part of an Evangelical faith community in Southeastern Wisconsin. They possess a graduate-level degree and believe their career to be important to them. They identify as white and multi-ethnic (European and Latinx), with English as their primary language. Their faith, childhood, family of origin, marriage, studies, and ethnicity have all played a role in their value of forgiveness. In regard to other strong values they hold, family is within the top five, which has been strongly influenced by their race/ethnicity and faith. The dissertator has experienced hurts across their life, like all of humanity. Their perception to deal with these hurts was with forgiveness, which incorporated an integration of faith and psychology. Like many, the primary researcher has struggled with forgiving, and forgiving has been a never-ending journey. They too are a learner in this process. These values make the interviewer's identity and influence their perceptions of the world, as well as interactions with others.

### *Subjectivity*

The dissertator's subjective lens will affect their perspectives of forgiveness, how they might ask certain questions and omit others, as well as make interpretations of the data. Their faith, the Bible, culture, personal experiences, and psychological theories of forgiveness have shaped the primary researcher's subjective lens on forgiveness. The dissertator's perception on what forgiveness looks like, for example, is that people who have been deeply hurt forgive by acknowledging their own sin nature, seeing the person who hurt them as infallible human-beings, knowing there is no possible way for the offender to repay for their injustice(s) towards them,

and giving the offender spiritual fruits of forgiveness. In their subjective lens, they believe that just as Jesus did not deserve the wrongdoing he endured, He forgave in the midst of suffering and offered grace to his offenders, or human-kind, who are undeserving of that grace. The dissertator's perspective holds that within the process of forgiving, the triune God and the survivor work collaboratively to forgive the offender. Further, the dissertator has a bias towards Enright's (2001) process model and definition of forgiveness, as well as Kim and Enright's (2016) developmental position on forgiving.

#### *Dissertator Expectations*

As the dissertator will be positioned as an insider, the dissertator considered how this position may affect the research process. One thought was that the dissertator's identity as a Christian made the procedure of gaining access to and developing trust with the participants easier, with less barriers. However, potential challenges could have included participants having difficulty answering honestly if they held diverging or negative views towards forgiveness due to fear of negative evaluation, as well as participants questioning the legitimacy of the study itself. However, this was not evidenced in the study or voiced by participants in the study. In actuality, participants overall expressed trust and the ability to be vulnerable with the dissertator. In addition to these anticipated challenges, the dissertator overall expected the process of screening, gathering data through interviews, and interpreting rich responses and results to be a taxing and lengthy process.

#### *Researcher Responsibility*

As a qualitative investigator, the dissertator holds significant responsibility. The role of the investigator was to understand what the participant believes to be true. Rather than speaking for their participants, the primary researcher strived to come from a place of representing



participant voices in a clear and understandable way (Strauss & Corbin, 2014). Further, ethics requires research responsibility of understanding and confronting biases in their worldview (Creswell, 2012). As the researcher, they hold great power. However, with this power, the researcher strived to uphold responsibility by conducting research in an ethical way. Using a constructivist lens, the researcher maintained awareness that their biases have a significant potential to influence their understanding, analysis, and interpretation of the data. Thus, their responsibility to be both objective and creative observers was crucial (Strauss & Corbin, 2014).

### **Credibility**

In order to gain credibility, the dissertator needed to base interpretations in participant's perceptions (Creswell, 2013; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 2014). To do this, they spent an extensive amount of time in the field to build trust and credibility (Creswell, 2013). Many hours were spent with the community in order to build rapport and limit bias. Significant time was allotted for data analysis, and a team of researchers, as well as the dissertation committee board, worked together to ensure the participant's responses were accurately represented in the themes. Further, credibility was gained through meeting saturation in the data, as well as asking for participant's reactions of the generated theory prior to writing (Strauss & Corbin, 2014).

To build trustworthiness with participants, the dissertator spent sufficient time building trust at the church sites, as well as building rapport and finding safe places for the participants to meet. Taking the time to meet church leaders in order to become more familiar with their customs, as well as asking for feedback on the dissertator's subjectivities and interpretations, was helpful in building awareness and trust. In regard to the interpretation, the research team consulted on why certain themes were chosen over others, as well as discussed how the members came to know those themes (Creswell, 2013). Additionally, the dissertator was reflective in

understanding how much their identity and subjectivity may influence the data interpretation. Lastly, the dissertator spent time discerning what to do with what they have been given by participants in order to honor the participants and share their voices in conjunction with the research team.

### **Ethical Considerations**

American Psychological Association ethical standards and HIPPA regulations were examined to ensure ethical conduct throughout the study. When meeting with church sites and participants, full disclosure about the purpose of the study was made. It is the ethical responsibility of the dissertator to accurately describe the process of the study (Creswell, 2013). This included briefing participants that they will not receive any undue risk and that participation is voluntary – free from coercion. An informed consent form was created and provided, as required by the IRB. Confidentiality and anonymity of the research participants were maintained on behalf of the dissertator and discussed through informed consent. Participants had the chance to be part of a raffle in order to win a gift card, and incentive (i.e., two \$50 Amazon gift cards) was given to two participants to ensure the dissertator was not the only beneficiary of the study (Creswell, 2013).

Several ethical issues were hypothesized to the surface during this study. Considering the nature of this study in investigating forgiveness of deep hurts, participants were hypothesized to experience strong emotions. Emotional harm was avoided at all cost by using appropriate screening, having a gentle approach while facilitating interviews, as well as continually assessing of the participant's wellbeing during the data collection. Pre-formulated procedures for resolution at these times were made. Specifically, if the participant were to have a greater risk for emotional vulnerability, the interviewer would advise a discontinuation of the investigation. Additionally, appropriate referrals would be made to support services and mental health

providers. However, only one participant expressed emotional vulnerability following the interview, and a referral was made to a variety of counseling practices near the participant. For those who completed the study, the following was provided: the dissertator and chair's contact information, specific information with regard to the future use of the data, and support service information.

### **Research Team and Training**

For this study, interviews were conducted, transcribed, and analyzed by the primary researcher. A team of one doctoral-level and six masters-level researchers, including the primary researcher and auditor, were formed to read and analyze the interview transcripts for the purpose of ensuring consensus and greater objectivity, in line with Strauss and Corbin (2014). The researchers are diverse in gender, ethnicity, faith (i.e., Nondenominational Christian, Lutheran, Catholic, Pagan, and Atheist identities). One auditor, Thomas Baskin, Ph.D., a doctoral level psychologist, reviewed the team's work to ensure the theory is coherent, internally consistent, and accurate, and that it does not have any gaps, loose ends, or redundancies, as in line with Strauss and Corbin (1998).

All team members received experience with qualitative methodology prior to the analysis process under the supervision of a psychologist. Considering research team members did not have firsthand experiences with the participants and had entry-level experience in qualitative methodology, the primary researcher offered several instruction sessions via Zoom on qualitative methodology, and the auditor and primary researcher provided team members with GT materials in order to increase understanding and competence with this methodology. Meetings consisted of discussing the purpose of the study, instruction and readings of GT methodology and/or methods, discussion of team biases and expectations prior to data collection, as well as findings

through the analysis process. The primary researcher supervised and reviewed all of the analyzed transcripts, as well as consulted with the research team several times throughout the analysis process to protect against any inappropriate inferences about the GT method and actual data.

## **Participants**

GT theorists suggest sample sizes of 20 to 30 may be ideal in order to gain saturation, though there is also argument that this number may change depending on when saturation is reached (Creswell, 2013), so the study will require flexibility and discernment. Theoretical sampling methods were used in this study, as participants were theoretically chosen based upon whether the individuals will be able to help the research to best shape the theory (Strauss & Corbin, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 2007). Considering there are a significant number of Christian denominations and it would be virtually impossible to interview all branches of the Christian faith, the dissertator and dissertation committee selected the following denominations that fit into liberal or conservative, and traditional or non-traditional quadrant camps: Catholic (i.e., traditional and conservative theology), Mainline Protestant (i.e., non-traditional and liberal to conservative theology), and Evangelical Protestant (i.e., non-traditional and tendency toward conservative/fundamental theology) participants were recruited, out of convenience, as they are among the largest Christian groups (See Appendix B for a chart reflecting a comparison on Christian beliefs).

### *Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria*

Inclusion and exclusion criteria were both created by the dissertator and a licensed psychologist. The inclusion criteria for this study include non-traditional, conservative Protestant individuals, namely Evangelical individuals; non-traditional, liberal Mainline

individuals; and, traditional, liberal Catholic individuals. Though these groups do not fully encompass the many beliefs, traditions, and practices among Christianity, these groups cover each quadrant listed above. Further, though differences exist among the groups, they hold common elements of being a Christian. Individuals aged 25 and older who hold an attitude or belief setting themselves apart as proclaimed believers and followers of God/Jesus Christ, make decisions or engage in practices that signify their Christian worldview through events or actions (e.g., reading of scripture, baptism, prayer, worship, church membership, etc.), and participate in a Christian church community (for at least 6 months) will be included. Further, those who have practiced the phenomenon of forgiveness for hurts experienced in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, as well as those who believe forgiveness is a way of life, will be included for this study.

Exclusion criteria includes individuals who, though they identify as a Christian within at least one of the denominations, do not practice or behave in conjunction with their Christian beliefs. Further, individuals who have not worked on forgiving hurts experienced across their life were not part of this study.

### *Participant Recruiting*

Participants were recruited directly through their church congregation site, as well as through word-of-mouth. After receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, the dissertator contacted pastors and leaders of Evangelical Protestant, Mainline Protestant, and Catholic church sites in the Southeast Wisconsin area in order to discuss the study purpose and gain cooperation in the study. After gaining access, the dissertator requested permission from church leaders to advertise the study in announcements, church pamphlets, bulletins, and email, if available. Due to difficulties in

finding willing participants, the recruitment strategy shifted to snowball sampling (i.e., individuals who heard of the study through word-of-mouth by former participants who were encouraged to share the study with those they felt would be a good fit).

Interested applicants were screened for inclusion and exclusion criteria, which were created by the researcher and various church leaders. Prior to screening, the primary researcher contacted the leaders of various church sites in Southeastern Wisconsin and interviewed them on the contingencies about that particular faith system. For example, questions included, “What are the criteria for being a, or what makes up a, \_\_\_\_\_ [Catholic, Mainline Protestant, or Evangelical Protestant] individual? What beliefs and behaviors does one need to exemplify in order to be considered a \_\_\_\_\_ [Catholic, Mainline Protestant, or Evangelical] individual, and are there qualifications?” Though these may be assumed by research, the researcher assumed each church site may hold to certain beliefs. This screening was reviewed by the research team and implemented prior to the applicant selection process at the church site.

Applicants selected were offered interview dates and times to meet at their church site, home, other community location, or over the phone. Those who responded met with the primary researcher to conduct the interview. The timeline to complete the IRB approval, make connections with churches and their members, recruitment process, and conduction of interviews took roughly two years.

### *Participant Demographics*

A total of nine Catholics were screened for the study, though two did not respond in regard to setting up an interview following the screening and therefore were no longer invited to be participants in the study. Eight Mainline Protestants were screened, and one withdrew from the study during the screening due to struggling with forgiveness and feeling uncomfortable with

sharing their previous experiences of forgiving. Seven Evangelical Protestants were screened, and all were participants in the study.

A total of 21 participants participated in interviews. A majority of the participants were Caucasian (20 out of 21; 95%), male (12 out of 21; 57%), ranged in age from 31 to 82 years, and ranged in educational level from some post-secondary to doctorate level education. All seven Catholic participants identified as “Catholic,” six indicated they have been Catholic since birth, and one reported converting to Catholicism during adulthood. Regarding forgiveness duration, three Catholic participants reported practicing forgiveness since early-childhood, though one indicated they did not become intentional about forgiving until adulthood. Four Catholics stated they began forgiving during adulthood. Of the Evangelical Protestant participants, three identified as “Evangelical Free,” two identified as “Nondenominational,” and two identified as “Evangelical Baptist.” Three identified with their Evangelical Protestant tradition from birth and the remaining four reported converting to Evangelical Protestantism or identifying with this faith denomination during late adolescence to adulthood. Regarding forgiveness duration, three Evangelical protestant participants stated that they began practicing forgiveness during early-childhood, and three reported they began forgiving during adulthood. Of the Mainline Protestant participants, one identified as “Lutheran” from the Missouri Synod (LCMS), one as “Lutheran” from the Evangelical Church in America (ECLA), two as “Episcopal,” one as “Presbyterian,” one as “Methodist,” and one as “American Baptist.” Six identified with the Mainline Protestant tradition from birth, with three of the six reported converting to a different Mainline tradition later in their life; and, one Mainline protestant participant stated they converted to the Mainline protestant denomination as an adult. Four Mainline protestant participants stated they began practicing forgiveness during early-childhood, and three began forgiving during adulthood.

Of the 21 participants in the present study, seven described severe offenses involving neglect, emotional, verbal or sexual abuse, which were by family members (i.e., parents, siblings, current or former spouses). Eighteen participants reported interpersonal hurts such as betrayal, effects of unresolved familial addiction or mental health issues, infidelity, and divorce, which were typically by family members, friends, and employers. Thus, a majority of the participants reported forgiving remarkably painful to atrocious offenses. Of the participants who discussed self-forgiveness, most described it in relation to hurting family members or friends.

### **Interview Protocol and Data Collection**

The interview protocol, created and reflected in Appendix A, was developed by the primary researcher through generating questions pertinent to the study question, gathering ideas and gaps from the literature, as well as through consulting with a licensed psychologist. Using literature is in line with evolved GT, as Strauss and Corbin (1998, p. 49) believed reviewing the literature could be used to inform the formulation of interview questions as a way to “enhance” theory development. The interview incorporates questions exploring the participant’s background, identity, beliefs and perceptions about forgiveness, influence of faith on their beliefs and practices, motivations to forgive, aids to forgiving, experiences of forgiving hurts from across the lifespan, the process of forgiving, the role of their faith in forgiving, the influence of forgiving on their faith, tendencies to lead a forgiving life, the developmental process of forgiveness, and concluding remarks. The questions were evaluated by the dissertation and research team throughout the course of data collection. After the initial interviews, the primary researcher modified the questions based upon concepts, questions, or gaps emerging from the analysis, as in line with evolved GT (Corbin & Strauss, 2014).



## *Procedure*

The dissertator conducted face-to-face or phone, semi-structured interviews held at participant's preferred locations (e.g., church site, home or community site, over the phone, etc.). A follow-up contact through email was used for clarifying any questions and validating the research. Participants were asked demographic information, including their religious denomination, age, race/ethnicity, and gender identification. Participation in the interviews was voluntary, as in accordance with the IRB at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Consent was obtained from the participants admitted to the study. Each participant was briefed on the purpose of the study, as well as confidentiality in accordance with HIPAA, prior to the interview. Participants were given the opportunity to decline participation in the study, and they were informed that they could discontinue their participation at any time during the interview. Interviews were taped and transcribed by the primary researcher verbatim with permission from the participant.

After collecting the data, identifying information about the participants was removed. Further, each participant was given a code number, for the purpose of protecting participant confidentiality. All data was stored as specified by HIPPA regulations and destroyed at the end of the study. A transcription service, specifically Temi, was used; however, the primary researcher combed through the transcripts to ensure the narratives were accurate. Data analysis ensued following the interviews.

## **Data Analysis**

The data was analyzed using evolved GT methods. Analysis consisted of the interaction between the dissertator and research teams' ability to maintain "a degree of rigor" by basing the analysis in the participant's perceptions, as well as the creativity to take raw data and understand it meaningfully (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 13). Considering the dissertator aimed to create a

theory of Christian forgiveness, they and the research team made deductions and inductions, and derived hypotheses about the data in the form of themes through researcher interpretation and discovery (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). As Strauss and Corbin (1998, p. 25) expressed, “A theory does more than provide understanding or paint a vivid picture. It enables users to explain and predict events, thereby providing guides to action.” Thus, the research team engaged in their best efforts to maintain a balance between objectivity and sensitivity; specifically, they attempted to make accurate interpretations of the data, and at the same time were sensitive to and had insight into what the data means (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). While this process was time-consuming and potentially daunting at times, it was critical for the dissertator to engage in memoing, or reflecting about their thoughts, insights, feelings, biases, and experiences to hold themselves accountable (Creswell, 2013).

The dissertator started the analysis process during the data collection phase (Creswell, 2013; Corbin & Strauss, 2014). Data analysis was performed by first focusing on the purpose of the study, and then by using the following 3-step coding model pioneered by Strauss and Corbin (1998): open, axial, and selective coding. The purpose of conducting this detailed procedure was to adequately and systematically build a theory, as in line with Corbin and Strauss (2014). The following are overviews of each step in the coding process.

The first phase of coding analysis consisted of *open coding*, where transcripts are read thoroughly (i.e., line-by-line via microanalysis) and concepts in the data are uncovered, named, and developed (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 102). During this phase, the dissertator looked for patterns across pieces of data (e.g., words, events, actions), compared those data pieces to each other, and grouped similar pieces of data with common characteristics under a “category,” otherwise known as a phenomenon or unit of meaningful information (e.g., a problem, issue,

event, happening, object) (Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 124). The main strategy used for coding decisions was the *constant comparative method* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) in order to locate and name categories, as well as compare new information gathered to those categories as a process of validation. The coding process was performed through highlighting sections or sentences that are relevant to the research topic and question (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). While highlighting sections, the data uncovered was named, which were made up of *in vivo codes* (Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Saldaña, 2009a) that are derived from the participant's exact words or phrases, as well as created names made by the research team. This method was used with the intention of basing the interpretation in the participant's words as much as possible. After commenting through all of the highlighted sections, a coding memo was created (Creswell, 2013). Codes holding common characteristics were then grouped into categories for the purpose of reducing large amounts of data to smaller and more manageable pieces, as well as for gaining increasing "analytic power" to later explain and predict relationships among the information received (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 113). Categories were listed, and their properties were defined (Corbin & Strauss, 2014).

Following the initial phase of open coding, the process of *axial coding*, or creating and relating or linking subcategories to categories occurred, which adds depth and structure to the theory building process (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Corbin & Strauss, 2014). The parts of data that were broken down during the open coding phase were "reassembled" and connected around the "axis" of the categories, respectively (Strauss, 1987, p. 64; Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 124). At this stage, the research team looked for explanations of the category or phenomenon in order to understand the relationships between the subcategories and categories, as well as among categories. These explanations were made up of *causal conditions, strategies, intervening*

*conditions, and consequences* (Creswell, 2013), which consisted of factors, actions, and outcomes that cause, were in response to, or influenced the core phenomenon of forgiveness (See Strauss & Corbin, 2014, for details on the procedure for creating these explanations). Simply, the research team worked to understand the ways in which the categories related to each other. This process terminated when *saturation* was reached, and new information either did not emerge from the data or if it did not add anything to the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2014).

During the last phase of coding, *selective coding*, the major categories were refined and went through a process of integration in order to form the theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 144; Creswell, 2013). After, preliminary codes were identified, they were reviewed, revised, or excluded as appropriate. Preliminary codes were then grouped into themes and subthemes. To be classified as a major theme, all three denominational groups needed to mention the theme. To be classified as a subtheme, at least two participants needed to mention the subtheme. Each major theme represents a unique concept that was not referenced in other themes or subthemes. Next, major themes were organized as representing the research questions of the “what,” “why,” and “how” of forgiveness. During this process, the research team decided on what the central category, or main theme, of the research was for the purpose of explaining what the “research is all about” (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). Similarly to how subcategories center around a category in axial coding, categories were organized around this central category to create what is known to be an overarching theoretical scheme (Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Many techniques can be used to facilitate this integration process (e.g., writing the storyline, using diagrams, using memos; see Corbin & Strauss, 2014). Subsequently, the research team went through a process of refining or editing the theory to ensure it is logical and does not have any inconsistencies, that important data was not overlooked, that categories are saturated and

complete, and that ideas that do not add to the theory were dropped (Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Saldaña, 2009b). Finally, the theory was validated through comparing it to the raw data and holding discussions with the research team (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). Further, in line with Corbin and Strauss' (2014), research questions with the subsequent final themes were sent to the participants, and participants were asked to offer feedback. This feedback was implemented, and themes were changed or added to based on responses. One participant identified additional ways in which they forgive that were not adequately described by the subthemes. New subthemes were created based on whether at least one other participant shared a similar experience. Finally, the researcher wrote the findings, where they discussed the findings and theory in great length, shared participant quotes, discussed limitations, and shared future implications for the research, clinical, and religious communities.

### **Summary**

This chapter offered an overview of the methods employed in this study, including presenting the research question, identifying the paradigm and study design, discussing biases and subjectivity on the part of the researcher, discussing ethical considerations, presenting procedures for the study including participant demographics, and discussing an overview of methodology and methods. In summary, an evolved GT methodology following Corbin and Strauss' (2014) method proved useful for providing an understanding of a process and action. By gaining a deeper and richer understanding of the participants and experiences, this study will give voice to the Christian community and their perceptions, practices, and experiences of forgiveness through discussing their forgiveness journey.

## Chapter IV

### Findings

In the following chapter, findings include themes representing core concepts that address the following research questions. For the first research question, “What is forgiveness according to Christians?” (i.e., I. Forgiveness Defined) the following themes were found: “Forgiveness is a Process,” “Forgiveness is a Choice,” “Forgiveness is Universal,” “Forgiveness is an Act of God,” “Forgiveness is an Antidote to Sin,” “Forgiveness is an Antidote to Sin,” “Forgiveness is a Virtue,” “Forgiveness Begins with an Injury,” “Forgiveness Aligns with the Value of Justice,” “Forgiveness is Giving an Unmerited Gift,” “Forgiveness is an Act of Releasing and Overcoming Unwanted Thoughts, Emotions, or Behaviors,” “Forgiveness Is Transcendent,” and, “Forgiveness Is a Pathway to Freedom.” The following themes were also found, though describe differences across participants, “Forgiveness is Not Forgetting,” “Forgiveness is Forgetting,” “Reconciliation is a Necessary Step in Forgiveness,” and “Reconciliation is an Aspirational Step in Forgiveness.”

The following themes were found to address the second question, “Why do Christians forgive?” For the first part of why Christians forgive, the following themes were found to address, “What motivates Christians to forgive?” [i.e., II) A. Motivations for Forgiveness]: “Relationship with God,” “Relationship with Self,” and “Relationship with Others.” To answer the second aspect of the question to why Christians forgive, “To what degree does a Christian’s faith beliefs influence their forgiving perceptions and behaviors?” [II) B. The Degree Christian’s Faith Beliefs Influence Their Forgiving Perceptions and Behaviors] the following was found: “God is The Author and Initiator of Forgiveness,” “My Christian Faith Helps me Understand

what Forgiveness is and How to Engage in It,” and “I Would Not Forgive if it Were Not for my Faith.”

For the third research question, “What is the process Christians use to forgive?” (III. Forgiveness Process) the following themes were found: “Uncovering Barriers to Forgiving or Receiving Forgiveness,” “Deciding on Forgiveness,” “Working on Forgiving and/or Seeking Forgiveness,” and, “Experiencing Transformation.” For the domain of “Working on Forgiving and/or Seeking Forgiveness,” subthemes are grouped under the following themes: “Connect to God,” “Connect to Self,” “Connect to Supportive Others,” “Connect to Offender,” and “Connect to Offendee.” For the “Experiencing Transformation” theme, the subthemes are grouped under themes of “Maturation of Forgiveness,” “Deepening of Christian Character,” and “Cultivation of Resiliency.”

In addressing the fourth research question, “How have Christians forgiven across the lifespan and developed in their forgiving perceptions and practices across time?” (IV. Christian Forgiveness Development) the following themes were found: “Faith and Forgiveness Development in Childhood is Externally Controlled and Motivated by Parents and Church Authorities,” “Forgiveness and Repentance Pedagogy is First Introduced at Home and/or in Sunday School,” “Children are Exposed to and Gain an Understanding of What it is Like to be Hurt,” “Children Learn to Exercise their Will to Forgive and Repent, Typically Motivated by an Obedience and Fear of Punishment Orientation, as well as Social Conformity,” “Children are Eager to Practice Forgiveness and Experience Positive Emotions from it, Despite Limited Understanding of It,” “Adolescents Begin to Gain Awareness of their Internal and External World as it Relates to Faith, Forgiveness, and Repentance,” “Development of Personal Faith and

Forgiveness Typically Begins in Childhood to Young Adulthood,” “Consistent and Intentional Forgiving typically Begins in Adulthood,” “Adults have the Capacity to be Mature Forgivers,” “Adults Experience a Parallel between their Faith Sanctification and Forgiveness Maturity,” “Adults find the Importance of Forgiving Unresolved Hurts from Childhood,” “Adults Identify Seeking Forgiveness or Self-Forgiveness to be More Challenging than Forgiving Others,” and, “Adults Tend to Advocate for the Learning and Practicing of Forgiveness in Childhood.”

Lastly, for the fifth research question, “How have Christians incorporated forgiveness into their identity or way of life (V. Forgiveness as an Identity or Way of Life),” the following themes were discovered: “Christians are Forgiven,” “Christians are Forgivable,” “Christians as Individuals are Forgivers,” “Christians are a Forgiving Community,” and “Christians are Teachers of Forgiveness.”

Each section will begin with major themes highlighted in bold and subthemes in italics, followed by an explanation, comparison to the literature, and examples of a given participant’s response. Participant names have been redacted and changed to the following: Catholic (C), Mainline Protestant (M), and Evangelical Protestant (E). The number refers to the particular individual within the identified denomination.

## **I. Forgiveness Defined**

### **Forgiveness is a process.**

Participants generally describe the act of forgiving and being forgiven as a process that is non-linear, meaning that the steps to forgiving or being forgiven do not happen in a particular order, rather the process is explorational, fluid, and dynamic.



I think a lot of people think of it as you're just saying whatever that person did to you is okay and you're just saying let it go. But no, it's so much more than that. It has a whole process... and the forgiving process is something that I revisit. It's not linear (M6).

“You start to look at it, look at it from more of a process lens rather than a content lens (E7).” Further, they identify those acts as ongoing processes that include a series of steps that lead to a certain outcome. Following forgiving or seeking forgiveness, participants identify that there is transformation and growth, and that the growth also continues to develop and mature, without ever having reached a point of completion. One participant expressed, “So it really, it was an evolutionary process and it met me as much as I wanted it. My sense and knowing my faith, it met me” (C7).

### **Forgiveness is a choice.**

Forgiveness and seeking forgiveness are often considered a choice and major decision that one must make. For example, “And, forgiveness is a choice. It's not an emotion. So, it's a choice. I choose to forgive him for this” (E6); “If you just forgave mindlessly, I don't think that's a very human response. That's a very conditioned response. So, you have to make a decision” (C3); and, “I'm a little bit in control when I can forgive somebody. I have the control of saying I'm going to forgive this person” (M7). Further, participants emphasize that while God commands them to forgive as He has forgiven them, they state that God does not force one to forgive or seek forgiveness, rather that they have free-will to engage in those processes.

### **Forgiveness is universal.**

Participants express that forgiveness is for everyone and can happen to anyone, as everyone is exposed to harm and hurt at some point in their lives, as evidenced by, “I think it is, it's universal in the sense that it can happen anywhere to anyone... I think everyone's

redeemable. I think reconciliation is always a movement. It's an energy that's out there, and it's forgiveness" (C7). It is not exclusive to culture or character; for example,

I know there are personality types and psychologists talk about that all that and some are easy going and some are not easy going, and some people are laid back and some people- I know that, we all know that there are personality types, but I still think that whether one is laid back or outgoing or the one is reserved or not reserved, that that we all experience forgiveness. That it is not just for those who are socially well adjusted or for those who have high GPA's and things like that (E1).

Further, participants identify forgiveness as a basic, universal human need in order to live in harmonious relationships with God and others.

### **Forgiveness is an act of God.**

All participants emphasize that being forgiving is part of God's character, as evidenced by God the Father sending His son Jesus to live on this earth and be a propitiation of humanity's sin through forgiving. Thus, forgiveness is an act of God. For example, "Forgiveness is always an action of God and the divine, and either working through me or separately and a part from me, and again, it's a humbling experience" (C7); and,

God is a creator of all things, and that man has rebelled against God, that God out of love promised to send the Savior and that savior is the God man, Jesus Christ, and Jesus died in the place of sinners like you and me. And then he rose again from the dead three days after he died, proving that God accepted his sacrifice for sin and prove that we could have life and that we would rise again one day and that we would not be bound to the grave because of our sin. And so, he was our substitute. And, because God is holy, he demanded that there was a payment for that sin, and he took it upon himself to pay that sin... He gives you the gifts of the Holy Spirit, which is God living in you which empowers you to obey with an ability that you never had before... So, I think being a Christian, part of being a Christian is following Christ's or God's example of forgiving those who have wronged you and God does that willingly and graciously and he called us to follow that example (E3).

While participants state that forgiving is also a part of a person's character, as human-beings are made in the image of God, they identify that human forgiveness is a learned behavior

from God. Apart from God, participants express that forgiveness is not a natural human instinct, rather it is to seek justice.

### **Forgiveness is an antidote to sin.**

While participants do not specifically define sin, it is discussed as an act of immorality or transgression that separates human-beings from God, and by the very nature of being fallible, human-beings are prone to sinning. For example, one participant expresses,

All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. That nobody can meet the standards that God requires of us, and so, and in a sense pessimistically, we have all failed, but if Christianity stopped with all-failed, that's a very very pessimistic religion. I mean it's depressing, why would anybody adhere to that religion? But, there is this, but that's only the first step. The second step is that God has a solution for this failure, namely to forgive us, so being forgiven by God is really at the heart of Christianity (E1).

Participants often identify hurts and wrongdoings toward others, God, and self, as sinful. They state that the remedy for sin or wrongdoing is forgiveness, as evidenced by God forgiving through Jesus; for example, "The only antidote to sin was Jesus dying on the cross for all our sins... his death and resurrection is the antidote to all sin" (C5).

### **Forgiveness is a virtue.**

Participants describe the act of forgiving as a high moral standard or imperative.

It's something that God has commanded us to do, and so we should keep doing it... I view it as a moral imperative, and what that means is that your call- it is a standard that guides your morality and so it's demanded of us by God to forgive people even when they wrong us. There's much, much harm in the world that's caused by people who hold grudges and that's a sinful way of acting that causes damage in the world. And so, it's because God has called us to forgiveness (E7).

In following the "call" to forgive, participants identify that conforming to God's commands leads to a virtuous life. "Part of being a Christian is following Christ's or God's example of forgiving those who have wronged you and God does that willingly and graciously and he called us to follow that example... that I still have a duty to forgive that person" (E3).

### **Forgiveness begins with an injury.**

All participants describe experiencing hurt or harm following a real or imagined injury from another human-being, stating that one cannot forgive without an offense taking place; for example, “In forgiveness, one party is hurt, offended, mistreated, but some harm or some damage has been done to one party” (E1). Hurts are described as intentional or not intentional, and on a spectrum between minor to major injuries. One participant states,

I mean I think there's misunderstanding sometimes, but it doesn't even require a lot of work. I think sometimes people say or do things that are so off the cuff that another person might feel offended, but if they talk it out, they realized that it just wasn't a big deal and therefore you can just let it go. In more severe kinds of situations where you've been hurt, I think the first thing you have to do is really look at the act either to talk to the person who offended you or hurt you or face the fact of someone that did something harmful physically to you (M5).

### **Forgiveness aligns with the value of justice.**

The theme of justice is mentioned in two contexts. One, by God’s just act of not simply excusing sin, but rather having Jesus, who they identify as holy and blameless, sacrificially take on the sin of human-beings through His death on the cross. Secondly, participants engage in their value of justice during the forgiveness process by recognizing the wrong and not condoning or excusing it, as well as holding boundaries and potentially seeking legal consequences if necessary. Participants express,

Forgiveness doesn't mean being a doormat... Forgiveness doesn't mean you let someone walk all over you. It doesn't mean you just keep- you don't speak up and say this is wrong. You can. You could speak up and be assertive and say this is wrong” (E6); and, “I don't think that forgiveness is actually ignoring justice at all. It's taking justice to a different level. It's not allowing justice simply to be an exercise and a legality, it's allowing justice to be an exercise in being fully human (C3).

However, participants emphasized that while they can engage in the virtue of justice, it is God’s role to judge the offender; for example,

It's not our job to pass sentence. And the other place where we're not supposed to judge

is we're not called, we are not supposed to judge the motive of people's hearts because only we don't even know the motives of our own heart, much less of others... none of us has the right to stay in the judgment seat, but God (E6).

**Forgiveness is giving an unmerited gift.**

Forgiving is perceived as sacrificing the participant's right to hold a grudge and giving the gift of forgiveness, which is undeserved. "Forgiveness is an act of mercy because what person who offended me deserves is what I'm not giving them. I'm not giving them what they really deserve. I'm withholding that" (E3). Another participant states,

It's not merited. You're giving them grace isn't merited... Just like when God gave me grace in my life and accepted me. It just put me in a different place, and I was unmerited at that point. So, allowing that part of my life with God to work in somebody else's, even though it benefits me really (M6).

Through the forgiveness process, participants express that gifts like mercy, grace, love, compassion, kindness, and generosity are given to their offender.

**Forgiveness is an act of releasing or overcoming unwanted thoughts, emotions, or behaviors.**

Participants identify that as a result of the injury, they may experience the following examples of unwanted thoughts, emotions or behaviors: ruminating or distorted thoughts, intense anger and hurt, as well as urges or behaviors of seeking revenge or avoiding the event all together. In defining forgiveness, "letting go," or overcoming these experiences was a common participant description. "Forgiveness means letting go of the hurt... So, let it go, try to you know move on with your life... You have to let it go because it takes a lot of energy to be angry" (C6); and, "My simplest definition would be to no longer have resentment, bitterness, and vengefulness on somebody who has wronged you" (E4).

### **Forgiveness is developing positive thoughts, emotions, or behaviors toward the offender.**

Participants identify that forgiveness is not just “letting go” of negative or unhealthy thoughts, emotions, or behaviors, rather it is also developing healthy thoughts, emotions, or behaviors such as perceiving the offender positively, feeling compassion for the offender, and praying for their offender. “It's letting go of the feelings, letting go of the emotion, and say you I'm gonna do what I can to wish this person well” (M3). Another participant reports,

You realize that despite the fact that I'm not going to hold these things against you and I'm not going to wish harm upon you and when you come to me, I'm going to try to help you... I'm not angry at them, I don't ruminate about them, and then if they came to me for help, I would try to help them, but I also don't know if I can trust them (E7).

### **Forgiveness Is transcendent.**

Forgiveness is depicted as rising above the suffering as a result of being wounded from the injury. Further, participants express the transcendent quality of being God-like through forgiving as God has forgiven.

I would say based upon the forgiveness I have received for the things I have done, or the life that I've lived, that forgiveness spiritually can transcend to a forgiving spirit of others. I kind of referenced, to the one who has been forgiven much turns around and forgives much in return (E5).

Forgiveness is where you're willing and able to look past the actions of a person and look at the heart of the person and look at the individual for who they are and not let their actions in a moment of time or actions, over a period of time just to find them and really be able to be, to have the eyes of God, look at them and look at them that way and be able to, to see them as, as his child and some someone made in his image (M4).

Additionally, it is described that forgiveness transcends culture, such as race or ethnicity, and other human characteristics like personality.

### **Forgiveness is a pathway to freedom.**

Participants define forgiveness as healing the wound and liberating the mind, body, and soul from “emotional prison.” “Forgiveness is the ultimate healing and it provides

emancipation” (C7). “So, when we choose to not forgive someone else, we're really keeping ourself a prisoner too... ultimately, by not forgiving, you keep yourself locked up in a prison” (E6). They describe the paradox of unforgiveness to be actually hurting themselves rather than the offender.

### **Forgiveness is not forgetting.**

Eleven participants [Catholics (5), Evangelical Protestants (3), Mainline Protestants (3)] hold a worldview that forgiveness is not forgetting. Specifically, these participants identify that recalling the offense is natural and at times necessary to discern future interactions, incorporate safety and boundaries, and uphold justice.

Forgiveness is not forgetting. Oftentimes growing up, you heard, well when God removes your sin, it's like forgive and forget. Well, it's not humanly possible in most cases to forgive and forget. I'm never going to forget what my ex-wife did to me. I think that's what forgiveness is, is choosing to not hold that sin against that person (E3).

You don't ever want to forget that that happened... that makes you extremely vulnerable... it puts you in bad situations. You can forgive them, but there's a difference. One ignores the reality, the other stands in the presence of the reality and says despite what that did, I can still in my heart forgive, but I won't put myself in a bad situation (C3).

You can forgive somebody but not forget specific things that happen because I don't want to forget that somebody did specific things to me or hurt me because I want to be aware of boundaries for future relationships that I have... it's almost like it takes a different place in your mind and it doesn't become part of that, the forgiveness part anymore. It almost goes into more of it serves a purpose for me now, but now the boundary purpose (M6).

Further, they identify that while God forgives and forgets, human-beings do not have this capacity.

### **Forgiveness is forgetting.**

Four [Catholics (1), Evangelical Protestants (2), Mainline Protestants (1)] participants identify with the belief that forgiveness is forgetting, as if the offense never happened or that if

one could recall the offense, they would have difficulties recalling the details. For example, “Forgiveness, in my mind, is a where you kind of put it off or almost, in my understanding, it's forgotten about. When it's no longer at the forefront of something that's bothering you” (E5); “Forgiveness in its core is to behave in a manner that says that the transgression never occurred... I retrain myself to say, now that has been forgiven, I would love to forget it” (M1); and, “When you truly forgive someone, you actually forget, pretty much forget what they did to you. If you do remember it, you don't have any of the feeling, the pain, it's all gone. It's really weird” (C4).

### **Reconciliation is a necessary step in forgiveness.**

Nine out of the 21 participants [Catholics (4), Mainline Protestants (3), Evangelical Protestants (2)] hold the view that in interpersonal forgiveness, reconciliation with the offender is a necessary step in the forgiveness process, and attempts are made to confront and renew or release the relationship with the offender. To these participants, the forgiveness process is not complete unless steps were taken to reconcile with the offender.

I'd rather have a restored relationship through any means... To me [forgiveness without reconciliation] would feel incomplete. And, I've had situations like that where someone has been lost to me and I didn't really have the chance to repair that officially, but it just seems like there's unfinished business and now I can't finish (M1).

Participants expressed reconciling may look like confronting and renewing the relationship or confronting and releasing the relationship.

[Reconciliation] I think it's necessary. I think how it looks maybe different depending on the gravity of the situation. Right? Do you reconcile with somebody whose pathological when you can be reconciled but that doesn't mean that you can actually necessarily make yourself available for direct reconciliation because that might not be prudent. Anything prudent guides those situations. So, do you need to be reconciled? I think you can't help but need to be recognized, and you can do everything in your ability, short of what's not prudent to be reconciled (C3).



Participants state that in cases where renewing the relationship is not prudent or wise, confronting the offender is still a necessary component to the forgiveness process.

### **Reconciliation is an aspirational step in forgiveness.**

Twelve out of 21 participants [Catholics (3), Mainline Protestants (4), Evangelical Protestants (5)] believe in interpersonal forgiveness, reconciliation with the offender is an aspirational step in the forgiveness process, and attempts are ideally made to confront and renew or release the relationship with the offender, though it is not required in the forgiveness process. Some identify it as an entirely separate process from forgiving. One participant expresses, “You can forgive somebody, but I think I see that qualitatively different than trusting them... reconciliation has to do more with trusting a person, as well as forgiving them” (E7). Another states,

So, I do believe even attempting to reconcile is important, but even if reconciliation with the person isn't achievable, even forgiving them in your heart and being able to forgive somebody without them accepting your forgiveness or them apologizing, I feel like it's still very, very crucial in your life (C5).

Further, some advocate that reconciling may not be warranted if the offender is dangerous, and in some cases impossible, such as if the offender has died.

## **II) A. Motivations to Forgive**

### **Relationship with God.**

*Gratitude of being forgiven by God through Jesus.*

Being forgiven and the feeling gratitude of being forgiven by God is a strong motivator for participants, as evidenced by, “The more one is forgiven, the more appreciates being forgiven, and hopefully the more one is willing to forgive others... We forgive because we are grateful. We are more thankful” (E1). Participants share their belief that by taking into account God forgiving them of their wrongdoing or sin, they can in turn forgive others or seek

forgiveness; for example, “Being forgiven much, then it frees me to be able to forgive and also compels me to forgive” (E6).

I think for me a lot of the motivation has been just that realization of the forgiveness that I've experienced in my life, and first, like I said, just coming from God, the forgiveness that he has and that the author and creator of the universe was able to forgive me (M4).

*A sense of moral or ethical obligation.*

Participants describe human-beings as moral and ethical beings, and that Christians are motivated by to forgive because God commands Christians to forgive. “It does go back to the reality or the realization that you've ultimately been forgiven... If God's willing to come all the way down to the tomb and bring me back, then I certainly have to be” (C3). Thus, honoring God, as well as being relieved of guilt, is motivating. Further, it is described as a moral or ethical privilege, as God does not force Christians to forgive, rather it is of a person’s free-will to forgive. “I can’t say love your neighbor as yourself except if he’s your father and you’re upset with him. You know, so part of it, so part of it is wanting to be faithful and obedient to God” (E1).

*Peace in my relationship with God.*

Participants are motivated to forgive in order to have a peaceful relationship or communion with God; for example, “Knowing that I'm in right relationship with God and I'm doing what he's asking me to do” (C5). Some describe that they are motivated because they perceive it draws them closer to God. Others mention that in order to have peace with God, one must forgive in order to be forgiven themselves. Another participant expresses, “To me it's more important to be right with God than necessarily any human or other person, and I only say that because when I'm right with God, then I can hear his voice properly to reveal the need for forgiveness or to seek forgiveness with others” (M4).

## **Relationship with self.**

### *Congruence between my faith values and behaviors.*

Participants describe the distress that comes from having incongruence between their values of faith and forgiving or seeking forgiveness, as well as unforgiveness or unrepentance.

I just got tired of the bad thoughts and I got tired of sitting in church and thinking, you want to go as a Catholic, you want to go and receive communion and you want to go with a clean heart and you want to sit in church and think I've done the best I can this week. I'm trying my best to be a good Catholic and when you've got that black part sitting in your brain, it's just a blockage and so I just had to work very hard to say- and actually kind of eventually say to myself, I'm going to forgive this person for doing that (C1).

A strong motivator of forgiveness or seeking forgiveness for participants includes living authentically and living in line with their values.

I started to forgive her because I realized that it was important for me to not only practice what I preach but to live out my faith and living out my faith, because if I'm actually a Christian, I'm going to wear this shirt then I have to actually live like a Christian, which as you know, as you've seen, as you've experienced is very difficult because it's called to a very high standard of behavior. A high moral standard (E7).

Further, participants express a sense of congruence and awareness of their own need for forgiveness, which motivates the forgiving process.

### *Comfort.*

Recognizing the discomfort and distress in not forgiving, participants expressed that experiencing comfort through transcending suffering, ridding of negative emotions and thoughts, and experiencing peace as the end result or benefits of forgiving to be a motivator.

I think from a very selfish point of view, it's a stress reliever. It's an anxiety reducer because you're not carrying that weight of there's some issue here when I don't forgive someone, carrying around some sort of grudge and some kind of negative history and it kind of just hangs there like a weight and you see that person and you're like, I got to deal with whatever and deal with this person (M7).

Further, engage in the forgiveness process is described as a self-care strategy and way to improve overall well-being, as evidenced by, “It’s still for our own peace of mind, and harmony with ourself” (C5).

*Meeting my existential needs.*

Some participants shared that they are motivated to forgive because it fulfills a need, such as connecting with others, experiencing freedom to make a decision, finding meaning in suffering, and having power over sin through spiritual life despite physical death. For example,

When I die, I want to be able to extinguish all of those hurts, physical and emotional and I want to relinquish, I want to be part of what’s relinquishing and not just for myself but for other people coming and going about hurts that I’ve done or are, were done to me (C7).

I don’t know how you can move forward being a Christian knowing that there is an afterlife when we get to- and being able to stand in front of the Creator and go, yep, I still got this big nope, not going to forgive them (C1).

**Relationship with others.**

*Maintaining a sense of community.*

Participants are motivated to forgive in order to continue relationships with others and have a sense of belonging through community. For example, “I think that the function [of forgiveness] is sustainable human relationships” (E7); and, “I think it’s ultimately trying to make sure that we’re back in community with one another, that the pathways are open again for, if not to be the best of friends, then at least to be not any negativity” (C1).

*Seeing others forgiving.*

Additionally, participants report being motivated and inspired to forgive when seeing others forgive, such as through stories in the media or books.

I am moved by examples of forgiveness. Things like, oh the families at the church in Charleston where were all church goers were killed by the young racist, and the way that they were able to say whether they really felt it completely in their hearts that they

forgave the young man and maybe in a more substantive way. There was an Amish community where somebody had killed some of their children and they actually embraced and tried to rehabilitate the young man who had done it. I'm forgetting the details, but you remember those stories, stories in the news (M3).

I think we hear stories in the media and hear stories of different people who had to forgive someone who murdered their children, or they did an incredible injustice, and I think the media likes to put those stories out there because it's so shocking to most human beings, and I believe that's a reflection of the character of God (E4).

## **II) B. The Degree Christian's Faith Beliefs Influence Their Forgiving Perceptions and Behaviors**

### **God is the author and initiator of forgiveness.**

Participants believe the triune God is the creator of life. They identify that forgiveness exists because God authored it and that it characterizes Him. Participants express, "God designed, God put forgiveness into the book because he wanted us to, because that's really the best way for people to live and honestly I do believe that forgiveness is the best way for people to live" (E7); and, "I recognize that the further I go in my journey, that forgiveness is who God is" (C3). As a result, participants believe that their forgiving perceptions and behaviors are not a result of a natural human response to forgiveness, rather that it is because human-beings are made in God's image that they can forgive.

### **My Christian faith helps me understand what forgiveness is and how to engage in it.**

Participants state that the Christian faith is their foundation to understand the reality and nature of forgiveness.

At a foundational level, it [my faith] sets the stage for understanding what forgiveness is. It gives you the picture of it in God forgiving me through Jesus, it called me to forgiveness. So, because otherwise if I didn't have that ethical call to forgive someone, and I didn't have the spirit of God living inside of me, I would just probably harbor bitterness and anger. And, so I think that it foundationally, it helps me understand what forgiveness is... it helps define what it is for me and gives me a framework from which to think about it (E3).

Participants offer specific ways in which they connect to their faith, such as through reading Biblical scripture of the gospel message of God forgiving humanity, prayer, and connecting to other Christians. Through these means, they are able to gain an understanding of what forgiveness is and how to engage in it.

I think my Christian faith is, it's the whole basis of my forgiveness. The scriptures, the Holy Bible that I do believe is true, the true word of God, calls us to forgive those that have wronged us. We're Christ's models, and his way to pray is that forgiveness is part of that - that we forgive others the way that we've been forgiven. The Bible lays out, not necessarily how the step-by-step process to do that. I think that's part of the faith is leaning on God for that, but it really highlights the importance of forgiving others. And just extending that love to not only friends and family, but also to our enemies... oftentimes just we're instructed to forgive the way that we've been forgiven. And, so for me, the part of that process has been really just reflecting on how I've been forgiven, looking at the areas of my life that I have failed or disappointed, first and foremost God, and to see what He's forgiven me of and the sins that He's forgiven me of and then those around me, and look at how they've forgiven me and still continue to love me. And it's a process that takes a lot of prayer, a lot of patience, a lot of time reading your Bible, and being connected to that word and that truth because everyone else around you in the world outside, outside of the Christian faith, I think oftentimes doesn't encourage you to forgive, especially for the larger sins or wrongs that have been committed against you (M4).

### **I would not forgive if it were not for my faith.**

Lastly, participants express that were it not for their faith, they would not forgive or seek forgiveness, as evidenced by, "I would say that I would not have not forgiven if it hadn't been for Christianity, for my faith" (E7). Participants pointedly state that if they did not believe in or have a relationship with the triune God, who is the author and creator of forgiveness, they would not have the moral obligation or desire to forgive or seek forgiveness.

If we didn't, I didn't have faith in God, and having a reason to do what's right or wrong, which includes forgiving others, I feel like I wouldn't be up to forgiveness, like there would be no basis for forgiving. So, I feel like having that, the basis of being a Christian and understanding the reason why I make the decision to forgive, is linked to my relationship with God and why I am here and my purpose and how I'm asked to treat others (C5).

I wouldn't, if I wasn't connected with God, I can't even, I probably wouldn't ever forgive. So, it's 100 percent my faith... I never put myself above anybody else, but I always think to myself, how does a non-Christian navigate life? I don't know how they do it (C2).

### **III) The Forgiveness Process**

The following include steps to the forgiveness process. While not intended to be a concrete, step-by-step process, as participants share the forgiveness process is fluid, the following domains are organized by an anticipated progression.

#### **Phase 1. Uncovering Barriers to Forgiving or Receiving Forgiveness**

##### **Address maladaptive coping strategies to the pain.**

###### *Denying the hurt.*

One defense described is denying that the event occurred altogether, whether it be that the offende was harmed or the offender had any responsibility in hurting the offende.

“And so, I think telling the story for me was big because when you're in denial for so long, that's where you sit, and you don't take responsibility for certain things... I was using denial as a tool to exist in that situation” (M6).

Some identify that perhaps this is due to poor self-awareness, such as a lack of personification with the event or how one's behaviors affect others.

“If I don't recognize the hurt or accept that I've been hurt, it will start to grow and fester and so it will just be there, and it can chip away at depression. It can chip away at just thoughts. It can seep into your subconscious. And then in that, at the same time remind myself where I am in Christ. Without doing both of those together, I almost don't want to forgive because I won't be remembering why I should have to forgive” (E2).

Participants state this is further complicated by beliefs that the offende is responsible for the wrongdoing done to them or the offender has delusions that everyone is against them.

*Avoidance in dealing with the problem.*

Participants recognize the importance of overcoming avoidance in order to move through the extending or receiving forgiveness process. Specifically, participants describe that either as the offende or offender, it is a natural human reaction to avoid thoughts, memories, or feelings about the injury due to the dialectic between discomfort to traumatic reactions. Participants express,

Seeking forgiveness is hard because then you have to confess that you hurt somebody. And my first instinct is just to always say, but I didn't do it on purpose. I didn't mean to. But, that doesn't really help, or at least not much. Wanting to minimize it because it makes me feel guilty (M2).

I know that I'm more likely to go out and drink more and maybe not even become intoxicated, but just have more drinks on a more regular basis. Whereas when I'm not struggling with unforgiveness, it won't even enter my mind and be like, I want to drink tonight (M4).

Participants report that engaging in destructive rather than constructive coping strategies for the pain can lead to challenges in receiving or extending forgiveness.

*Displacing unwanted emotions onto others.*

Some participants describe the tendency to unconsciously and unintentionally harm others because they were hurt themselves though did not work through the forgiving process. For example, one states this occurred through gossiping about the offender, which led the confided observer to in turn take on the offende's negative thoughts or feelings. While perhaps initially comforting for the offende, the participant continued to experience resentment and feel the need to forgive and the friend struggled with vicarious resentment. Another participant expresses,

Anger is a big factor, and I think an anger towards the wrong source. So, I recognize that I get more angry with those around me that have nothing to do with it. I take it out on those around me (M4).



Specifically, what may occur is the spreading of personal, unresolved anger and resentment to others, like a ripple effect. Another participant further reinforces this point,

While I felt really bad about the divorce, we tried as much as possible first of all not to make our children the battleground for whatever bad feelings we had, and I tried as much as I can to forgive her and also to forgive myself for failing (E1).

This is also indicated for intrapersonal forgiveness, where participants describe not forgiving themselves leads to a more critical and judgmental spirit toward others, as well.

*Withdraw and isolation from God, self, and others.*

While some participants state that extending or receiving forgiveness is typically the prominent means of coping with a relational injury or personal offense, several indicate that because of being fallible as human-beings and living in a sinful world, there may be a tendency to satisfy one's needs or care for the wound from the injury through isolating and withdrawal. For example, "I will clamp down. I will be very quiet, very cold. I think that's probably the best way to describe it is I will just shut down" (C1).

I noticed that when I don't want to deal with it and don't want to forgive, I pulled back from my time in scripture and from my time in prayer because I know what it's going to say and I don't want to admit that's what I need to do. So, I don't want to hear, hey, forgive the person that's offended you. I just want to brush over and act like that's not something that I have to do, even though I know in my heart of hearts that's what needs to happen (M4).

Some other motivators of avoidance include fears of being vulnerable, hurt again, or not being forgiven by others.

*Ruminating or obsessing about the injury and/or the offender.*

Ruminating and obsessing on the offense or the offender appeared to be a common theme among participants in regard to extending forgiveness toward the offender and self. For example,

When we ruminate on past injuries, which maybe is a form of what wouldn't be a little-t trauma, we do something that is like antithetical to the way life actually works. We exist in four dimensions up, down, left, up, down, over, and back, back and forward, and in time and being able to get stuck in the past, ruminating about memories, has the negative component of keeping you from doing something that is natural, which is that you can move over time and gain new experiences, and you kind of close yourself off to new experiences. It keeps you from living a healthy and productive life (E7).

Some described this to be a concern even following forgiving, in which the participant would need to return through the process of forgiveness.

There's never a day or there's probably never a moment in time when I don't think about her unfaithfulness to me or horrible things that she continues to do that just drives me bonkers. So, I probably need to think about it more so because I struggle to know whether I've really forgiven her or not (E3).

#### *Pseudoforgiving.*

Some participants state that there may be a temptation to extend forgiveness to someone quickly or tolerate the offense without going through the forgiveness process for reasons such as being codependent, believing that uncovering emotions like anger toward their offender would be betraying them, and avoiding the pain that comes from moving through the grief.

When you're a people pleaser, I don't want somebody to be mad at me, so I'll just go ahead and forgive them. So maybe it's not, you're not thinking of the whole situation. Maybe you become resentful too because you haven't processed it (M6).

Participants express that deciding on forgiveness before grieving the loss can lead to resentment, much like that of unforgiveness, as evidenced by, "I have to recognize that it's happened and not just shove it aside because of the fact that it can come back worse" (E2).

#### **Address unforgiving attitudes.**

##### *Holding onto the hurt.*

Participants report that there may be a tendency to not want to forgive right away, hold on to the pain, engage in self-pity or sulk, as they have a right to; however, as evidenced by these

participants, holding a consistently pessimistic perception may lead to even greater distress and increased difficulty in regard to extending forgiveness. For example,

I don't like holding grudges or holding onto past offenses because I see that it takes a toll on my, my mind. It's like a hijacker on my mind and I don't want to have negative feelings and thoughts because I feel like it's just a domino effect in my life (C5). And, so I just felt like after a while when you don't forgive someone, it feels like you're running down the same tired path all the time. This little rut in your brain that continually goes to the same place and you feel like you have to work very hard to change that rut in your brain to try to forgive them (C1).

Some describe that by holding onto the hurt, there is a barrier between the self and God.

In order to receive ongoing forgiveness from God, one needs to forgive.

*The perceived nature of the offense is deemed unforgiveable.*

Forgiveness is deemed more burdensome with more egregious offenses, such as abuse, and ongoing, patterned behavior of harm, as well as if the offender anticipates a re-offense.

Participants shared,

I'd say it's gotten harder over time because I feel like the thing that has happened to me, it's gotten worse and worse and it's been harder to forgive... so the comments from kids at school or other things you know rolled off my back and didn't bother me, but what hurt me the most was the emotional, verbal, and physical abuse from my dad. And so, it would repeat (C5).

This isn't always an easy thing to do. There's certain things that are definitely easier to forgive, but others that are difficult, and I struggle to forgive at times, as well (M4).

Several participants mentioned that while they did not experience horrific experiences such as abuse, they would experience doubt whether they would be able to extend forgiveness

*Being vengefully-prone.*

Hating injustice and being vengefully prone is described to be a natural response to an injury, as humans are moral beings; however, participants express that as Christians, being vengeful is considered sinful and not the way they are intended to respond to injustice. This connects to the paradoxical belief that while God has a right to be vengeful toward humanity

because of their sinfulness, He instead offers grace and forgiveness, and thus commands Christians do the same. Participants express,

I think when we're living in unforgiveness, we're actually feeling feelings of hatred and we really would somewhat be glad if something bad happened to them. And, I think almost all have had those feelings where we say I'm so hurt, and they wronged me so badly. I wouldn't really mind if something bad happened to them. That's really from our sinful nature, as I understand it, and it's the evil that's within us (E4).

So then when you have to go and forgive somebody else, you almost want to not forgive them because of how that made you feel. You know, you almost want to get back at somebody... it's because you're so hurt, you just want to see somebody hurt as much as you did. But that's not really, from a Christian point of view, that's not really what we're striving to do, but it's a human, a very human thing to want to feel like that (M6).

In order to extend forgiveness, participants state the importance of recognizing the right to experience anger as a result of injustice, though honor God's role as the ultimate judge who they trust will respond to the offender's sin accordingly.

### **Address character struggles.**

#### *Being prideful.*

Identity or character struggles was a theme mentioned among one of the barriers to extending or receiving forgiveness. One participant stated,

For us as human beings, it's not that easy. We are filled with a sin nature. We're filled with emotion, and so working through that is not as easy as a giant eraser, and so it can be quite difficult to work through that but that I believe we're called to do that (E4).

Some character issues identified include living inauthentically to faith, having an inflated sense of self-importance, experiencing self-absorption, having difficulties connecting to their imperfect self, and adopting an inward or self-focused mindset; for example,

I view an unforgiving person as one who thinks a lot about maybe themselves and maybe too much about the importance of themselves. I try not to view myself as the center of the universe, although my wife tells me that at times (E5).

*Being help-resistant.*

Another theme mentioned as a barrier to forgiving includes being help-resistant, specifically withdrawing from others, difficulties accepting God's grace, trying to forgive without God's help, and managing problems alone. Participants indicate that a quality of being a human-being is that we are relational; however, in times of pain and distress, withdrawal may be a common reaction.

It's kinda like sometimes if you feel like you're in a boxing ring and getting punched over and over again, you start to lose your strength to fight it. But then God says I'm the way, the Lord over you, there's strength. I'll mount up with wings as eagles. And, I got the word and I just gotta speak the truth to myself, not just to other people... It's about you got to keep our focus on God because in my own strength, if I start trying to do things on my own strength, I never do well, not as well. And, even when I say as well it's because it's never in my own strength. He really has shaped who I am my whole life (E6).

Participants express that internal wounds generally are a result of relational harm, and so the process of receiving or extending forgiveness is a relational process that does not occur in a vacuum. Rather, the process of forgiveness is relational; for example, "Without Christ and without that understanding of the forgiveness I have received, like I would not be able to actively respond in that [forgiveness]" (E2).

**Address unrealistic expectations.**

*Expecting an apology and/or forgiveness from others.*

In the process of extending or receiving forgiveness, participants report it is common to have high expectations of others, such as expecting apologies and that others will forgive them.

Like what I mentioned with my husband because I'm quick to judge him if he doesn't say it [apologize] perfectly right. So that's probably the biggest area I have to work on is with my spouse because I expect a lot from my husband. I expect him to always be there for me and all, and so anytime he is not absolutely perfect, which is impossible standard that I am set to that, then I'm quick to jump on, well he should've done this, or you should've known this, or he shouldn't have done this. So that's definitely an area that I need to improve on (C4).

Another shares an expectation may be that self and others are perfect, which is incongruent with their belief that human-beings are fallible and imperfect,

“I feel that no one's perfect and that it's very important to remember that and not expect anyone else or myself to always be perfect because that's such a huge burden, both inwardly and outwardly to put on people or to put on one self that you can't live up to it” (M5).

Further, in the intrapersonal forgiveness process, participants describe inequity in regard to having higher expectations of self than others. They identify unrealistic expectations of self and others to be a barrier in forgiving because they are out of one's control.

*Wanting to control or fix the injury and/or offender.*

Several participants mention the desire to “fix” the injury or relationship, as well as change the offender, especially as it relates to reconciliation; however, in attempting to control the event or person, participants describe that this leads to even more helplessness and powerlessness, which makes forgiving all the more challenging. Participants express barriers of,

“... just maybe a feeling of there's not a lot that can be gone now to fix it. You can't fix it going back. And so, you might as well make the best of it moving forward” (C1); and,

I can't control who she is. I can only control how I feel... I try not to get overly angry about things because overall it may not change that other person, and if it does something to me that I feel wronged about, I could probably change me. I cannot change them (C6).

### **Address misunderstandings of forgiveness.**

Another theme mentioned as a barrier to forgiving was a lack of understanding of receiving or extending forgiveness. Some experiences described include the participant reporting that they did not receive sufficient teaching or modeling on forgiving from their family or origin or the church,

I missed the sacrament of reconciliation, which is huge. So, I never got any information on the sacrament of reconciliation. I actually, before I got confirmed, they just gave me a booklet and said, read this. Okay, you're ready. Go see the priest. And it was like, I didn't

even understand what I was doing. Outside of it was uncomfortable, kind of thing. So, that unfortunately I think played a negative influence in my life on what I really understood about how forgiveness works (C4).

Another way in which there is a lack of understanding includes confusion surrounding forgiving based on the severity of the offense.

I've been more shaking up, okay, what is forgiveness? What does forgiveness look like? So, I can answer, give you canned answers of what I know to be true, but wrapping my head around it when this is why it's harder, like you were asking before when it was easier before, I just knew this is what I need to do. But, then when it gets all muddy, when you're dealing with abusers, when you're dealing with people that aren't healthy, what does it look like? Am I forgiving and just being wise or is there unforgiveness (E6)?

Further, one other participant states the Bible does not have a concrete, step-by-step process on forgiving, which may give way for confusion on what Biblical interpersonal forgiveness looks like practically.

## **Phase II. Deciding on Forgiveness**

*Receive conviction to forgive or seek forgiveness.*

In the decisional process of extending or receiving forgiveness, participants identify they will sense conviction to engage in this process from God, or more specifically the Holy Spirit; knowing it is their moral and ethical obligation; as well as, because of their desire to be obedient to God.

I feel like wholeheartedly feel like we need to rely on the Holy Spirit and I think that he will prick our heart's... like there's this nudging, you need to deal with this, and if it's something, if there's unforgiveness, God's good at letting me know it, like nudging me, like, oh, it keeps coming up or whatever... convicting me and showing me (E6).

Participants share that forgiveness is not a natural human instinct, rather human-beings grow to understand and engage in forgiveness through the help of the Holy Spirit.

The most important is probably the first step is going into prayer and in scripture and allowing the spirit to come into your life and show you that you need to forgive because

I don't think that forgiveness is a natural instinct for humanity. I think the natural instinct is eye for eye, tooth for tooth retaliation type thing and once everything's even, and we're on even playing fields, you move forward (M4).

*Recognize consequences of unforgiveness or unrepentance.*

Participants discuss that in weighing the pros and cons of extending or receiving forgiveness, a part of the process is recognizing how unforgiveness or unrepentance will affect them cognitively, emotionally, behaviorally, biologically, socially, and spiritually. For example, psychological issues include experiencing ongoing anger, resentment, depression, anxiety, despair or hopelessness, guilt, shame, ruminating/obsessing, blocked thinking, stress, self-hatred, hating others, suicidal ideation, mental preoccupation on offense/injury, verbal aggression (e.g., hostility, rage, screaming), physical aggression (e.g., seeing domestic violence at home then fighting kids at school), having addiction(s) (i.e., to substances, to people), physical issues (i.e., fatigue, sleep disturbance, chronic illness like cancer), and functional issues (i.e., inability to fulfill work obligations, negative effect on home life). For example, one participant expresses,

I mean I think that by not forgiving, by holding grudges, by holding grievances, you're just, one's just poisoning, allowing themselves to be. I don't even think it's conscious necessarily, but you're allowing yourself to be poisoned. I mean, I think we just, and I wouldn't find a way to sleep at night. It would just turn and boil up and continue to be harmful and hurtful (M6).

Relational issues identified include isolation or social avoidance, having poor boundaries, projecting unresolved issues onto others, experiencing or speaking untruths about others beyond the offense (i.e., “bearing false witness”), as well as severing relationships and hurting “the body of Christ.” Additionally, spiritual issues reported include not living authentically to one’s faith, feeling distant from God due to sin, as well as avoiding and hurting God; for example, “And if you can't forgive, well, first of all, you're miserable. And second of all, you make people around you miserable. And you're really not a reflection of who God is” (C3).



*Know that I will not be alone.*

Another determinant identified in deciding on forgiveness is knowing that one will not be alone and that they have support especially from God, as well as their support system such as their church, family, or friends. For example, “You can say, oh God is with me, and it's a choice” (C2); and,

I guess part of forgiveness is understanding, and I think being a faithful person. Without that, who do you talk to? You have to go to somebody. I feel sorry for people who have no religious basis because then it's just themselves or other people. You don't always get the right answer from other people, but if you really lay yourself there, Jesus, well I think he helps you to actually deal with things. I think that Christians have the benefit of having Jesus there to walk with you when you are really down and out (C6).

Some identify that knowing Jesus decided to forgive despite the horrific suffering He endured, this gives them courage to decide to forgive, as well.

*Experience a willingness or desire to extend and/or receive forgiveness.*

Participants describe that there needs to be a willingness or desire to choose to extend or receive forgiveness.

I think the appropriate response is not keeping an open wound or not letting it fester but moving on in a clear conscience. And so, I think that's, I would see that as one of the steps of the process here (E5).

Participants identify that there needs to be an awareness that unforgiveness has not been constructive or helpful to them in regard to being able to overcome the pain and find freedom.

I think it's the acknowledgement in my own mind that I didn't want to carry this for the rest of my life... I wanted not to carry that hate and that ranker. Some people are so bitter about their divorces; they can't develop new relationships. So, it was a conscious choice (M7).

*Learn about forgiveness.*

Lastly, participants mention that in the decisional process of forgiving, Christians need to learn about extending or receiving forgiveness. This may look like reading scripture, attending a

forgiveness class, learning about forgiveness through a sermon or church workshop, or reading books on forgiving. For example, “I had to forgive, and that was probably the very beginning of rolling up my sleeves and reading Dr. Enright's books and going once a week to forgiveness. And when I went to my forgiveness classes” (C7); and,

I think once I really studied forgiveness and was able to look at it as a thing, it kind of was, this is what I should be doing of course, and move forward... So, I would say probably about seven years ago, six years ago, my pastor had a forgiveness class at church based on the book by Desmond Tutu, the book of forgiving, which came out of South Africa's Apartheid and took kind of the basis and the principal that was forgiving people that had atrocities done to them... So that was like a really awesome thing. But that was a big part of the full forgiveness class that we took - sharing the story, sharing the story, writing it down. What perspective can you take it from now, you know (M6)?

### **Phase III. Working on Forgiving and/or Repenting**

For this section, subthemes are categorized under a. “Connect to God,” b. “Connect to Self,” c. “Connect to Supportive Others,” d. “Connect to Offender,” and e. “Connect to Offendee.” Due to the significant overlap between codes for extending and receiving forgiveness, as well as the participants’ particular emphasis on relationship, subthemes were created to capture overarching and connecting themes across various forgiveness processes rather than categorizing them under domains of interpersonal forgiveness, intrapersonal forgiveness, and seeking forgiveness.

#### **Connect to God.**

The following include the spiritual process of connecting to God through the extending or seeking forgiveness process. Participants emphasize that connecting to God occurs throughout the entire forgiveness process.

*Recognize the need for God’s help.*

Participants highlight the importance of humility when it comes to extending and receiving forgiveness, as to Christians, God is the creator who is omniscient, omnipresent, and

knows human-beings intimately. Therefore, participants use words like depending, relying, trusting, being open to God through the process. For example,

We have to be dependent on God. If you've seen a need in your life and it's not there, tell him, ask him to give it to you, especially if it's a thing that he says he wants to do. You can be confident he's gonna do it. And if you need grace to forgive, you confess it. It's being dependent on Him (E6).

Being open and not trying to live hastily or not trying to force solutions, or when I have a problem, trying to say, okay, what's going on? Be pragmatic. Look at the situation and then rely on God heavily and realize that that's the person in charge and that's the person I need to reach out to and just pray and open myself up to that and just be present even when I don't think I can be present (M6).

#### *Recognize and accept God's forgiveness.*

Specifically, for situations in which self-forgiveness or seeking repentance is warranted, participants report the importance of recognizing and accepting God's forgiveness. In receiving forgiveness during the self-forgiveness process, participants describe a sense of being able to give themselves permission to forgive themselves.

I know conceptually that God is not holding these things against me. Why I'm still holding themselves against myself? I do not know, except that it's ego. If God says it doesn't matter anymore, it should stop mattering to me (M2).

Further, in receiving forgiveness from God during the seeking forgiveness from others process, participants identified being able to have closure especially in situations where the offender does not forgive them.

When I'm seeking forgiveness from God, he's already given me the grace to fail, and then come to Him and say like, I failed. So, it's safer in a way because there's not that rejection, fear. When you're working with people, there's a fear of rejection and even with spouses and friends and siblings, there's a fear factor involved that isn't there with Christ (M7).

#### *Reconcile to God.*

Further, in the receiving forgiveness process with God following repenting, recognizing, and accepting God's forgiveness, participants express that they are able to have peace and with

God. "God created me to have a right relationship with him, but my sin screwed that up and so God is reconciling me to him through his son Jesus, so he is making that relationship whole or right again" (E3). While participants describe reconciliation is not always possible in human-to-human forgiveness, reconciliation is guaranteed when human-beings are able to repent and accept God's grace; for example, "But the greatest thing too is that is for sure the reconciliation, there's always a- I'm always drawn closer to God and that's a really, really good thing" (C7).

*Pray to God.*

This appeared to be a frequent theme mentioned throughout the forgiveness process, stating that through each step or stage, prayer is necessary; "Well the first thing always for me- for me, the first thing is to go talk to the Lord, so go, and I say, 'Lord, Lord, I'm really hurt, I'm offended, but I need to talk'" (E1). Participants describe the cathartic and sacred experience of being able to connect to "God," "Lord," "Father," and/or "Jesus."

I am angry, angry, angry, angry, angry, and I'm thinking of all these things and I should just do to him and leave him at jail. And I sat down, I remember sitting down and just saying, I can't do this, God. I'm giving it to you. I am giving it to you because I can't do this (C6).

Feeling heard and receiving guidance through the forgiveness process is also mentioned to be a source of comfort and strength.

I think it started a lot with prayer. Just taking that time to say, okay, I am angry, I am mad or I am upset or hurt or whatever. And then praying first for the ability to forgive, and then ultimately seeing that it works (M7).

Some specific codes include sharing hurts with God, asking for guidance, being vulnerable with God about the pain, sensing comfort from God, engaging in a prayer journal, or worshipping God through music, especially songs of lament.

*Trust God's sovereignty over my situation.*

Participants share the sense of relief they experience when they can recognize that God is in control over their life and circumstances.

I don't have to sort it all out. The Holy Spirit will guide me and there's peace in that, knowing that I just acknowledged, trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding and in all your ways acknowledge Him and He will direct your paths, and I don't know if I'm taking that out of context or not, but there's a true principle regardless that if I am acknowledging God in that, in these things, He's going to sort it all out and he says he will, and he will. He's true to his word (E6).

Due to the nature of uncertainty as it relates to the forgiveness process between human-beings, having an advocate who is omniscient and omnipresent in their circumstances helps to bring a sense of security.

So, my old me before I understood about forgiveness probably would have really resented the doctor and hated her for all the pain and suffering and financial devastation that she caused our family through her actions. But the new me looks at the whole world differently because I realized that once you give your life to God, once you head on that path to God and give him control, then there's this peace in knowing that he's in control and that nothing can touch you unless he allows it, and if he allows it, it's going to be for the greater good, for His greater good, for your greater good, and ultimately, we want to get to heaven, so and I could talk for hours of how much that has helped (C4)

Additionally, those who are receiving forgiveness from God report trusting God's promise to extend grace and forgiveness.

*Learn from Jesus.*

Another strong theme mentioned is learning or modeling after Jesus, who participants believe to be the ultimate forgiver and advocate, as Jesus' asked God the Father to forgive humanity while on the cross, which was accomplished through Jesus' resurrection. For example,

I think if I were faced with some situation that I just didn't feel I could forgive, I would seek help. I would try to again look at the biblical example, look at the Christ example... I think the things that Christ instructed us through the Bible or through his parables or through his teaching. It was that treating each other with respect, forgiving, helping the least of those, outreach to people less fortunate, sharing all those views that are Christian kinds of social justice views, are things that were ingrained into me as being a young kid,

part of the Christian faith (M5).

Participants give several examples of the teachings of Jesus that have proved fundamental in their forgiveness processes, including Jesus' pedagogy of concretely identifying how to forgive or abstract parables like the Prodigal Son; for example, "Jesus is like, somebody punched you on the cheek? Turn the other one. Someone wants your cloak? Give him the rest of your life" (E2); and,

There's parts of scripture that says we're supposed to not forgive just seven times, but 77 times. And, it's not just 77 times; it's actually, that's just to express the point that there's no limit to what we should forgive somebody, that we should continue to forgive no matter what like Christ would (C5).

*Read Biblical scripture.*

Participants indicate that they learn about forgiveness through Jesus' parables in the New Testament. They describe the metaphors as insightful and helpful in regard to reasoning and understanding relationships and forgiveness.

There's illustrations and stories, stuff in the scripture. If you're familiar with a prodigal son's story. The son goes away, blows his inheritance and comes back poor and rejected, and they offered him a big feast because he's returned, and the father says, as if he was dead, he's alive and he's back. But the son who was always at the house, always doing the job, who thought he was doing the right thing, has a sense of repentance or I'm not being forgiving of his brother, blew his inheritance and he says, hey father, you didn't give me a party. It's more about him and what he thinks he deserves. And, I think the illustrations found in the scripture are what kind of drives one to say the people that need more forgiveness, you try and forgive them more, is how you can stand with a clear conscience before the Lord, knowing that you've been forgiven, and I want to extend that to the hand of others (E5).

Participants also report finding comfort and encouragement to extend or receive forgiveness by reading Old Testament scriptures that describe people like Job who suffered horrific injustice and David who experienced despair from engaging in wrongdoing.

I take it to scripture. I go right to- a great book is Job. Pull it out read it. If you want to see how somebody felt they weren't treated right, and yet that's one of the longest dialogues biblically from God (C3).

*Engage in contemplation or meditation.*

Engaging in contemplative or meditative practices is described as being a practice that helps participants connect to God's presence and themselves in their suffering. Participants shared,

In our Catholic faith, suffering is a part of our life. God didn't send Jesus to rid the suffering, he sent Jesus to be there with us during the suffering. So instead of wanting to kind of rid the suffering, I was able to just stay with it and when I would stay with it, I would stay with it in kind of a contemplative way and also draw on the fact that Christ was right there with me and that I wasn't alone (C7).

And so, this is a meditation sent out every day, maybe about a part of St Ignatius life, and so I think one we've done recently is basically sitting, thinking about Jesus in the garden before his crucifixion and thinking about how much he was praying to forgive other people that were doing this to him. And then to imagine yourself sitting on a bench further on and then you see him suddenly get up and come over and talk to you and say, him asking you, why are you doing this? Why are you going down this path? Of looking at what you've done, what you've done to others and what can you pray about to help bring around a better thinking of them and what you do (C1).

Some codes include doing imagery of being with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, at Jesus' feet during his suffering and death on the cross and sitting on a bench engaging with Jesus; as well as, going through the stations of the cross.

*Understand the meaning of suffering.*

Participants report that having discernment about suffering is essential to the Christian worldview. They indicate that God does not produce evil, only goodness toward humanity. However, due to the Devil, the sin in the world, and the sin of humanity, participants state that there is inevitable pain and suffering even though that is not how God intended things to be.

The Bible says that we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers and rulers in this dark world, and spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. So, our battle is not against flesh and blood. It's not against each other. We do have a real enemy. The devil is real, but God is greater... The Bible talks about 'suffering produces perseverance, perseverance, character and character hope. And that won't disappoint us. Count all joy when you face various trials knowing that the testing of your faith will produce, patience,' it goes on. But, I think knowing that it's not in vain, that

anything in the hands of God is going to produce good things. And, so even the bad things in life, God works through those. So, he can bring good out of yuck (E6).

Despite living in a reality that was not intended, participants state there is meaning even in suffering. Specifically, participants indicate that paradoxically, God can bring goodness through the pain and that by connecting to this truth, they can experience meaning; for example,

Despite the fact that God doesn't cause suffering, God is with us in our suffering. And because of that, God can take that and transform it. And so, there's that element of trust every time you forgive (C3).

### **Connect to self.**

The next set of themes include the internal processes of extending forgiveness to others or themselves, as well as accepting forgiveness.

#### *Uncover the guilt and hurt.*

Participants report that in the receiving forgiveness process of either seeking forgiveness from others or engaging in self-forgiveness, the first step is to confront themselves and recognize their responsibility for the harm they did to themselves or others.

It's a lot of acceptance of one's own input into whatever the situation is. You know, there are actions that we contribute to whatever the breakdown in the relationship was. So, confession, there's that acknowledgement of one's own input into the, into the situation (M7).

Further, participants then label the emotions tied to hurting themselves or others (e.g., guilt, shame, regret). “At times, I think it starts in a sense of maybe obligation or guilt... I tell you what, if I were to wrong someone, I would feel guilty until I said sorry or I didn't mean to do that” (E5).

Specific codes include naming the harm they did to others, confronting any self-justification or excuses, confronting my flaws and failures, and confronting barriers to taking responsibility.



*Connect to my own fallibility.*

Participants report that at some point in the forgiveness process, they need to connect to themselves and recognize their own humanness and fallibility, that they are capable of wrongdoing. One participant expresses, “It's easier to forgive other people when we realize that we are ourselves need to be forgiven for the things that we do” (C5). Another states,

I think that's where I started to say I need to acknowledge my own faults and my own responsibilities for the breakdown in the marriage, and at the same time, forgive him for his faults and his responsibilities for the breakdown in the marriage and that's where I think it really started there (M7).

At this stage, participants emphasize the importance of recognizing one's responsibility and potential contribution to the problem.

*Empathize with myself.*

Following the confronting and uncovering phase, participants state that it is important to recognize their fallibility and humanness through empathizing with themselves.

It's hard to forgive myself because I couldn't identify with it at the time, but knew I was doing the best I could. So now when I look back on and I'm like, okay, and so then when I beat myself up now about things that are superfluous, I'm like, okay, give yourself a you know what break (M6).

I think we have to learn to know that we're not perfect. No one's perfect and I'm not going to pretend for a minute that I am. And so, when I have a day where I don't do the best by myself or by other people, I have to be able to say, well, you screwed up today, but you're going to try to do better tomorrow... I didn't quite measure up to what I think, but that's okay, and I'm learning how to do that. I really believe it and not beating yourself up (M5).

Codes include developing understanding myself, recognizing humanity in self (i.e., wrongdoing, making mistakes), developing compassion toward self, giving myself the benefit of the doubt (e.g., telling myself “I did the best I could”), and seeing balance of positive and negative aspects of myself.

*Give myself the gift of forgiveness.*

Participants state that like with the interpersonal process of forgiveness, it is important to extend forgiveness to the self.

Sometimes we need to start by just forgiving ourselves. I feel like a lot of times, we are too hard on ourselves and if we can just turn to God and ask for forgiveness we will be in a much better place (C5).

Participants give examples of apologizing to the self, expressing forgiveness to the self, and preaching the gospel to the self, such as, "... telling myself, I forgive you, telling myself give yourself a break. You're doing the best, you can" (M6).

*Renew my relationship with myself.*

Participants state that following extending forgiveness to the self, one is renewing a relationship with themselves. Specifically, this looks like making a commitment to not make the same mistakes, as well as making promises to themselves and intending on keeping them.

And so, I think within, that's something that within that that's a message that people have to use with forgiving themselves and saying, well, I, I didn't quite measure up to what I think, but that's okay, and I'm learning how to do that... But I think that self-forgiveness, of going bed at night, saying I'll be a better person tomorrow, I think is an important step" (M5).

And then continuing on is remembering that as you go forward that the enemy's going to try to use those negative thoughts that you've had about yourself or wrongs that you've done either to yourself or to others to try to bring you down and make you mad at yourself again and bring you back to that place of unforgiveness. It's a thing to remind yourself, I worked through this again and again. That's where prayer and scripture comes into play for me is reminding myself of the truth; truth in scripture and who God says I am and not anyone else or even myself who I say I am (M4).

### **Connect to Supportive Others**

The following include connecting to other human-beings who they consider to be helpful and safe, as well as who have participants' best interest in mind.

*Seek interpersonal support from my immediate support system.*

Some participants state that seeking interpersonal support from their support network of friends and/or family through the process, and using them as a sounding board, can be helpful in processing the offense and receiving guidance in how to move forward.

Part of that response may be asking other people, taking it to another person, processing it, whether that be a spiritual director, a friend, somebody who's not going to simply tell you what you want to hear it (C3).

I think a strong support system of people around me really helped. People that weren't afraid to just speak truth or speak and say, hey, you need to forgive, or you need to seek forgiveness and we're going to be honest. Even if it wasn't something I wanted to hear or people that called me out when I had wronged someone (M4).

In both instances, participants share their openness to care and feedback in order to move in the direction of health and wisdom.

*Seek interpersonal support from the church/my faith community.*

Participants identify that meeting with their pastor or priest, connecting to a lay spiritual counselor, being part of a small group, seeking support from church goers, and attending church Bible studies or workshops to be helpful.

I think within a Christian community, that's what a Christian community is all about, is supporting each other and these kinds of issues. And I think many times if there were issues like that where someone had hurt someone's feelings or done something to them, there might be support within the Christian community to talk that out, to work that out. Certainly, go to our pastor, go to our youth leader, whatever that might be (M5).

When I was having a lot of problems with my husband because of the drinking, a pastor knew about that and he would talk to me and everything. At some point he finally said to me, God gives us ways to help cope. Yeah, prayer is the first thing, but at the same time he does give, he puts people out there for us because again, we're human. We need that human perspective (C6).

Further, some participants stated that it is comforting to speak with other Christians in the church, as they may have similar values or practices as it relates to forgiveness.

*Attend therapy.*

Several participants identify attending psychotherapy (i.e., a therapist, psychologist, psychiatrist) to gain deeper insights into their problems and behaviors, as well as other's motives.

I did see a therapist for 10 years, of different ones, different psychologists and psychiatrists, to try and understand because I want to forgive, and I feel like that was hurting me more by not forgiving them (C5).

Additionally, they report processing through unforgiveness and healing from depression, anxiety, or other mental health issues that they believed were a result of unresolved circumstances. For example,

I think that you can go through that process of forgiveness with God and through counseling and potentially therapy; just working through the emotions and that process, which I don't like to call it a standing, because to me, I don't know if it just sounds a little weird, but I guess the therapist would be potential stand in where they're helping you work through that process (M4).

Additionally, other codes include going to a support group and taking psychotropic medications to aid with symptoms of depression, anxiety, ADHD, and other psychological disorders mentioned to be affected by resentment and unresolved anger.

*Go through the Sacrament of Reconciliation with the priest.*

Catholic participants are the only group to describe this theme of engaging in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, where participants confess their sins and receive guidance and forgiveness from priest.

Personally, I've experienced a profound transformation after going through the Sacrament [of Reconciliation] on a regular basis. Years before, when I wasn't, and when I thought I was forgiving people that hurt me or struggling to forgive them, it was not something I was able to do (C5).

Some discuss it as helpful, while others describe it as necessary to the process of extending or receiving forgiveness.

So, God established his covenants with us and gave us the sacraments, including the gift of reconciliation for that purpose. And it's critical for it. It is, it absolutely is... with the sacrament of reconciliation, which the first time I really went was in my forties, and now my goal is always to go once a month, I usually make it about once every three months, but you need to get that forgiveness from God, and once you have the forgiveness from God, it's easier to give it out. You can't forgive unless you've been forgiven yourself (C4).

*Pray to Mary, the saints, and/or angels.*

Exclusive to Catholic participants, this theme emerged as some participants state that they will pray to Mary, the Saints, or Angels to aid in their forgiving practice.

And when I pray, I like to have that almost as conversations I think with Mary, with Jesus, with Guardian Angels; and, I think in those conversations there's such a feeling of love there, and when you feel that love coming from your faith and coming back at you, you can extend that love outwards. I think it's easier (C1).

One participant stated that her daughter had been medically neglected by her physician and later suffered. In that situation, she experienced anger and distress, so related to St. Peter, as well as prayed to Mary, as she could connect to a mother who witnessed her child (i.e., Jesus) suffer unjustly;

I'll call on Mary or I also have some saints now that I like, and St. Peter was known for having a temper. So sometimes I'll pray to him and ask for, just give me some help, you know, to deal with the anger and my old- because it's very easy to fall back into your old habits (C4).

### **Connect to offender.**

This set of themes include the internal and external process of offendees connecting to and forgiving their offender. Participants describe that in the forgiveness process, one is attached to the offender, so in order to experience freedom from the offender, one needs to paradoxically connect.

### *Uncover the anger and hurt.*

In person-to-person forgiveness, participants identify how critical uncovering the hurt is in order to move forward. “Will you be outraged about things? Sure. Because that's how change comes about... and if it's about Christian values, yes, you should be outraged” (C6). Further, participants highlight that as a Christian, righteous anger is a healthy response to injustice.

Part of that is just trying to understand, so anger is not a bad emotion. Paul calls us to be angry and not sin, right? Which is such a weird, like what? How does one? So, there's a capability of being angry about bad without sinning towards- and so it's understanding that balance and what does that mean (E2).

Participants uncover the anger and hurt through connecting to themselves typically through an intrapersonal dialogue or journaling. This includes naming the hurt, identifying the offender, describing the injury event in detail, labeling the emotions tied to the hurt (e.g., anger, hurt, shame, sadness), and recognizing the loss in the hurt (i.e., time, expectations, trust); for example,

So, it's naming the hurt, what the hurt was, and then telling the story in any way from every perspective you can think of... and write about it because I like to write, so I'm a journaler, so that was a really good way to get it out. You know, what was hurt? Why am I so upset about this? And telling the story always happens because in your mind, you're just like, I'm so mad and angry and this is why (M6).

### *Accept the pain.*

Participants describe that at some point, in order to resolve the forgiveness process, they need to overcome willfulness toward reality, accept that the injury occurred, and let go of the pain. For example, “... accepting what has happened and letting go of the emotion that remains from whatever situation that was. Maybe some sadness, but usually anger and hurt” (M7); and, “... recognizing and accepting the hurt, and then reminding myself of where I am in Christ” (E2). It is emphasized that accepting the pain is not to be confused with excusing or tolerating the offense.

*Empathize with my offender.*

Participants describe the process of developing understanding and empathy for their offender, specifically identifying the narrative or story from the offender's emotional and cognitive perspective.

I think part of it is trying to understand why another person would do the things that I think were so hateful or so hurtful... recognizing where that person is coming from helps me not react the way I really feel like reacting. Sort of, I don't want to say walking a mile in another person's shoes, but I can't think of a better way to put it right now. Is acknowledging where that other person is and they're either emotional state or factual state or whatever, and trying to account for that may help me to keep from reacting emotionally (M7).

Here, the participant is describing walking alongside the offender and being in tune with what it is like to be them in order to better understand their emotional experiences.

I'm just trying to imagine what it would be like to forgive people without empathy and for me it would be hard because you would just, you would continue viewing them as somebody else's different than you... because without it you will lose the viewpoint of that you are like me, and because you are like me, and you are able to make the same mistakes, you and I are somehow coexistent. We are related to each other (E7).

Further, participants state that they empathize cognitively through perspective-taking and recognizing what factors and motivations may have contributed to them hurting the participant.

*Have compassion for my offender.*

Along with empathizing with their offender, participants describe recognizing the hold sin or wrongdoing has on the offender. Additionally, they experience a sense of social responsibility and need to act in order to help them.

Once I feel that I've prayed about it and talked to the Lord and had a shoulder to lean on so to speak, then I start to pray for the other person, and I say the other person hurt me. I don't know why they hurt me. Maybe there is something going on in their lives, maybe so, since I don't know what's going on, I need to pray for them, so Lord have mercy on them (E1).

I feel like people, a lot of what people do, I feel is because of their own personal problems or experience or whatever they're going through. And so, it has nothing to do

with me, and that's why I'm trying as an adult now to see things from just their perspective and understand that hey, this person might be really going through something

and the reason that they just bit my head off has nothing to do with me and the way they mocked me or whatever it was. And so, I feel like it's just understanding and giving some compassion to the other person, that they are probably going through something very difficult because if they weren't they probably wouldn't treat me this way (C5).

*Give the offender the gift of forgiveness.*

Participants identify that there is a decisional process of forgiving the offender, where they will either internally say that they forgive the offender or write a therapeutic letter of forgiveness, which may or may not be given to the offender.

From there move into a mental reminder of my forgiveness in Christ and the forgiveness that God has towards me and that alignment of here's my hurt towards God and towards other, my sin towards God and other. Here's what happened to me. They're on the same level, and if this is forgiven by God, this can be forgiven by me (E2).

At that time, I didn't tell him that I forgave him because I just couldn't, I just, it was too difficult where we were in the process, and he probably would've just thrown it back at my face anyways. So, I wrote a letter. I didn't give it to him, but I wrote a letter to him. (M6).

*Potentially confront my offender.*

Through an external process, some participants indicate that there may be a mentality of seeking restorative justice with the offender, so they will confront the offender in order to seek out the offender's perception of the nature of the offense, describe the narrative or story regarding the injury, as well as express their thoughts and emotions.

I think after you confronted and if you understand it better, you know what it is. You know the facts. I think fact-finding is part of any kind of a process and we're talking now of course about forgiveness. So, talking to the person, finding out the facts (M5).

Following confronting the offender, some participants indicate they will verbally express forgiveness to them. Some identified that the motivation to confront the offender may also be to participate in the resolution of harm, where they express forgiveness and love for the person.



Either going up to that person and saying, I forgive you is basically what it is. So, I forgive you for this, this and that. And then a lot of times people don't realize that they hurt somebody... irregardless of what the other person says or does, it's not the point. It's you being able to say, I forgive you and do all this work to be able to move forward (M6).

A few participants discussed expressing forgiveness non-verbally, through letter-writing or emails.

I wrote her a letter and I was very kind. It was a very, very Christian letter. But I did ask some hard-hitting questions, and I did say if we're going to move, if we're going to reconcile, then we got to talk about this stuff. And, that was last summer and I've never heard from her. My daughters who she's close to said that I made her angry. So, I think I made the best reconciliation effort that I could, but I suppose I could try again or whatever, but I still don't think that God is telling me to do that. And I think I know that I feel I've done enough, and I've made enough efforts and any more attempts on my part might only make it worse for my wife and I don't want to do that (C2).

*Potentially renew the relationship with my offender.*

Some participants state that renewing the relationship with their offender may be appropriate, desirable, and more ideal than releasing the relationship.

Repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation... Forgiveness in and of itself is just one part. It's just like a transaction. If there's, if the transaction on the side of the person who had been offended, the repentance and other side of the person who was offending and the result, the ideal result the goal is, some form of reconciliation. Those three things are necessary ingredients for our relationship to be righted (E3).

In renewing the relationship, participants emphasize the following elements are necessary. The offender must repent, receive the forgiveness offered, and either assure the offende that they will change or demonstrate some measurable change in order to rebuild trust. For the offende, there needs to be evidence that they worked through the forgiveness process and internally resolved the hurt, show a willingness to make amends, accept the apology given.

I've had situations where the next step is we end the conversation there and if we feel that that's things have been forgiven and that the situation has been kind of dealt with, then we've just moved on and continue our lives. And, if we interact with each other,

we're cordial and we're friendly, but there's no hey, let's go, let's get back to how it was before. But, I have had situations where it's not only not back to what it was before, but I think our relationships have become stronger because of that forgiveness (M4).

One participant identified renewing the relationship may require a facilitator or mediator, such as a therapist. Despite renewing the relationship, participants highlight the need to renew trust, hold boundaries, and engage in assertive communication with one another.

*Potentially release the relationship with my offender.*

Some participants indicate that at times, renewing a relationship with their offender is unachievable, such as in cases of abuse, ongoing harm, the offender does not take responsibility for the offense, or a complete breach of trust in which the offende does not believe it wise to renew a relationship.

Now there's a difference between forgiveness and if someone is sinning in a way that is unhealthy and toxic.... But I think we got too careful like when you're dealing with abuse and different things like that. There's that healthy balance of forgiveness, like doesn't mean you continue to let the person abuse (E6).

At that time, I was thinking, I don't want to move forward. I don't want to keep this marriage going. So, I knew that I was going to have to release it. So, I felt like at that time I was kind of in a stagnant place because I wasn't like, I couldn't just walk away and go, okay, bye. So, but eventually that happened (M6).

Additionally, several participants indicate that they experienced situations where their offender was not willing to renew the relationship, even if the participant desired renewal.

I wrote her an email and I explained why I was feeling and the things that she did that made me feel this way, and she wrote back, and she still wanted to continue the friendship, but not once did she say she was sorry for any of it... and I wrote her back... I thought sometimes relationships become toxic and that's what this became. I knew it could never be the same. And at one point I even told somebody, I said, oh I guess I'd rather put up with this and have her as a friend, but it just became too much and so I just said no, I just don't think this is going to work (C6).

Some report the need to confront and then externally release the relationship with the offender, specifically coming to an agreement that one or both are going to terminate the

relationship. Some participants indicate that releasing the relationship can occur without confronting the offender, as well.

### **Connect to offender**

The following themes include the participants being in the offender role and their process of externally receiving forgiveness from the offender.

#### *Confront my offender.*

In the receiving forgiveness process, participants identify that if they are aware that they had harmed someone, they would attempt to confront their offender for the purpose of engaging in open dialogue and make amends with them. For example, “If I knowingly offended someone, I would approach them right away. Now if I did something accidental that hurts someone, I would do the same thing” (M5); “When I have wronged somebody, I have to seek them out and ask for forgiveness. I can't wait for them to come to me and forget” (E2); and, “I usually ask to be forgiven. I usually seek forgiveness myself. I want to make things right with that person and let them know. Being intentional where I'm very sorry” (C5). In this step, they report facing the offender in order to hear the offender’s perspective and empathize with them.

#### *Apologize to my offender.*

Following, participants describe experiencing and expressing their remorse, repenting for the offense, and admitting to the wrong-doing in their conversation with the offender. For example, “I absolutely feel that's necessary for me if I've wronged someone else to go to them and say, I'm sorry” (M1). Participants identify that it requires humility, as well as awareness of one’s ability to engage in wrongdoing and relational repairs with in order to effectively deal with guilt.

There's a huge amount of humility in saying to someone, I hurt you and I acknowledge that. And essentially, you're letting yourself bare to say, I want something in return from

you and I'm in a position where really, I don't deserve anything from you because I've hurt you. Right? So, when you're saying, would you forgive me, yeah, you're asking for something from someone whom you've just hurt, and I find that really hard (M7).

*Seek and accept forgiveness from my offender if given.*

Lastly, participants indicate that following repentance, they will ask with specific verbiage of the word forgiveness, "Will you forgive me?" For example,

I will say, I'm sorry I wasn't nice to you, I didn't treat you well, that kind of thing. I'll use the word forgiveness. I'll say, will you forgive me? He'll say, yes, I'll forgive you that, like those words very much come into play (M7).

Participants state that the offender may or may not extend forgiveness or reconciliation, and that this is out of the offender's control; "Because you're seeking forgiveness for them, saying, I'm sorry, so that would be up to them to say I forgive you or whatever, and then decide on having a relationship or not" (M6). If forgiveness is extended, participants state that they humbly accept the gift of forgiveness offered.

#### **Phase IV. Experience Transformation**

Participants indicate that in following the above steps of the extending or receiving forgiveness process, they experience transformation. The following subthemes are specific ways in which participants describe their personal growth.

##### **Maturation of forgiveness.**

Participants indicate that by extending or receiving forgiveness, one develops and matures in the entire process itself.

*Holding onto forgiveness.*

One subtheme that emerged from the data is that after moving through the forgiveness process and extending or receiving the gift of forgiveness, one might be prone to experiencing regression or ongoing unresolved emotions from the injury. Thus, participants express that with

enough forgiveness practice, one develops endurance in their forgiving. Specifically, this looks like holding onto forgiveness and forgiving anew if necessary.

In that moment we could express ourselves, but a week later, a month later, a year later, five years later, those emotions could still come up and I need to pray that I can continue to forgive that person in that and be reminded that, hey, we did resolve this, and we've gotten to a point where that was worked through. And so, it's a continual process. I think even for every situation, it's a continual thing because things can come back up where we want to use it in retaliation to them, but if I've said honestly that I've forgiven them, but I need to remember that myself... I think to constantly remind myself because we're both human and we're still going to sin at each other at some point, intentional or not. It's only reminding myself that we can forgive one another. And, so when something new comes up, like, hey, let's forgive on that, let's just move forward from that, as well. So, I think a situation can be resolved and can be closed, but I think that the process of forgiveness is continuous, ongoing between a person, between two people (M4).

Sometimes I think I've actually forgiven somebody, and then something will come out, like pouring salt on that wound. You come back out and then you're like, okay, wait a minute, I haven't truly forgiven because if I had, then this from my past wouldn't be, and so that's sometimes how you find out about it (C4).

Participants indicate that at that point, it is essential to return to the forgiveness process in order to resolve that event. This is especially essential if one decides to renew a relationship with the offender.

*The forgiveness process takes less time, effort, and mental energy.*

Specifically, the forgiveness process takes less time, effort, and mental energy. For example,

I'm way easier going, I get over it much more quickly. I don't develop the grudges. I don't spend time on it. It just, I take it for what it is. Sometimes I'll think, well maybe that guy is just having a bad day. Let's see how it goes tomorrow or something like that. But I'm really open to not blaming them or filing it in my head as much. I just let it go. I really just let it go (C2).

Further, it may become habitual, the capacity to forgive increases, and one may develop greater maturity in forgiving.

If you partake in that process, it becomes somewhat more natural for you in it. It may not be as quick, but it becomes something that you can do, and you realize, hey, I've forgiven

before, I can do it again. So, you have the potential for saving other relationships in the future (M4).

### **Deepening of Christian character.**

#### *Peace.*

One of the most identified themes in regard to transformation, participants describe experiencing an increased sense of emotional, relational, and spiritual peace.

And in the moment, I literally felt this, I don't know what to call it. Calm. Peace. It started at the front head and it went all the way down. I stopped crying. I never cried after that. I had no, no hate, anger, nothing anymore, and it took care of everything... But that let me know that God was there for me (C6).

How they view others changes and it changes from having received forgiveness from Him to extending that to others. Having a sense of peace, a sense of quietness. Maybe meekness that maybe wasn't there before (E5).

Additionally, participants report experiencing peace with God through certainty in regard to reconciliation with God when seeking forgiveness; with self through increased connection to self, having a clear conscience, and experiencing lowered states of anxiety and stress; as well as, with others through potential interpersonal harmony if there is a renewed relationship between offender and offeree.

#### *Joyfulness.*

Participants express a sense of joy, happiness, optimism, and positivity. By engaging in forgiving, their life is in line with the way God intends it to be.

So definitely, the benefits of forgiving, so really happiness... Happy are you if you're not attached to something that keeps you from your relationship with God and others, and that's a good place to be... when people persecute you and may say all sorts of insults that they are when you don't have to hold on to that... you're fortunate and I think all parts of your being are affected positively by that (C3).

Further, participants describe rejuvenation, their spirits to be lifted, as well as reconnection with healthy parts to themselves; "I think there's a lightness. There's a happiness...

I got rid of that grudge and oh my goodness, my health came back, my optimism, my joy, everything” (C1).

### *Love.*

Through forgiving, participants report an increased ability to love, seek the good of others and self, value common humanity, and recognize human worth.

It looks like loving unconditionally. It means wanting the best for others. It means loving my neighbor as myself. It means putting them first. It means being a servant. It means humbling myself. It means treating others the way I want to be treated (E4).

I think the community as a whole, the bigger community, because there's a sin against one for not forgiving can be a sin against many for not forgiving and I think there's ripple effects to all of your friends. When I'm upset at that one person from campus here, well then that would put me in a bad mood that would make me go home and then I would yell at my kids or yell at my cat or yell at my husband and it would cause a ripple effect... once you forgive somebody, you can experience that feeling of love, that feeling of community (C1).

### *Compassion.*

Participants identify increased compassion following forgiving, specifically by demonstrating increased understanding, concern for self and others in their suffering, and willingness to go through redemptive suffering. For example,

And, I think there's a sense of understanding from a spiritual perspective, who people are. I mean personally, I believe that people are more heading in the direction different from and away from God and that when they act out, they act out of their own emotions, and act out on their own desires, act on their own ambition. They act out because that's the perspective that they were born with and they're just living that out. But, when one comes to Christ, I believe that that perspective in live, that focus in life changes, but there's a sense of not approving, but a sense of understanding they're acting out the way they act out because that's who they are. And I don't say, I never say it's right. Okay? But there's going to be a certain sense of understanding that they're doing what they're doing because of who they are... I would view a person who forgives as probably being a very compassionate person (E5).

Further, another participant expresses that they grow in compassion and then have a tendency to extend compassion toward future offenders, “I'm very compassionate towards them

and even though I don't know maybe what they're going through, I just give them the benefit of the doubt” (C5).

### *Faithfulness.*

Following engaging in the forgiveness process, participants indicate the following growth in their faithfulness: that it reinforces and reaffirms their Christian beliefs that God’s institution of loving others is more significant than hating others; God’s purpose and plan is getting accomplished; increased sense in the sovereignty and power of God; as well as, deeper intimacy with God by feeling increased presence, alignment, and dependency on God. Participants express, “It's just reinforced my faith... that we are all created equal and God will forgive us all equally no matter what” (C6); and,

As I forgive, I feel closer to God with it because it's that small glimpse into the bigger picture that he has, the fact that he has forgiven me. And so, there is that, this growth of a relationship with God in that of I'm getting it, I'm lining up with what you have planned and what's your life desire is for us as humans in general” (E2).

### *Temperance.*

Participants indicate that through extending or receiving forgiveness, there is an increased sense of self-control and getting, “More back to ourselves. Control over our own mind” (C5). Specifically, they describe freedom from rumination or obsession; such as, “When I haven't forgiven, it overcomes my thought process throughout the day. So, when that forgiveness takes place, my mind is freed up from dwelling on the situation or those emotions (M4);” and, “You're not plagued mentally like I've described.... worrying and preoccupied by the hurt and the pain of my life” (E3). Further, codes include increased conscientiousness, sense of stability and grounding, better intrapersonal and interpersonal boundaries, and lowered impulsivity to act on emotions.

### *Courage.*



Another theme of growth includes increased courage and bravery, specifically in regard to the willingness to be vulnerable and confront personal responsibility. In reflecting upon their forgiveness process, participants express, “It's actually been very freeing mentally to have more positive thoughts and to know that I had the strength to forgive somebody, and the courage” (C5);

You need to move on and you can't be stuck there. You're working through a situation that's big, and you can't hide it anymore. You can't push it down anymore. It takes a lot of bravery and courage and strength to do that (M6).

#### *Righteous justice.*

By extending and receiving forgiveness, participants reported an increased sense of righteous justice, such as asserting their boundaries, being equitable toward others, and being a social justice advocate, as evidenced by, “Whether they thought I was loving them or not, I tried to be fair to them” (M2). “And, so I just try to have a lot of grace towards other people. But now especially, I just try to be fair and even with somebody, and I know that I don't have such great days too” (M6).

#### *Honor.*

Participants state that engaging in the forgiveness process ultimately brings honor and glory to God. Participants express,

I think that every action that, especially if it's forgiveness between two believers in the Christian faith, I think that that brings honor and glory to God, which then edifies the entire body of Christ... I think it gives glory to God and it reflects his character (E4).

Another way of framing honor and glory is pleasing God through their motivations and actions.

I think God is pleased when I forgive other people... And for me, I take more like a Bonhoeffer approach to it of just saying what there is - single minded obedience towards God. I'm obeying God's law and doing what he told me to (E7).

#### *Hope.*

Especially for receiving forgiveness, participants reported the hope of being forgiven or redeemed, as well as generally having an optimistic outlook in their relationships because of being able to be forgiven. For example, “You're living in a state of willingness to forgive and a state of hopefulness that you will be forgiven when you act like an idiot too” (E3); and,

When one receives forgiveness, a sense of a burden being lifted of now the recipient- and it's like, wow they give me another chance, or they believe in me and there's a certain sense of hope there” (E5).

*Grace.*

Additionally, participants report having overall increased grace toward others, specifically being a more gracious person and being able to extend unmerited love and mercy toward future offenders and others in general with greater ease, as evidenced by, “I feel like I have the grace to forgive others more easily” (C5); and, “Grace, I'm giving people grace... And, so I just try to have a lot of grace towards other people” (M6).

*Humility.*

Through forgiving and confronting one's own pride, participants state that they experience increased humility.

The most charitable interpretation of someone's intentions is I think part of that is loving them by giving them the benefit of the doubt, by thinking the best that I can about them, and if it isn't love its humility, that we're bound to one thing (E3).

Additionally, they identify humility gives way to improved relationships with God, self, and others, especially because the priority shifts from the need to be right to the need to be in relationship; “When we forgive, we become right with God again. We've humbled ourselves and we recognize that we aren't some greater being who has the, who can't forgive” (M4). Further, some describe that by forgiving, they are stepping out of the role of either being a victim of their offender or persecutor toward their offender.

### *Wisdom.*

By going through the process of forgiveness, participants express there is a deeper understanding of forgiveness and thus increased discernment and ability to take perspective or derive meaning from hurtful experiences. For example, “One just becomes a little bit more- now you have more experience, you have a little bit more wisdom” (M5); and, “... Wisdom to know how to handle relationships, and how to really allow love to be primary in my relationships with other people” (E4).

### *Gratitude.*

Forgiveness leads to a sense of gratitude; “Experiencing a sense of gratitude... And I think that feeling of gratitude was stronger than everything else” (C1). Specifically, participants state that the more one is forgiven, the more one appreciates forgiveness, and the more one forgives, the more one appreciates being forgiven. For example, “I feel like it's only drawn me closer to God and trusting in him and makes me a more thankful person” (C5); and, “It opens up to more appreciation of God and of other people” (M2).

### *Authenticity.*

Through moving through the pain or wrongdoing, participants report greater authenticity, as they live more congruently to their values and who they are, which then lends to greater self-respect and esteem. For example, “I think also you get the congruence of knowing that you're acting according to your beliefs, which probably does produce a pretty positive feeling, thinking to yourself, well I'm acting in accordance to my values” (E7); and,

Just being able to get to a new place, know that there are times when there's going to be difficult situations that happen, but just get to a different place where in a relationship, you can be more authentic, or just know that if there is a situation that happens in the future that pops up that you can handle it (M6).

## **Cultivation of resiliency.**

### *Confidence and competence over painful events.*

Participants state that following extending forgiveness, they see themselves as confident and competent in overcoming the pain. For example,

I can do this. I don't have to hide. I don't have to live in denial. I don't have to do any of this stuff anymore. So, it made forgiveness a little bit more attainable in my own mind for myself in a lot of situations because I was able to look at it as not such a thing that had so much power over me. Taking responsibility, I have power and I have might and God is my power too (M6).

Further, they experience a greater sense of self and power to step out of the victim to survivor role, and harms or hurts become less painful; for example, “They are not defined from then on by their anger or hurt or whatever left from the injury” (M3).

### *Increased sense of empowerment and freedom.*

Participants identify that there is an increased sense of power and freedom from emotional pain and burden of the offense. Specifically, “I experienced just emotional freedom and spiritual freedom. I know that when I was depressed that was because there was a lot of unforgiveness of myself there. And so that forgiveness of self-freed me from that” (M4). Some even describe it as being freed from mental, emotional, relational, or spiritual prison; “It's work but you end up freeing yourself, even if the person doesn't want to renew the relationship with you” (M6).

### *Increased intrapersonal, interpersonal, and spiritual connection.*

Another subtheme derived from the data includes a sense of increased unity, connection, or belonging with others, which builds community, as evidenced by, “I think in the end, the end results would be- corporately, it would be a sense of togetherness and fellowship, of unity” (E5).

We can live in harmony with and right relationship with God and with each other... I feel like the peace and harmony is back in your relationship instead of maybe some

resentment or anger. So, there's no hard feelings. I feel like the hard feelings are gone and maybe the bond is stronger between the two people (C5).

Definitely in a neighborhood where you have neighbors bickering about something stupid and they make up and they move on, I think there's definitely benefit because the tension level for everybody is greatly reduced. And, instead of talking about the bickering neighbors, you can talk about the awesome ski conditions or how great the golf is, or whatever (M7).

Overall, participants share that unity can occur between the offender and offeree, as well as impact others who are not involved.

#### *Improved mind and body wellness.*

Lastly, participants describe increased wellness physically and psychologically overall.

I think that you're less likely to trip over into things that are, are going to be not healthy. Everywhere from eating to exercise to all that. I think you're more prone not to take care of yourself when you hold on to the negative (C3).

Participants notice they engage in more constructive behaviors of caring for themselves once they are able to engage in the forgiveness process. They share specific experiences of wellness such as remission of cancer, improved sleep, as well as decreased depression, anxiety, anger issues, and concentration or attention problems; "I think the benefits are being able to sleep at night and peace of mind and knowing that you've done everything you can do to try to make a wrong right" (M5).

#### **IV. Christian Development Across the Lifespan**

##### **Faith and forgiveness development in childhood is externally controlled and motivated by parents and church authorities.**

Several participants describe that as children, their faith was externally controlled and motivated by the institutional church, as evidenced by the following codes: priest or pastor has authority, faith is defined by church leadership, need to go through sacraments/ "rites of

passage.” Further, faith is influenced by parental figure(s). Specific codes include: faith is generational, family practiced and exemplified forgiveness, family taught me about forgiveness, and there is a familial expectation to forgive.

I guess being Christian, is how I grew up. That's what I was taught. As soon as you start preparing for the sacrament of reconciliation it's all about forgiveness and you're asking Jesus to forgive you... we looked at it in a more formal way because it's all about forgiveness with the sacrament. So that has colored how I look at things. If I'm going to ask for forgiveness, then I have to be willing to forgive, no matter what it is (C6).

Participants state as children, they had a limited understanding of their internal world and personal faith, stating that they did not question their faith and what they were taught.

Little ones need more intentional direction because I don't think that forgiveness is necessarily, we don't come out of the womb with that. It's something that's been learned, learned behavior, so you kind of have to be shown the way and shown the importance of it. The priority needs to be set for you (M1).

### **Forgiveness and repentance pedagogy are first introduced at home and/or in Sunday school.**

Participants indicate that as children, they learned the following about extending and receiving forgiveness at home or in Sunday school at church; “... hearing it in Sunday school, and lessons that we learned, and just that you should forgive somebody cause that's what God has done for us, is forgave us” (M6).

As a kid in Sunday school, you hear about forgiving and if there's a problem, try to talk it out and try to understand the other person's view and try to see where they're coming from and forgive them. But I think that basic teaching was there, and it was, it was exemplified in my family. I mean, you know, kids fight scrap and all that stuff and get their feelings hurt. And I can always remember my folks saying, well, you guys need to sit down and talk about it. Forgive each other and say you're sorry. You know, this kind of thing. And so, it, it was kind of ingrained in me from the beginning (M5).

Participants state they were taught how to engage in conflict resolution, be a moral and ethical person, confront problems, empathize and understand others, say “I forgive you,” and apologize. Further, they indicate learning who God is and that He forgave humanity. For

Catholic participants, the sacrament of confession or reconciliation with God is introduced and participated in.

**Children are exposed to and gain an understanding of what it is like to be hurt.**

As children, participants state they first came into contact with the reality that there is pain and suffering in the world; “Even as a kid, I think I realized that people hurt people, and that hurts” (C3).

My parents got divorced when I was really young, and so the idea of hurt and pains came into my life really early on... so like my life has always been the mentality of understanding there's pain in the world came in when I was like three or four (E2).

Most participants expressed being first introduced to pain through play with their siblings, being disciplined by their parents, or familial dysfunction (e.g., divorce, substance use). Participants report a natural focus on being hurt, projecting responsibility or wrongdoing external to them.

**Children learn to exercise their will to forgive and repent, typically motivated by an obedience and fear of punishment orientation, as well as social conformity.**

Several participants report childhood was the first time that they had practiced forgiveness.

I remember as a child growing up and being a Christian, just being able to do that [forgive] just cause that's what I knew I needed to do, but not knowing what really what the meaning was. But knowing that you should do that (M6).

I remember being young and probably after I made my first communion, just the worry of going to confession on Saturday night and not doing anything wrong... And I remember giggling and laughing and my father, because I laughed during church, we would have to go to the next mass and then he would tell me it was a sin to go to church twice in one day. So that's kind of how it really began (C7).

Motivations to extend or receive forgiveness during childhood include feeling a sense of duty to forgive, fear of being punished for wrongdoing, fear of being in trouble if they did not forgive, as well as a focus of gaining others' approval, especially that of their parents.

**Children are eager to practice forgiveness and experience positive emotions from it, despite a limited understanding of it.**

Participants who identify that they extended forgiveness during childhood said they also felt a desire to forgive and felt a sense of happiness after forgiving.

I've had experiences of being as a kid, experiences of remarkable forgiveness that I never forget... Summers were summers and you spent it around the house, you know, so you had you went out collecting bugs and butterflies and so we have microscopes set up side by side and inadvertently his got knocked down and broke. And I had the sudden loss of interest in insects. Part of that was a fear that he would never be able to forgive me. And I can remember the healing when that finally just kind of came out. I said, you know, I just gotta tell you that this happened. The mirror broke. It was probably an inexpensive microscope when I look at it now, but he said, he just said, are our, our friendship means much more than that microscope (C3).

I think that I would say since, since I was little, I think it was a big part of my family. It was forgive your brother and forgive your sister, like in the house, my actual biological siblings when we were fighting. And, so it's always been instilled to forgive them and love them... I think that learning as a child and learning to forgive, maybe smaller things when the toy's taken from me or an art projects gets broken or something like that, which at the time I guess isn't trivial cause I'm five years old, but that's the most important thing in my life (M4).

However, they report a simplistic view of forgiveness and having a limited understanding of forgiveness due to their age. Additionally, some described a greater tendency to continue or end the relationship following the offense without evaluating the relationship given their age.

**Adolescents begin to gain awareness of their internal and external world as it relates to faith, forgiveness, and repentance.**

Participants describe that in their transition to adolescence, they went through a transitional process of being externally to internally controlled and motivated. Specifically, at



this age, they examined what they were taught in regard to faith and forgiveness. Codes include questioning what was taught to me in childhood, reading and researching my faith and forgiveness, comparing my parent's or other's ways of forgiving from Jesus' way of forgiving, and learning what it means to forgive. Additionally, they began to diffuse their identity from parents and church authorities, such as filtering their inherited faith through what they believed to be true.

I had an experience that was part of bringing me to an understanding of saving faith when I was in high school. I saw someone who had wronged me in a lunchroom and I was in the car with my friend, and I think I was 16 and I asked him to stop the car because we had passed a young man who had harmed me while walking on the sidewalk by himself and I got out of the car and started a physical altercation with him on the sidewalk. And that changed for me in 1981, as I said earlier. Wow. The freedom that I experienced of being forgiven of all my sins and the love that was shown to me, and I felt that all the sins that I committed were forgiven. It just changed everything for me and I really thank the Lord that he has given me the grace that forgiveness and holding bitterness has not been something that has weighed me down in my life (E4).

Further, participants describe having a stronger justice orientation and tendency to hold on to the pain or not extend forgiveness.

When you're in high school and you think about your friends and there's cliques and things and there's dramas and you don't necessarily- it's almost a part of that growing up where you're going to ignore that person for a while and you're not going to forgive them, and I think it stops, you stop the pettiness after. Well, the petty ones where you don't want to forgive. I think that drops away as you grow older (C1).

### **Development of personal faith and forgiveness typically begins in childhood to young adulthood.**

Participants describe that at some point between their childhood to young adult years, a deep, personal faith is typically established, and forgiveness understanding increases, in late childhood to young adulthood. They described the following process: 1) Intentional discovery (i.e., awareness of the ability to make personal decisions about faith, seeking understanding of

what faith and forgiveness means to me personally, recognition of not having adequate understanding of or teaching in how to forgive, pursuing truth about faith and forgiveness through the use of philosophy, reading of Biblical scripture; 2) Encountering Jesus (i.e., coming to know who God is through Jesus, the feeling of “being there” during Jesus’ life/death, empathizing with Jesus’s pain, recognizing God loved/connected to me first, recognizing Christianity is non-comparable to other faiths); 3) Recognition of being a sinner (i.e., recognizing wrongdoing, to others and God); 4) Commitment (i.e., following “the call” to be a believer, repenting of wrongdoing/sins, accepting God’s gift of forgiveness, receiving Jesus as savior, surrendering life to God, reconciling to God and “getting right with God,” following or “walking with” Jesus, being baptized if Protestant, and having a personal motivation to obey God); 5) Transformation of Christian character (i.e., being “born again” if Evangelical Protestant, indwelling of the Holy Spirit, new ability to relate to God, closeness with God, not having sin between God and me, new ability to relate to others, changed perception on truth, actions become congruent to identity, reengaging in institutional church with renewed faith, and changing faith tradition based on changed faith beliefs). Personal faith establishment may have occurred between childhood through adulthood. One participant who grew up in the church and Christian faith expresses,

[Faith], for me, it's encountering Jesus. It's following him in such a way that I myself become that image that I was made in God's likeness and more and more it does align you to that so there's an integrity with the way in which I act and what I believe (C3).

Another participant shares that they did not grow up in a Christian household, and that they were not exposed to Christianity until their college years,

I was a senior in college. I was actively looking for the truth. I became convinced it is not in philosophy and so in my case, Christianity was a major decision I had to make as opposed to I've always been a Christian since day one. So, in many ways, I knew what I was getting into (E1).

### **Consistent and intentional forgiving typically begins in adulthood.**

Many participants identify that while they had started to forgive in childhood, intentional and consistent forgiving began in adulthood.

The daily reminder of who I am in Christ, a daily reminder of the good that I've had in the forgiveness I have in Christ and keeping that at my forefront, then allows me to pursue it to continually (E2).

With ongoing practice and refinement, one can become more “fit” in these practices according to one participant, analogous to physical fitness.

It's a muscle you got to flex. We don't preserve anything without working at it. That's, what this side of heaven means. And so, if we want to be good at anything, we have to work at it, we have to be disciplined about it, whatever those disciplines are. If you want to be physically fit, then you figure out what your routine needs to look like. Spiritually fit, you do the same thing (C3).

At this point is when participants recognized forgiveness as a complex process (i.e., seeing a wholistic picture of faith leads to greater picture of forgiveness, having a deeper understanding of wrongdoing and suffering, recognizing more nuanced forms of hurt, recognizing the complexity in relationships, understanding of the reciprocal nature of forgiveness, and recognizing that harming others also harms myself). Further, this is when forgiveness is seen more as a choice, as they are more privy to recognize their free will to forgive.

I think as I've grown up and I think bigger offenses have taken place against me, that practice has been amplified more, and I've been seeing the importance of needing to practice it. So, I think probably definitely in the last five or six years, it's become more intentional process where I'm- it's not just, yeah, I forgive you and I move on, but I meditate and truly get, try to get to a heart state where I know that I have forgiven and I have moved on (M4).

As adults, participants begin to understand the layers of multiple forms of forgiveness required within each situation; for example, the need to be forgiven while forgiving another.

Additionally, adults focus on developing and growing in all forms of forgiveness (i.e., interpersonal forgiveness, intrapersonal forgiveness, and seeking forgiveness).

**Adults have the capacity to be mature forgivers.**

Most participants described a maturation process of becoming increasingly developed in their forgiving process as a result of age and intentional practice.

I think, like with so many things, the older people get, the more mature you are. You just tend to maybe have a little softer attitude toward lots of things and I think forgiveness is one of those. I think it's probably easier for me now than it was when I was 20.... I think as you move on through life you just become, one just becomes a little bit more, now you have more experience, you have a little bit more wisdom (M5).

I think in the beginning there wasn't any [forgiveness], and then over time, part of it is just maturity. As adults we realize that other people aren't perfect and they're doing usually the best they can do, and that acknowledgement that most people are trying to do what they think is right at the, at any given time, not everybody of course, but most people, and those are the people you're developing relationships with, people that want to have good and mature relationships with you. So, it took me a long time to figure out, like my parents are, they're human. They made a lot of mistakes. No kidding. Raising kids is hard (M7).

It has three aspects to it. One, God forgiving me. That's where it all begins. God forgiving me. Understanding that, realizing that, knowing that is the foundation. Second of all, forgiving others who have hurt me and have maybe done injustices. And thirdly, receiving forgiveness from others and that's the other aspect of. That's to me very much a sign of maturity as a follower of Christ (E4).

Specific codes include increased self-awareness, increased ability to be reflective, increased awareness of expectations of self and others, increased awareness of whether I forgave or not, increased discernment of my sin and wrongdoing, increased understanding of my own imperfection, persistent recognition of the need to be forgiven and to forgive, persistent seeking of forgiveness and forgiving, persistent connection to forgiveness resources, aim of becoming more like Jesus, heightened awareness of others, increased tolerance of others, ability to deeply empathize with others, ability to see other's perspective, a willingness to accept others as imperfect, ability to extend grace to others, desire to reconcile with others, increased discernment

in my relationships, deepened faithfulness with God, sensitivity to my convictions, and daily pursuit of spiritual growth.

**Adults experience a parallel between their faith sanctification and forgiveness maturity.**

Participants discuss that as Christian adults, this is the age where they intentionally pursued spiritual fitness, such as keeping faithful with God, engaging in constant prayer, reading the Bible, learning more about who Jesus is, engaging in Bible studies, engaging in the sacraments as a Catholic, and engaging with church community. As a result of their sanctification of becoming increasingly like Jesus or the way God desires them to be, participants described an increased desire and discipline in pursuing fitness within their forgiving.

I'm going to say it's a whole lot easier to forgive and that's my normal way of living now. And it gets easier the older that I get. And I know that's number one because my faith in God gets stronger and stronger and two, I have all this experience to call on and I see what works and what's foolish (C1).

God has given me this grace to be a very - I believe a very forgiving person - and I worked through some kinda tough stuff, and it's been really under the aspect of my Christian life, and I just was so thankful that God has helped me in this area... it's been a continual throughout my life, but I believe as I have matured as a human being and as a Christian, I think it has gotten easier (E4).

**Adults find the importance of forgiving unresolved hurts from childhood.**

Some participants describe that while there are present hurts to deal with, returning to forgive past, unresolved hurts is also vital. Participants state that while they practiced forgiving in childhood to adolescence, they did not have the ability to understand the complexity or nuances of the harm and they did not have a strong understanding of their internal world, so it is important to recognize any unresolved events that are continuing to cause distress and forgive them in retrospect. For example, "I think every one of us has gone through a level, different

levels of injustice and harm and hurt, and I think working through the things that happened prior to age eighteen is huge. It's huge" (E4).

I think that I've been trying to forgive more later on in life. There are times when I'm thinking back about certain things in my life that I didn't realize that I needed to give forgiveness for or even think the thought that there should be forgiveness there and I think you really start to think about the ones that mean a lot to you that if you're holding onto it must really hurt you. And so, I think you have to think more about the forgiving and then you don't let as much bother you, but I think maybe sometimes the things that hurt you hurt you a little more deeply, so you have to be much more conscious about working on giving the forgiveness (C1).

Additionally, participants share that some hurts may have been repressed and do not come into conscious awareness until later in life.

### **Adults identify seeking forgiveness or self-forgiveness to be more challenging than forgiving others.**

When participants were asked about areas of forgiving they need to continue developing in, working on self-forgiveness appeared to be a common answer.

Most obviously I need to forgive myself, all the stupid things I did when I was young and sins, but you know, but all those things that come up in my memory. I don't know why those are so much harder to forgive than things that other people did (M3).

Some stated that this could be because they have higher expectations of themselves than others and that because of the pervasive pattern of sin one recognizes in themselves that gets carried out, the process of self-forgiveness can be discouraging.

I think it seemed to me to be easier to forgive than sometimes to seek it myself... I still probably think I am much easier on other people than I am on myself. But I'm learning to go easier on myself. Why shouldn't I deserve it as much as the people I give it to? Right? And I think that's a logical thing. That's just somehow, we're not enculturated to think that way (C3).

Additionally, some participants share they struggle more with forgiveness when they are in the offender than offendeer role as a result of a guilty conscience.

I would say on the other end when I'm the one who's done wrong to somebody, it's harder for me personally and emotionally to let it go. It probably bothers me more because I was the one who was doing the offending rather than being offended. So the process is probably more emotionally packed than when I'm the one who is forgiving because I'm the one who's been having to bear the weight of having hurt somebody (E3).

### **Adults tend to advocate for the learning and practicing of forgiveness in childhood.**

Several participants state that while forgiveness pedagogy and understanding is inadequate during childhood, learning to forgive as a child does lead to a smoother forgiveness process as an adult.

I feel like this is one of the strong qualities that I have is forgiving people, and maybe it's because it was instilled in me at such a young age and because I've had to practice it so much (C5).

Further, one participant expresses that having a sense of community and structure as it relates to learning and practicing concepts of relationship building and forgiveness led to a sense of security and safety as a child, which reinforced the practice of engaging in forgiveness.

[What helped me most to forgive or receive forgiveness has been] the basic teachings I received through church. I think that's true of anybody, whatever they received in the first five years of their childhood is extremely important. And it has a lot to do, I think churches and people who attend church, usually create a bond. And I think that's really central to have bonds that are created to keep people safe and protected and secure and not violated. And, I think most churches tend to do that (M3).

Further codes under this theme include: forgiveness becomes easier, forgiveness occurs more quickly, and hurts tend to be lesser as I've been actively working on forgiving.

### **V. Forgiveness as an Identity or Way of Life**

#### **Christians are forgiven.**

*God forgave us first through Jesus.*

Participants identify that a significant part of their identity is that they are forgiven by God through Jesus.

God out of love promised to send the Savior and that savior is the God man, Jesus Christ and Jesus died in the place of sinners like you and me. And then he rose again from the dead three days after he died, proving that God accepted his sacrifice for sin and prove that we could have life and that we would rise again one day, and that we would not be bound to the grave because of our sin. And so, he was our substitute. And, because God is Holy, he demanded that there was a payment for that sin, and he took it upon himself to pay that sin (E3).

There's the example of God giving up his only Son for the forgiveness of our sins... Jesus having gone through what he went through and hanging on a cross saying forgive them, they don't know what they're doing. That's pretty powerful stuff. I mean, the guy's dying a pretty gruesome death, very painful and is still saying forgive them (M7).

Specific codes found among the interviews include God the Father sent his son Jesus to this earth, God the Father sent his son Jesus so human-beings could relate to him, Jesus is a propitiation for my sin by taking human-being's sin onto himself, Jesus went through redemptive suffering on the cross, Jesus asked God the Father to "forgive them for they know not what they do," justice was paid by Jesus on the cross, Jesus modeled to humanity how to forgive, and we are redeemed through Jesus' death and resurrection. By believing these tenets, participants assert that they have new and everlasting life through being forgiven by Jesus and can experience closeness with God by not having sin between God and themselves.

*God calls us to forgive if we want to be forgiven.*

As a result of being forgiven and reunited with their creator, participants state that Christians now have a purpose, including a calling to a life of forgiveness. For example, "It's an important part of the whole Christian life or the whole spiritual self to be able to realize that one of the reasons you were called to forgive other people is because you too are an offender" (M2).

I'm held accountable to forgive. It's not a fear-based system, like I'm not necessarily afraid of hell... I'm not afraid God's going to punish me if I don't forgive people, but it's more like I see humanity is bettered by forgiving people, and I think that my God instituted that standard (E7).



Participants indicate that God expects Christians forgive others since He has forgiven them, and if they ask for forgiveness they need to be willing to extend it.

We say forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those that trespass against us. So, we're actually, we're literally asking God to forgive us. It's the way we forgive other people. Basically, he's not going to forgive us in what we do, and that's actually what we're asking and so with him asking, like we're asked even in the Bible and scriptures to forgive others (C5).

Some participants emphasize that this command is not out of wrath or anger, rather God wants Christians to forgive for their good and to sustain community.

### **Christians are forgivable.**

*Recognizing our fallibility as human-beings.*

Participants state that part of their identity as a Christian is recognizing that they are a sinner; that all human-beings have the potential to be offenders – to harm God, self, others, and the world.

Being a Christian, it means knowing that I'm a sinner, knowing that I have fallen, but knowing that it's not on me to fix myself, that because of Christ and his work on the cross, I have forgiveness for wrongs I have done (E2).

A Christian is someone who is a forgiven sinner, one who looks to Christ and the work that he did to gain our forgiveness for us, to acknowledge that we are sinful, that we're born that way, but we continue to live that way even after we come to faith. That's what sets us apart from others is that we have something we can do with that guilt. We have a place to take it and leave it and have it washed away. We aren't better than anybody else, although I mean there are Christians who do think they are or maybe people who aren't Christians who think that Christians, think they are (M1).

Additionally, participants acknowledge that they are imperfect. They are unable to meet the standards God or Jesus requires from them, so all humanity has sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. This continues even after becoming a Christian. One participant emphasizes that being a Christian does not mean perfection.

Being a Christian does not mean, it's not that we are perfect, it's that we're human and we try our best to follow what Jesus calls us to do through scripture, but we do fail... It means every day you get up and when you go to confession, you say you're sorry for your

sins. Well, you have to do the action you can't say the words, you have to at least try to do better. If I'm always getting angry at my kids and I'm not trying to control that anger, then I don't know, was I really sorry? So, to me Christian does not mean perfection, it means trying to attain the expectations that Jesus put forth for us, but we could never really attain it because we are not perfect (C6).

*Recognizing our inherent worth.*

Participants describe having a Christian identity means recognizing their inherent worth because as a human-being, God created and loves them, they are made in the image of God, God deems them forgivable, and they have an overflowing of God's attributes as a result of justification and sanctification.

God created that person in his image and his desire is for, he is not willing that any should perish, but that all come to the knowledge of him. And so, his desire, he is kind. God is the one who has the right to strike us off and he has his loving kindness, his tender mercy, his compassion, all of that. If anyone has the right to hold it against anyone, it's Him and he chooses forgiveness (E6).

People grow up in certain ways. And, they don't feel worthy or whatever. And, I hear people talk about, oh, I grew up in this certain religion where I was like going to hell. So, I must be a bad person kind of perspective. So, we're all worthy. Psychologically, spiritually, we're all worthy of goodness (M6).

*Accepting of God's gift of forgiveness through faith.*

Protestant participants indicate that to identify as a Christian, they have become forgivable by receiving Jesus as their savior through forgiveness, recognizing that they have been justified through faith in God, and thus have become, "born again," or hold a new identity in Christ. For example, "Jesus earned my forgiveness and gives it to me as a gift through faith" (M1). Salvation through God's grace and faithfulness with God appears to be a strong theme among protestants.

Grace, the Bible says God is- grace is a powerful force. By grace we've been saved through faith. Grace is not this mamby pamby thing. It's the power of God working. There's a verse that says, God has given us the grace to say no to sin. And so, I think at some point, I think I started to think of grace is just kind of this la-di-da and it's not. It's a powerful driving force part of God's character (E6).

*Accepting of God's gift of forgiveness through the Sacrament of Confession.*

Catholic participants express that faith alone is not sufficient to being forgivable, rather it is necessary to confess and repent of sins prior to receiving God's forgiveness.

When Protestants say, well we can just talk to God directly. Well that that is true. You can confess your sins directly, but you as a Catholic have the benefit of talking to a human who is going to help you in a human way. So, God gives us the priest in confession to help us along... going to confession meant God forgave (C6).

While the majority of Catholic participants indicate that there is an opportunity to receive God's forgiveness through the Sacrament of Confession with the priest, one participant reports that humanity cannot be forgiven unless one goes through the Sacrament of Confession, "We can't assume we are forgiven. Getting right with God only comes through the Sacrament of Confession" (C5).

*Willingly surrendering our life to God.*

As a Christian, participants indicate that it is necessary to willingly surrender their life to God and continue to be transformed, or sanctified, which means that Christians are willing to receive forgiveness throughout their lifetime.

So, to become a Christian, you have to believe that Jesus was your sin substitute. You have to repent of that sin that required Jesus' death. And, follow him with your life. So, at some point in time, there's a beginning point to becoming a Christian where you repent and believe, but it's not like a one-time transaction where you obtain fire insurance or something and it's like a get out of hell free card that day. So, becoming a Christian isn't just a one-time thing. It's you are becoming transformed and becoming more like Jesus the image of the one who saved you throughout the course of your life. That doesn't mean that it's always an upward trajectory, but the overall trajectory of your life is one of becoming more like Jesus (E3).

Participants share they also experience meaning through living faithfully with God by following Him and engaging in ways that He has asked of them.

I know Jesus's words on the cross, Father forgive them, and I believe in the Bible and I believe that that's what God wants. And I believe that God created me, and I believe that I owe everything in my life to him. Therefore, what he says goes and then a little bit beyond (C2).

*Intentionality in seeking forgiveness from God and others.*

Participants indicate that in being a Christian, they incorporate forgiveness into their identity by being forgivable through intentionally seeking forgiveness from God.

It's pretty much the same process and saying, hey, I messed up God, I need forgiveness from you. I think there's a difference in forgiveness from God. I think the first, everybody needs to ask for forgiveness from their sins, and when you continue to ask for forgiveness from the wrong that you've done against Him are different from the forgiveness for salvation. It should, asking forgiveness for, hey, I am not living according to the way that I've committed to live, the way that you called me to (M4).

Further, they also consistently and intentionally seek forgiveness from others through continuously engaging in the self-awareness process in order to gain insight into their wrongdoing toward others. Through this, they are able to demonstrate humility and actively engage in loving others and repairing relationships, which is commanded of Christians.

I believe a follower of Christ should immediately seek forgiveness from somebody else. Going to them and humbly asking for their forgiveness. And I think it takes a level of maturity to do that, but I think we're called to do that (E4).

### **Christians as individuals are forgivers.**

*Being a follower/disciple of Jesus.*

Participants state that Christians are also marked by the way they behave specifically in forgiving. Participants recognize that because Jesus was the ultimate forgiver, they express choosing to follow Jesus' teachings and parables on forgiveness, as well as imitating the ways in which Jesus lived.

I think being a Christian is trying to follow Christ's example in Christ's life. And he was the ultimate forgiver and my opinion, I mean, as he went to the cross, he said forgive them for they know not what they do. And I think that that's the model for us all to strive for (M5).

Being a Christian means you're a follower of Jesus Christ. Much of the gospels record that He called people to be his disciples and to follow him and to understand who he was, believe in who he was. A Christian, is a follower - a disciple. Historically, in the first century they were called imitators, which was a derogatory word it appears, and yet that's the word that over the years has become accepted and understood as being a Christian (E5).

*Aspiring to embody the image of God's character.*

Having the role of being a forgiver, participants not only describe a behavioral way of following Jesus, though of also taking on God's character through desiring to be more like God or Jesus and becoming increasingly more like God or Jesus throughout the course of their life.

God forgives because of his character. So, we can forgive because of the character of God, because of his love and we're called to be like God. We're not called to be God - no - we're called to be like him though and allow his, we're image bearers and so we can forgive, not because anyone deserves it. Neither do we (E6).

The more we can forgive other people, the more we are able to be Christ like, and that's the goal of being a practicing Christian is to try to emulate the teachings of Christ and the things that he wanted us to do and to be (M5).

*Believing God transforms and does a work in me.*

Participants express that they are forgivers because God gave them the Holy Spirit as a helper to forgive. Specifically, they share that since they have the Holy Spirit, God is with them in the forgiveness process.

I know He's my internal compass. I mean, I know we have our conscious, but I truly believe that the spirit of God dwells in me and he does nudge me in a way... I think he makes it clear to me that I need to forgive. Like brings, raises that awareness of the need and then also graces me with the ability to forgive (E6).

“He [God] gives you the gifts of the Holy Spirit, which is God living in you which empowers you to obey with an ability that you never had before... that grace that is given to me by means of the spirit moving inside of me gives me the ability and the power to move towards forgiveness and righting a wrong because without that, my motive would be screwed up. My motives with without the spirit of God would be how do I protect myself? How do I make this person feel the same pain that I'm feeling? How do I seek their vengeance? And then once I get that, once I feel like they've paid enough, then I can

forgive them because we're even. So, because the spirit of God lives in me like he can, he helped move me to that, to the right way of forgiving” (E3).

As a result of God working through them, they report having a new ability to relate to others, that of wisdom and grace.

*Intentionality about preserving and developing in our faith and forgiving.*

When participants were asked about whether their forgiving could fade over time, most participants indicated acknowledged that if not practiced consistently and intentionally, forgiving could indeed regress.

I believe that if I don't practice it regularly, I think it would fade and not become consistent in my life... I think it goes back to my time with the Lord through scripture and through prayer. I think is reflecting on the time in my life that I have forgiven and been forgiven, and just remembering the blessings that it has brought, that forgiveness has brought to me (M4).

However, all participants indicated they can maintain or develop in their faith and forgiving to some capacity, which would prevent their forgiveness fitness from fading over time.

From the spiritual perspective, it talks about walking in the Spirit, Spirit of Christ, from if I go back to the fact, if one word to take their focus, and put their focus purely on themselves, that's when there's more of a spirit of maybe not forgiving as opposed to it's not about me, it's about others, and it's about Christ, and I think that's what preserves that spirit of forgiveness and keeps it from fading away. It's that that perspective, and that perspective is change for when it comes to Christ as a believer, but the perspective is I think when that gets, for a believer when that gets barged, their whole focus on life changes and they're no longer the person that they should be and acting the way they should be (E5).

### **Christians are a Forgiving Community**

*Forgiveness is a way of life.*

Nearly all participants indicated that being a forgiver and extending forgiveness is a way of life for them. For example, “I try to, let the Christian example of forgiveness be a part of how I live my everyday life” (M6). “It is forgiveness that we experienced that brings us into life with

Christ. So, forgiveness is an active way of life for me, both in the receiving of it and in the giving of it” (E2).

[Forgiveness is] definitely a way of life. It is life. I don't think you can participate in fallen humanity without it being a way of life... And so, it's a committed way of life. It's a way of life that you just can't say, well, I arrived. It's way of life that you're always going to have to work on. And that, I think just in our discussion, you can see it grows as your faith life grows (C3).

One participant indicates forgiveness is not a way of life for them because they believe they need to continue to improve in their forgiving despite them engaging in the forgiveness process consistently.

*Living in unity with others.*

Participants emphasize that as Christians, forgiving is important in order to live in unity and community with others.

Communities can't function if people don't forgive each other. You know, can you imagine a family that works when people don't forgive each other? It just doesn't work. You know, and it's the same thing with community. Imagine any relationship where people don't forgive each other? It's not going to last very long. So, I think that the is function is sustainable human relationships, a function I think forgiveness shares (E7).

I think we do need to know that we are forgiven and that we're loved. I do think that's what the church can offer. That's what a life of faith offers, and I think that as you experience that as people really live that, and I think that's what the Christian community is about. It's about people coming together as a community and saying, we're going to live in that image and that's going to make a difference in the world and that's going to change things and that will open up these issues that are going to be counter cultural to how other things in the world work (C3).

Some also describe the vitality of forgiving for the purpose of sustaining relationships within the church, or “body of Christ.”

*Working toward a common goal.*

Participants additionally describe forgiving as a communal goal; specifically, some indicate it as a universal experience among Christians that can even be practiced within

community. “[Forgiveness is] practiced in community. I mean a faith group is basically a practice of community and a group” (M3).

We are better when we work together than when we cluster into our little groups and then try to try to compete for power. That's not a great a great system, I mean it's a necessary system, but it's because resources are scarce, but if we can work together, we should (E7).

I mean it's to be a community. To be a part of a loving community in which we can all to come together peacefully. We can all meet together at some point... we can be all together, we can love one another, we can all talk, work towards the right things towards social justice, towards everything. So, it's a really strong part of [forgiving] (C1).

One participant shares that Christians as a group could be considered as forgiveness activists in order to combat injustice in and outside of the church, much like social justice advocates.

### **Christians are teachers of forgiveness.**

Lastly, participants state that they have incorporated forgiveness as a way of life or identity by influencing the world through being teachers of forgiveness. Participants described two forms of teaching.

#### *Speaking on or sharing forgiveness with others.*

One form of teaching includes educating and/or sharing forgiveness with others, including speaking the message of God’s forgiveness to other Christians and the world at large.

For the mass of humanity, those who do not know Christ or do not understand forgiveness are confused when they see it... To have that mentality of don't return the evil with evil, but returning it with good, show that forgiveness, be kind, is something that the world even till today does not grasp fully. And so, to them to hear forgiveness and to see forgiveness is a benefit because they're seeing something different and so there's an opportunity there to share why that's different, but they're also getting a glimpse into what it means to have a relationship with God (E2).

#### *Modeling forgiveness to others.*

Another way of teaching forgiveness includes modeling forgiveness to others; for example, “I want to be a better leader as a disciple of God and doing the right thing, and I believe



a lot of it is our example that we set for people... and if I can help even just one person with that, or my experience, that would make me feel very happy” (C5) and, “It’s my duty in relationship to younger Christians to be the model. It’s not that I consciously try to be a model, it just becomes part of your life” (E1).

### **Emergent Theory of Christian Forgiveness**

As consistent with Corbin and Strauss’ (2014) grounded theory process of forming an emergent theory based on relationships between the themes derived from the data, the following model addresses the central phenomenon, causal conditions, action strategies, contextual influences, intervening conditions, and consequences of Christian forgiveness. The components of the model as well as the proposed relationships between the constructs that reflect the research questions of this project will be discussed.

Results show that Christians report the causal condition, purpose, and main influence of forgiveness to be rooted in their Christian faith - that God is the creator and initiator of forgiveness, and that their faith determines what forgiveness is and how to engage in it. Participants perceive the central phenomenon of forgiveness to be a process, a choice, universal, an act of God, an antidote to sin, a virtue, transcendent, a pathway to freedom; to begin with an injury, align with justice, overcome or release unwanted thoughts, emotions, or behaviors, as well as give an unmerited gift of forgiveness and compassion.

The main action strategies used by Christians involve uncovering barriers to forgiving or receiving forgiveness, deciding on forgiveness, working on forgiving or seeking forgiveness, and experiencing transformation. Techniques Christians used to work on forgiving or repenting include connecting to God, self, supportive others, the offender, and the offende. They differ in their beliefs to whether forgiveness includes forgetting or reconciliation, though the majority

perceives forgiveness to not include forgetting. Participants describe reconciliation to include two parts, specifically seeking restorative justice and confronting the offender, as well as either releasing or renewing the relationship. The majority of participants stated confronting the offender is a part of the Christian forgiveness process, and a minority believed that renewing the relationship would be an essential part of the process.

Participants shared that their developmental context of forgiveness, as well as intervening condition of motivation to forgive impacted and assisted in their forgiveness process. Specifically, their early, external experiences of Christian forgiveness pedagogy and conditioning, to later, internal experiences of an authentic, personal faith and sanctification influences intentionality and maturity as they move through the forgiveness and repentance processes. Further, motivations of a stronger relationship with God, self, and others impact their ability to engage in the forgiveness process.

Following participants' engagement in the extending or receiving forgiveness process, Christians address achieving a stronger self-concept as Christian and forgiver, as well as character transformation. Specifically, it strengthens their sense of self as being forgiven, forgivable, forgivers, a part of a forgiving community, and teachers or models of forgiveness. Further it leads to increased joy, peace, benevolence, compassion, unity, faithfulness, temperance, courage, justice, honor, hope, grace, humility, wisdom, resilience, transcendence of suffering, authenticity, gratitude, as well as mind and body wellness.

### *Conclusion*

The purpose of this chapter was to report findings that specifically address the research questions of how Christian forgiveness is defined, motivations for forgiveness, how faith influences forgiveness perceptions and behaviors, the forgiveness process, the development of

forgiveness across the age span, as well as how forgiveness is incorporated into Christian's identity and self-concept. The following chapter will offer an emergent theory based on the findings, a comparison of the findings addressed in this chapter to the existing research in the field, summary of the study, conclusions, and recommendations.

## Chapter V

### Discussion

The goal of the current investigation was to use Corbin and Strauss's (2014) evolved grounded theory methodology in order to examine the experiences of Christians in regard to their forgiving beliefs, practices, development, and identity. Analysis of the findings resulted in themes and an emerging theory of Christian forgiveness that answers the relevant research questions. In this chapter, a discussion of how the components of the emergent theory (i.e., themes and subthemes) relate to research that has been previously conducted will be included. Following, limitations of the study and project implications for treatment and future research, as well as summary and conclusions of the study are discussed.

#### I. Forgiveness Defined

One of the research questions that guided this project included, "What is forgiveness according to Christians?" As indicated, the following themes were found,

Table 1. How Christians Define Forgiveness Themes
· Forgiveness is a process
· Forgiveness is a choice
· Forgiveness is universal
· Forgiveness is an act of God
· Forgiveness is an antidote to sin
· Forgiveness is a virtue
· Forgiveness begins with an injury
· Forgiveness aligns with the value of justice
· Forgiveness is giving an unmerited gift
· Forgiveness is an act of releasing and overcoming unwanted thoughts, emotions, or Behaviors

· Forgiveness is transcendent
· Forgiveness is a pathway to freedom

Table 2. Differences in Forgiveness Definitions Among Christians
· Forgiveness is not forgetting [11: C (5), M (3), E (3)] verses Forgiveness is forgetting [4: C (1), M (1), E (2)]
· Reconciliation is an aspirational step in forgiveness [12: C (3), M (4), E (5)] versus Reconciliation is a necessary step in forgiveness [9: C (4), M (3), E (2)]

The themes of forgiveness being a process, a choice, a virtue, a universal practice, a gift, transcendent, a way to emotional freedom, and an act of overcoming or releasing unwanted thoughts, emotions, or behaviors is in line with previous studies (Kim & Enright, 2016; Worthington, 2006; Enright, 2001; Worthington, 2001; Enright, Gassin, & Wu, 1992; Enright & Human Development Study Group, 1991; North, 1987). Forgiveness follows an injury or hurt from another, which may be psychological, emotional, physical, or moral, giving evidence for “Forgiveness Begins with an Injury” (Enright, 2001; Smedes, 1984). According to Enright et al., (1991) forgiveness is possible when a person first confronts the moral injury, connects to their subsequent anger, and has a sense of justice and fairness, which coincides with “Forgiveness Aligns with the Value of Justice.” Further, the themes “Forgiveness is an Act of God” and “Forgiveness is an Antidote to Sin,” are congruent with Kim and Enright’s (2014) findings that “The Perfect God Forgives Perfectly” and “God’s Forgiveness Involves Dealing with Human Sins,” despite this study’s theme of forgiveness being a resolution to sin generalizing to interpersonal forgiveness, intrapersonal forgiveness, and divine forgiveness.

The literature demonstrates polarized beliefs surrounding reconciliation being a necessary step in the forgiveness process; for example, Frise and McMinn (2010) found that psychologists tend to perceive forgiveness and reconciliation as separate processes, whereas theologians

typically consider forgiveness and reconciliation to be an integrated process. However, Kim and Enright (2014) found theology students hold the perception that “Reconciliation Might Not Occur in Human Forgiveness but God Wants to Reconcile with Sinners.” Likewise, the majority of our participants described forgiveness and reconciliation to be an integrated process, though shared reconciliation may not be possible for a variety of reasons (e.g., abuse, communication barriers, death, etc.) so it is not a necessary step to forgiving. However, the majority of participants believe reconciliation is ideal. Research indicates that to truly reconcile, the offende must be able to trust the offender, and the offender must be able to commit to changing (Smedes, 1984), which aligns with most of our participants perceptions. In regard to forgiving and forgetting, researchers tend to hold the position that forgiving is not forgetting, because a deep offense would be difficult to remove from consciousness, and in some cases is dangerous and places individuals at increased risk for further victimization (Enright, 2001; Smedes, 1984). This is congruent with the majority of our participant’s beliefs.

**II) A. Motivations for Forgiveness**

The following themes were found to address the second question, “Why do Christians forgive?” For the first part of why Christians forgive, the following themes and subthemes were found.

Table 3. Why Christians Forgive: Motivations for Forgiveness Themes/ <i>Subthemes</i>	
· Relationship with God	
	<i>Gratitude of being forgiven by God through Jesus; A sense of moral or ethical obligation; Peace in my relationship with God</i>
· Relationship with self	
	<i>Congruence between my faith values and behaviors; Comfort; Meeting my existential needs</i>
· Relationship with others	

The theme “Relationship with God,” is congruent with Rye and McCabe’s (2014) findings that Lutheran Christians forgive because of their “Relationship with God,” as well as Kidwell, Wade, and Blaedel’s (2012) theme “To Draw Closer to God.” The subtheme of “Gratitude of Being Forgiven by God through Jesus,” aligns with Meek and McMinn’s (1997) finding that one motivation for forgiveness according to Evangelical Christians includes having gratitude of being forgiven and Kidwell, Wade, and Blaedel’s (2012) theme of “Forgive Others Because God Forgives Us.” The theme “Relationship with Others,” and subthemes “A Sense of Moral or Ethical Obligation,” “Congruence Between my Faith Values and Behaviors,” “Comfort,” are similar to Kidwell, Wade, and Blaedel’s (2012) theme “To be Myself/Free to be Who I Am” and McMinn et al.’s (1999) forgiveness motivation theme “Relational,” and subthemes “Duty,” “Christian Beliefs” and “Comfort,” respectively. Further, Gassin and Enright (1995b) identified that Christians forgive based upon their existential search for meaning in suffering, affirming the subtheme, “Meeting my Existential Needs,” as well as stated that overall, Christians forgive for themselves, as well as for their relationship with God and others.

## **II) B. The Degree to which Christian’s Faith Beliefs Influence their Forgiving Perceptions and Behaviors**

To answer the second aspect of the question to why Christians forgive, “To what degree does a Christian’s faith beliefs influence their forgiving perceptions and behaviors? [II) B. The Degree Christian’s Faith Beliefs Influence Their Forgiving Perceptions and Behaviors],” the following was found:

Table 4. Why Christians Forgive: The degree to which Christian’s Faith Beliefs Influence their Forgiving Perceptions and Behaviors Themes

· God is the author and initiator of forgiveness
· My Christian faith helps me understand what forgiveness is and how to engage in it
· I would not forgive if it were not for my faith

These themes align with scholars’ (Davis, Worthington, Hook, & Hill, 2013; McMinn et al., 2008; Rye, 2005; McMinn, Meek, Dominguez, Ryan, & Novotny, 1999; Gassin & Enright, 1995b) conceptualizations that Christians forgive based upon their Christian worldview, and that individuals overall are more motivated to live congruently with their beliefs and values, as well as draw from their faith when forgiving. While Kidwell, Wade, and Blaedel (2012) found both secular and religious elements to impact religious people’s beliefs, all of our participants explicitly stated they forgive because of their religious, Biblical beliefs. In the forgiveness process, some stated they integrate experiences like receiving counseling and reading forgiveness books as supplementary to the Bible in their extending or receiving of forgiving, though because of the significant overlap in religious and secular elements, the focus of the analysis was to explicitly name those experiences rather than categorize them into religious or secular. These results should be considered when considering how central faith is to the forgiveness process for Christians.

### III. The Forgiveness Process

For the third research question, “What is the process Christians use to forgive (III. Forgiveness Process),” the following themes and subthemes were found,

Table 5. The Christian Forgiveness Process Themes/*Subthemes*

I. Uncovering Barriers to Forgiving or Receiving Forgiveness
· Address maladaptive coping strategies to the pain



*Denying the hurt; Avoidance in dealing with the problem; Displacing unwanted emotions onto others; Withdrawal and isolation from God, self, and others; Ruminating or obsessing about the injury and/or the offender; Pseudoforgiving*

- Address unforgiving attitudes

*Holding onto the hurt; The perceived nature of the offense is deemed unforgiveable; Being vengefully-prone*

- Address character struggles

*Being prideful; Being help-resistant*

- Address unrealistic expectations

*Expecting an apology and/or forgiveness from others; Wanting to control or fix the injury and/or offender*

- Address misunderstandings of forgiveness

## II. Deciding on Forgiveness

- Receive conviction to forgive or seek forgiveness
- Recognize consequences of unforgiveness or unrepentance
- Know that I will not be alone
- Experience a willingness or desire to extend and/or receive forgiveness
- Learn about forgiveness

## III. Working on Forgiving and/or Repenting

- Connect to God

*Recognize the need for God's help; Recognize and accept God's forgiveness; Reconcile to God; Pray to God; Trust God's sovereignty over my situation; Learn from Jesus; Read Biblical scripture; Engage in contemplation or meditation; Understand the meaning of suffering*

- Connect to self

*Uncover the guilt and hurt; Connect to my own fallibility; Empathize with myself; Give myself the gift of forgiveness; Renew my relationship with myself*

- Connect to supportive others

*Seek interpersonal support from my immediate support system; Seek interpersonal support from the church/my faith community; Attend therapy; Go through the Sacrament of Reconciliation with the priest (For Catholics); Pray to Mary, the saints, and/or angels (For Catholics)*

- Connect to offender

<i>Uncover the anger and hurt; Accept the pain; Empathize with my offender; Have compassion for my offender; Give the offender the gift of forgiveness; Potentially confront my offender; Potentially renew the relationship with my offender; Potentially release the relationship with my offender</i>
· Connect to offende
<i>Confront my offende; Apologize to my offende; Seek and accept forgiveness from my offende if given</i>
IV. Experiencing Transformation
· Maturation of forgiveness
<i>Holding onto forgiveness experiences; The forgiveness process takes less time, effort, and mental energy</i>
· Deepening of Christian character
<i>Peace; Joyfulness; Love; Compassion; Faithfulness; Temperance; Courage; Righteous Justice; Honor; Hope; Grace; Humility; Wisdom; Gratitude; Authenticity</i>
· Cultivation of resiliency
<i>Confidence and competence over painful events; Increased sense of empowerment and freedom; Increased intrapersonal, interpersonal, and spiritual connection; Improved mind and body wellness</i>

These results are comparable to Enright’s (2001) four-phase forgiveness process model of the “Uncovering Phase,” the “Decision Phase,” the “Work Phase,” and the “Deepening Phase.” Subthemes under the “Uncovering Barriers to Forgiving or Receiving Forgiveness” phase such as “Avoidance in Dealing with the Problem” and “Ruminating or Obsessing about the Injury and/or the Offender” align with Enright’s (2001) steps of “How Have you Avoided Dealing with Anger,” and “Have you Been Obsessed About the Injury or the Offender?” The subthemes “Displacing Unwanted Emotions onto Others,” “Withdrawal and Isolation from God, Self, and Others,” “Holding onto the Hurt,” “The Perceived Nature of the Offense is Deemed Unforgiveable,” and “Being Vengefully-Prone,” coincide with research findings that the severity of the offense, unwanted emotions like anger and resentment, and unforgiveness make the

process of working on forgiving challenging (Wade, Hoyt, Kidwell, & Worthington, 2014; Browne, 2009; Enright, 2001; Worthington, 2001).

Enright et al. (1991) states that one psychological variable that people engage in when forgiving includes an examination of psychological defenses. One of these barriers to forgiving includes the problem of pseudo-forgiveness, in which the offende uses defense mechanisms such as denial, reaction formation, or projection in regard to their pain, while falsely believing they have forgiven when, in reality, they have not (Enright & Zell, 1989; Cunningham, 1985; Hunter, 1978). The subtheme of “Character Issues” validates research by Mullet, Neto, and Rivière (2005) that those who are prone to anger and resentment, rumination, emotional sensitivity, narcissism, hostility, and trusting others have more barriers to forgiving than those who have traits like agreeableness, emotional stability, and spirituality, which is emphasized by McCullough (2001). Further, the theme “Unrealistic Expectations” is described under Worthington’s (2013) self-forgiveness model subtheme of “Confront Unrealistic Expectations or Assumptions.”

In this study’s “Deciding on Forgiveness” phase, the themes “Recognizing Consequences of Unforgiveness or Unrepentance” and “Willingness or Desire to Engage in the Forgiveness or Repentance Process” parallel those of Enright’s (2001) “Decide that What You Have Been Doing Hasn’t Worked” and “Be Willing to Begin the Forgiveness Process.” The theme “Knowing that I Will Not Be Alone” is similar to that of Enright’s “Discover that You are Not Alone;” however, this theme is found in Enright’s “Discover Phase,” following working through forgiveness, suggesting that participants in our study expressed the need for support from God and others prior to working on extending or receiving forgiveness. One other subtheme that emerged from this study included “Learning About Forgiveness” prior to working on extending

or receiving forgiveness, which is validated by former research findings that Christians are more likely to forgive when they receive education on forgiveness (Greer, Worthington, Lin, Lavenlock, & Griffin, 2014; Lampton, Oliver, Worthington, & Berry, 2005; Jackson & Thurston, 1999).

Within the “Working on Forgiving or Seeking Forgiveness” theme, the subthemes under “Connect to God,” such as “Pray to God,” “Trust God’s Sovereignty,” “Learn from Jesus,” “Read Biblical Scripture,” “Engage in Contemplation or Meditation,” align with previous research that an individual’s relationship and dedication to God, prayer and asking God for help, as well as reading sacred texts are important elements in working through forgiveness for Christians and/or people of faith (Rockenbach, Vail, Malpass, & Small, 2014; Wade & Blaedel, 2012; Davis, Hook, Van Tongeren, Gartner, & Worthington, 2012; McMinn et al., 2008; Worthington, Sandage, & Berry, 2000; and, McMinn, Meek, Dominguez, Ryan, & Novotny, 1999). The subthemes “Recognize and Accept God’s Forgiveness” and “Understand the Meaning of Suffering” align with Enright’s (2001) “Discover Your Need for Forgiveness” and “Discover the Meaning of Suffering,” which is part of the “Discovery Phase,” as well as “Receive God’s Forgiveness” in Worthington’s self-forgiveness model (2013).

Under “Connecting to Self,” subthemes of “Uncovering the Guilt and Hurt,” “Empathizing with Myself,” and “Giving Myself the Gift of Forgiveness,” align with Worthington’s (2013) self-forgiveness model steps of “Recall the Hurt,” “Empathize,” and “Give the Altruistic Gift of Forgiveness,” respectively. Further, self-forgiveness, especially “Uncovering the Guilt and Hurt,” was found to align with remitting a sense of guilt as a result of perceived forgiveness from God and others (Hall & Ficham, 2005; McConnell & Dixon, 2012), evidencing the process of forgiveness may include multiple forgiveness pathways occurring

simultaneously. Further, both themes “Connecting to My Own Fallibility,” and “Renewing my Relationship with Myself,” are similar to Worthington’s steps of “Rebuild Self-Acceptance” and “Resolve to Live Virtuously;” Meek and McMinn’s (1997) findings that recognizing human fallibility and depravity on a universal and individual level is an important part to the forgiving process; as well as, the theme of “Self-Reflection” found by Rockenbach, Vail, Malpass, and Small (2014).

The subthemes of “Connecting to Helpful Others,” “Seeking Interpersonal Support from the Church,” “Going through the Sacrament of Reconciliation with the Priest,” and “Seeking Professional Support” coincide with themes “Consulting a Religious Leader,” “Support of Religious Community” and “Attend Therapy” found by Kidwell, Wade, and Blaedel (2012). Additionally, Greer (2011) found that Christians who had a stronger sense of belonging to their church were more likely to move through the forgiveness process.

In “Connecting to Other,” the subtheme “Forgiving Others - Uncovering the Anger and Hurt” and “Forgiving Others - Accepting the Pain” coincide with themes in previous research such as “Uncovering your Anger” and “Accept the Pain” by Enright (2001). Subthemes of “Empathizing with my Offender,” “Having Compassion for my Offender,” and “Giving the Offender the Gift of Forgiveness” coincide with Enright’s (2001) “Work Toward Understanding,” “Work Toward Compassion,” and “Give the Offender the Gift of Forgiveness;” Worthington’s (2001) steps of “Empathize,” and “Altruistic Gift of Forgiveness;” as well as, “Developing Empathy Towards my Offender,” and “Focusing on Positive Qualities of my Offender,” found by Kidwell, Wade, and Blaedel (2012). While “Empathizing with my Offender” and “Having Compassion for my Offender” appear to be analogous, researchers also distinguish the two exercises, highlighting that forgiveness includes feeling the other’s pain and

also reacting to that pain by a willingness to be vulnerable with the shadow side of humanity, respectively (Enright et al., 1991; Cunningham, 1985). The theme of “Connect to Offendee” is similar to Worthington’s (2013) “Repair Relationships” step in his self-forgiveness model. Subthemes of “Confronting my Offendee,” “Repenting to my Offendee,” and “Seeking and Accepting Forgiveness from my Offendee” parallel those of “Connect to Ones Who You Offended,” “Repent for Offenses,” and “Ask for Forgiveness.”

Lastly, the discovered theme of “Transformation” aligns with previous research, despite former process models not explicitly dedicating a phase to describe changes or transformations made as a result of extending or receiving forgiveness. For example, Kidwell, Wade, and Blaedel (2012) found that forgiveness leads “Good/Growth (Religious in Nature) Arising from Offense.” Additionally, Worthington (2006) and Enright (2001) indicate that by going through the forgiveness process, there is a change from negative emotions (e.g., anger, resentment, hatred, hostility, fear) to positive emotions (e.g., love, compassion, empathy, sympathy), which would align with the emerging themes like “Benevolence,” “Compassion,” and “Grace.”

Researchers have also found forgiveness can lead to greater improvements in forgiveness; remission of mental health issues like depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress; hope; peace; improvement in relationships with others; decreased rumination and improved control over one’s thoughts; spiritual growth and a sense of meaning in life; a greater sense of empowerment; and, improvements in physical health (see Akhtar, Dolan, & Barlow, 2016; Wade, Hoyt, Kidwell, & Worthington, 2014; Kidwell, Wade, & Blaedel, 2012; Blocher & Wade, 2010; Wade, Worthington, & Haake, 2009; Waltman, Russell, Coyle, Enright, Jolter, & Swoboda, 2009; Loudon-Gerber, Duffey, Dizinno, Haberstroh, & Karcher, 2008; Enright, 2001; Freedman & Enright, 1996; Reed & Enright, 2006; Lin & Enright, 1998; Coyle, Enright, &

Kendall, 1997; and, Al-Mabuk, Enright, & Cardis, 1995), which offers validation for the study's emerging themes like "Forgiveness Process takes Less Time, Effort, and Mental Energy," "Peace," "Faithfulness," "Joyfulness," "Temperance," "Hope," "Resilience," "Transcendence of Suffering," "Unity," and "Mind and Body Wellness." Further, the subtheme "Holding on to the Forgiveness Experience" is similar to that of Worthington's (2001) last step in his REACH model, "Hold on to Forgiveness." Researchers indicate that by confronting the wound, accepting the psychological scars, and then holding onto forgiveness until emotional release takes place, true forgiveness is reached (Enright et al., 1991).

There are some differences between the process model identified by participants and that of Enright's (2001) model. Participants identified that the extending and receiving forgiveness are parts of one overall model of forgiveness, and that these parts many times occur simultaneously rather than having distinct interpersonal forgiveness, intrapersonal forgiveness, and seeking forgiveness processes, whereas in Enright's (2001) model exclusively focuses on interpersonal forgiveness and Worthington's (2001) models separate interpersonal forgiveness from intrapersonal forgiveness. Further, the parts of each phase described by the participants are slightly different in comparison to Enright and Worthington's phases. For example, in the "Uncovering Barriers to Forgiving or Receiving Forgiveness," participants described recognizing the nature of the offense and then uncovering barriers to forgiving or receiving forgiveness - recognizing defenses and protective mechanisms they use to cope with the hurt which place a barrier between them and engaging in the extending or receiving forgiveness process. While Enright's (2001) model identifies moving through avoidance, fear, obsessions, hurt, shame, guilt, and anger as steps toward the "Decision Phase" of forgiveness, participants addressed these

underlying emotions more so during the “Working on Forgiving or Seeking Forgiveness” phase, after they have been able to overcome defenses to forgiving or repenting.

In the “Deciding on Forgiveness” phase, participants describe spiritual elements that help them to make a decision toward receiving or extending forgiveness, such as “Receiving Conviction to Forgive or Seek Forgiveness,” which is not described in former forgiveness process models. However, Enright’s notion that a change of heart, conversion, or new insights are required in the decisional phase of forgiveness, as well as Worthington’s (2003) stance that the Holy Spirit forms permanent change in one’s heart during the forgiveness process may have overlapping elements. The next phase, “Working on Forgiving or Repenting,” parallels forgiveness phases and steps found in the literature; however, there are some significant differences between the findings from this study and what is discussed in the literature. In this phase, participants focus heavily on their relationships to God, the self, and others rather than simply engaging in an intrapersonal experience. One glaring difference between the themes that emerged from the study and previous themes found in the literature is that former models do not explicitly incorporate steps to involve others in order to be helped through the forgiving or repenting process, whereas in this study, participants described the importance of “Connecting to Helpful Others.” Further, the emerging subthemes of “Seeking Interpersonal Support From my Immediate Support System” and “Praying to Mary, the Saints, or Angels” are not described in previous literature. Additionally, under the theme “Connecting to my Offender,” the subthemes “Potentially Confronting my Offender,” “Renewing the Relationship with my Offender” and “Potentially Releasing the Relationship with my Offender” are not described in forgiveness models, as they tend to focus on the intrapersonal nature of forgiving, as well as that forgiveness is separate from reconciling.



#### IV. Christian Forgiveness Development

The fourth research question addresses, “How have Christians forgiven across the lifespan and developed in their forgiving perceptions and practices across time?” (IV. Christian Forgiveness Development). To following themes emerged to address this question.

Table 6. Christian Development Across the Lifespan Themes	
Childhood	
	· Faith and forgiveness development in childhood is externally controlled and motivated by parents and church authorities
	· Forgiveness and repentance pedagogy are first introduced at home and/or in Sunday school
	· Children are exposed to and gain an understanding of what it is like to be hurt
	· Children learn to exercise their will to forgive and repent, typically motivated by an obedience and fear of punishment orientation, as well as social conformity
	· Children are eager to practice forgiveness and experience positive emotions from it, despite a limited understanding
Adolescence	
	· Adolescents begin to gain awareness of their internal and external world as it relates to faith, forgiveness, and repentance
	· Development of personal faith and forgiveness typically begins in childhood to young adulthood
Adulthood	
	· Consistent and intentional forgiving typically begins in adulthood
	· Adults have the capacity to be mature forgivers
	· Adults experience a parallel between their faith sanctification and forgiveness maturity
	· Adults find the importance of forgiving unresolved hurts from childhood
	· Adults identify seeking forgiveness or self-forgiveness to be more challenging than forgiving others
	· Adults tend to advocate for the learning and practicing of forgiveness in childhood

These themes appear to be in line with previous literature. Enright et al. (1991) state that children as young as 4 or 5 years-old understand what it is like to be hurt or harmed by another

and might need to forgive, coinciding with the emerging theme, “Children are Exposed to and Gain an Understanding of What it is Like to be Hurt.” Childhood development of forgiveness themes derived from participant responses, such as “Forgiveness and Repentance Pedagogy is First Introduced at Home and/or in Sunday School,” “Faith and Forgiveness Development in Childhood is Externally Controlled and Motivated by Parents and Church Authorities,” and “Children Learn to Exercise their Will to Forgive and Repent, Typically Motivated by an Obedience and Fear of Punishment Orientation, as well as Social Conformity,” are nearly identical to Kohlberg’s (1973) first and second stages of moral development, where morality is externally controlled and individuals have an obedience-punishment orientation and efforts are made to maintain the approval of primary caretakers or authority figures, respectively. Further, the theme “Children are Eager to Practice Forgiveness and Experience Positive Emotions from it, Despite Limited Understanding of It,” may overlap with the focus of Kohlberg’s (1973) first stage, which is primarily focused on the individual attempting to derive the greatest amount of pleasure and least amount of pain from events that they have experienced, as well as his second stage where individuals attempt to satisfy their personal needs through conforming to prescribed rules.

Participants generally did not describe their adolescence years when discussing their forgiving history; however, those who did mention this phase of life described that “Adolescents Begin to Gain Awareness of their Internal and External World as it Relates to Faith, Forgiveness, and Repentance.” While this theme does not fit with any prominent themes in the forgiveness literature due to a lack of research in adolescent forgiveness development, the theme may coincide with Erickson’s (1959) psychosocial development adolescent stage of “Identity versus Confusion” and Piaget’s (1964) cognitive development adolescent to adult stage of “Formal

Operational.” Specifically, at these stages, personal identity, social relationships and abstract reasoning are at the forefront, and adolescents begin to individuate from caregivers and authorities, developing a sense of self and an increasingly complex, personal understanding of their values and morals. Further, “Development of Personal Faith and Forgiveness Typically Begins in Childhood to Young Adulthood,” does not appear to align with any particular findings in the literature, so this theme adds new insights into Christian faith and forgiveness development.

Adults themes of “Consistent and Intentional Forgiving typically Begins in Adulthood,” “Adults have the Capacity to be Mature Forgivers,” and “Adults Experience a Parallel between their Faith Sanctification and Forgiveness Maturity,” align with previous research that forgiveness understanding and maturity develops with age; the more one practices their faith, the more mature they are in their forgiving practices; and sanctification leads to increased forgiveness over time (Kim & Enright, 2016; Davis et al., 2012; Enright et al., 1989). Additionally, as the person intentionally works through forgiveness across time, one can master it, leading to the forgiveness process being initiated sooner and moved through more quickly, as well as the potential to release emotional pain more fully, leading to forgiveness maturity (Enright et al., 1991). The following themes are not described in literature and offer new insights into forgiving for Christian adults: “Adults find the Importance of Forgiving Unresolved Hurts from Childhood,” “Adults Identify Seeking Forgiveness or Self-Forgiveness to be More Challenging than Forgiving Others,” and, “Adults Tend to Advocate for the Learning and Practicing of Forgiveness in Childhood.” However, Enright (2001) discusses the importance of working through previous, childhood hurts one offense at a time, and Lin et al. (2011) identify the importance of beginning forgiveness education in childhood.

## V. Forgiveness as an Identity or Way of Life

Lastly, for the fifth question included, “How have Christians incorporated forgiveness into their identity or way of life?” (V. Forgiveness as an Identity or Way of Life), the following themes and subthemes were discovered:

Table 7. Forgiveness as an Identity or Way of Life Themes/Subthemes	
· Christians are forgiven	
	<i>God forgave us first through Jesus; God calls us to forgive if we want to be forgiven</i>
· Christians are forgivable	
	<i>Recognizing our fallibility as human-beings; Recognizing our inerrant worth; Accepting of God’s gift of forgiveness through faith (for Evangelicals and Mainlines); Accepting of God’s gift of forgiveness through the Sacrament of Confession (for Catholics); Willingly surrendering our life to God; Intentionality in seeking forgiveness from God and others</i>
· Christians as Individuals are Forgivers	
	<i>Being a follower/disciple of Jesus; Aspiring to embody the image of God’s character; Believing God transforms and does a work in me; Intentionality about preserving and developing in our faith and forgiving</i>
· Christians are a Forgiving Community	
	<i>Forgiveness is a way of life; Living in unity with others; Working toward a common goal</i>
· Christians are Teachers of Forgiveness	
	<i>Speaking on or sharing forgiveness with others; Modeling forgiveness to others</i>

Psychological literature on forgiveness and religion/spirituality has prominently focused on the connections between forgiveness and aspects of faith, such as religious commitment and relational spirituality, rather than studying how forgiveness is incorporated into one’s identity in a holistic manner. However, nearly all of the themes are reflective of deep Christian roots reflected in the theological literature surrounding what it means to be a person and a Christian. Thus, many of the emerging themes surrounding forgiveness and Christian identity may be new insights for the psychology field.

Under the theme “Christians are Forgiven,” subthemes of “God Forgave Us First through Jesus,” and “God Calls Us to Forgive if We Want to be Forgiven,” fit with previous findings that Christians believe the source of forgiveness to be God’s grace, that God has forgiven them of their sins, and that God will not forgive them if they do not forgive others (Kim & Enright, 2015; Kidwell, Wade, & Blaedel’s (2012); Exline, 2008; Zackrison, 1992). The theme “Christians are Forgivable” and subthemes “Christians Recognize their Fallibility as a Human-Being” and “Intentionality in Seeking Forgiveness from God and Others” are congruent to findings that Christians recognize their human fallibility and depravity on a universal and individual level, have a grasp on humanity’s unconditional worth, as well as understand the need to both give and receive forgiveness (Meek & McMinn, 1997). Forgiveness is seen as a gift from God that ultimately Christians must accept (Kim & Enright, 2015). While not explicitly named in psychological research, Christians accept God’s forgiveness either through faith, which is the view of our Evangelical and Mainline Protestants participants, or through the sacrament of confession, which our Catholic participants engage in.

For the theme “Christians as Individuals are Forgivers,” the subthemes “Aspiring to Embody the Image of God” and “Being a Follower/Disciple of Jesus,” align with previous research findings that “Human Forgiveness Derives from God” (Kim & Enright, 2014), “To Be like God/Christ” (Kidwell, Wade, & Blaedel, 2012), and “We Must Turn the Other Cheek” (Exline, 2008), are prominent aspects of what it means to be a Christian. While the theme “God Transformed and Does a Work in Me” is not specifically mentioned in previous psychological literature, Worthington (2003) states that God through the Holy Spirit is able to change the hearts of human-beings.

The theme “Christians are a Forgiving Community” and subtheme “Christians are Intentional about Preserving and Developing in their Faith and Forgiving” is evidenced in research showing that Christians tend to practice forgiveness better than others and make it a priority for them (Worthington, 2003). New insights include Christians perceiving forgiveness to be a way of life for them, and that by forgiving, they are living in unity with others and working toward a common goal. Lastly, the theme “Christians are Teachers of Forgiveness,” describing how Christians seek to be a model of forgiveness to others in society, is not specifically mentioned in previous literature, and thus offers new information about Christian’s identity and forgiving.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Despite participants being diverse in age and religious identification, the sample population being predominantly college-educated, white males does affect findings, suggesting that this study is examining a relatively privileged group of Christians. As a result, limitations include the finite diversity in Christian participants in this study. Additionally, due to complications finding a sufficient number of willing participants in the Southeastern Wisconsin area, the researcher adapted the original recruitment strategy of finding a sample directly through church congregation sites to an updated, open recruitment strategy where participants were asked to refer others that may be a good fit to the study. Thus, a few participants from the sample are located in various states, such as Michigan, California, and Colorado. As a result, another limitation includes a lack of homogeneity in the sample’s culture and geographical location.

Further, while Grounded Theory (GT) methods include adapting the interview protocol over time and across participants as necessary to address gaps in findings from previous interviews until saturation is met, some questions, such as those exploring self-forgiveness, were

not asked of those who were interviewed earlier in the data collection process. Further, interviewing 21 participants on five significant, overarching research questions warranted a production of large amounts of data, leading the research team to take copious amounts of time and energy to analyze it.

Finally, the researcher and coders of this study may have introduced and embedded their biases during the analysis process. Specifically, their own beliefs and perceptions may have affected the way in which they derived meaning from the narratives. The use of a GT methodology, strategy of having multiple research assistants to continuously consult and code the data with, validation of results through participant involvement following the analysis process, and verification of the data with previous research assisted in reducing the impact of these biases. Further, having research team members who were diverse in faith/spiritual identity, including outside of the Christian faith, as well as having the researcher consult closely with the research team throughout the process, helped to control for any limitations allowing favorable impressions, preconceived notions, or inappropriate inferences to overshadow the data.

### **Implications for Practice and Future Research**

Regarding implications for training, practice, and research the following is proposed. Most of the emerging themes align with previous definitions of forgiveness, though this study provides new insight into Christian forgiveness. Specifically, the participants included the following in conceptualizing forgiveness: a definition of gospel-centered forgiveness; the integration of forgiveness and reconciliation for Christians; and, ongoing subjective differences in the way forgiveness is perceived, such as forgiveness is or is not forgetting. Thus, in understanding forgiveness as experienced and practiced by Christians, it is important to highlight that Christians center forgiveness on God being the author and originator of forgiveness through

Jesus' forgiving humanity, as well as their personal faithfulness with God. In defining forgiveness within a Christian context, these aspects are critical elements to incorporate.

For motivations to forgive, the emerging themes contributes a clearer and more holistic understanding to various motivations to forgive for Christians; specifically, motivations can be described as psychological, relational, and spiritual in nature. Rather than simply focusing on an intrapersonal or psychological process of forgiving, such as forgiving for one's own well-being or virtue, Christians highlight the importance of forgiveness being a dynamic, relational process of connecting to God, self, and others (i.e., supports, offenders, and offendees). Christian's beliefs about what forgiveness is and what motivates them to forgive align with lay theologian and writer, C. S. Lewis' *On Forgiveness*,

We believe that God forgives us our sins; but also, that He will not do so unless we forgive other people their sins against us. There is no doubt about the second part of this statement. It is in the Lord's Prayer; it was emphatically stated by our Lord. If you don't forgive, you will not be forgiven. No part of His teaching is clearer, and there are no exceptions to it. He doesn't say that we are to forgive other people's sins provided they are not too frightful, or provided there are extenuating circumstances, or anything of that sort. We are to forgive them all, however spiteful, however mean, however often they are repeated. If we don't we shall be forgiven none of our own... To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable, because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you. This is hard. It is perhaps not so hard to forgive a single person great injury. But to forgive the incessant provocations of daily life -- to keep on forgiving the bossy mother-in-law, the bullying husband, the nagging wife, the selfish daughter, the deceitful son -- how can we do it? Only, I think, by remembering where we stand, by meaning our words when we say our prayers each night 'forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those that trespass against us.' We are offered forgiveness on no other terms. To refuse is to refuse God's mercy for ourselves (1949, p. 182-183).

For the forgiveness process, the study's results align with previous secular process models that describe forgiving to be a process, which includes confronting the pain and emotions, uncovering barriers to forgiving, deciding to forgive, working on forgiveness, holding onto forgiveness, and experiencing emotional and psychological freedom. However, previous models focus on the psychology of a person as they go through person-to-person forgiveness.



This study found that Christian forgiveness it is a deeply relational, psychological, and spiritually-oriented process of continuously connecting to self, God, and others. It incorporates various dynamics of forgiveness that may occur simultaneously, including person-to-person and self-forgiveness, as well as seeking forgiveness from others and God. Additionally, there is a strong focus on connecting to supports such as to God and others throughout the process, of which is sparse in the literature. This aligns with Pope Francis' address in Assisi, Italy on October 4, 2013,

We are not alone; we do not walk alone. We are part of the one flock of Christ that walks together... But the most important thing is to walk together by working together, by helping one another, by asking forgiveness, by acknowledging one's mistakes and asking for forgiveness, and also by accepting the apologies of others by forgiving - how important is this!... This is a beautiful secret, and it prevents these painful separations. It is important to walk in unity, without running ahead, without nostalgia for the past (2014, p. 75-76)

Pope Francis expresses the power of being forgiven, forgiving, apologizing, and seeking forgiveness, and how deeply relational the process is. Further, the findings expound on the relationship between forgiveness and reconciliation - including elements of confronting, releasing, or renewing a relationship with the offender. Additionally, a phase dedicated to transformation and redemption emerged that Christians experience as a result of forgiving, so it is developmental in nature, whereas former process models do not have a phase dedicated toward growth.

Regarding the development of forgiveness across the life-span, most of the emerging themes appear to fit with previous literature findings, and these results strengthen existing literature. The study provides new insight into Christian's personal sense of efficacy of forgiving others over seeking forgiveness or forgiving themselves; perceptions that implementing forgiveness pedagogy early in life is vital for character development; arguments

that one's personal faith justification or salvation is a necessary element to being able to fully comprehend and engage in forgiveness; and beliefs that anyone has the capacity to mature in forgiving through intentional practice and sanctification. Additionally, participants advocate for the importance of forgiveness education in order to mature in it across time. While only a small group of researchers have provided their opinions on moral development and forgiveness, this offers new insights into the developmental process of forgiveness based on original data.

Further, forgiveness is part of Christian's identity and way of life. Participants identified forgiveness to be the cornerstone of their faith and life; specifically, it shapes their character into being forgiven and forgivers, sense of belonging of being part of a forgiving community, as well as role of being teachers of forgiveness. This aligns with theologian and Anglican bishop, N. T. Wright's,

The point of 1 Corinthians 13 is that love is not our duty; it is our *destiny*. It is the language Jesus spoke, and we are called to speak it so that we can converse with him. It is the food they eat in God's new world, and we must acquire the taste for it here and now. It is the music God has written for all his creatures to sing, and we are called to learn it and practice it now so as to be ready when the conductor brings down his baton. It is the resurrection life, and the resurrected Jesus calls us to begin living it with him and for him right now. Love is at the very heart of the surprise of hope: people who truly hope as the resurrection encourages us to hope will be people enabled to love in a new way. Conversely, people who are living by this rule of love will be people who are learning more deeply how to hope. This is the message that underlies the gospel command to forgiveness - which is also, of course, the command to remit debts, about which I spoke earlier. But forgiveness is not a moral rule that comes with sanctions attached. God doesn't deal with us on the basis of abstract codes and rules like that. Forgiveness is a way of life, God's way of life, God's way to life; and if you close your heart to forgiveness, why, then you close your heart to forgiveness... Not to forgive is to shut down a faculty in the innermost person, which happens to be the same faculty that can receive God's forgiveness. It also happens to be the same faculty that can experience real joy and real grief. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things (2008, p. 288).

Given the insights gleaned from the study, the following recommendations are made for the clinical, pastoral, and educational settings. It is recommended that former process models be

culturally adapted to fit better with the practices identified by the Christian participants in order to offer culturally-competent counseling services in clinical and pastoral counseling setting. Current forgiveness education manuals may also be tailored in order to address cultural and developmental factors of forgiveness. Further, it is recommended that religious programs, especially in church settings, include developmentally-appropriate workshops and studies on forgiveness that incorporate findings from the study in order to better serve their members of all ages.

For future directions for researchers, further research may be of interest with more diverse samples to gain a more authentic and accurate perspective of Christians. Additionally, extending the study of forgiveness and faith to other religious and/or spiritual groups, such as to Muslims, Jews, and Buddhists, is recommended as there continues to be a gap in the research. Moving forward, it is recommended that researchers continue the study of forgiveness development and maturity, especially for children and adolescents. Further study on adolescent forgiveness development is warranted, considering the information gathered for adolescent development in this study was vague and incomplete. Additionally, seeing as human-beings have the potential to change past memories, conducting research with children and adolescents at each stage of development may prove more reliable than having adults recall their development while growing up. Lastly, while the study did not exclusively study group-to-group forgiveness, further studies may be completed to understand the forgiveness process within this context, as Christians were found to be a forgiving community.

#### Summary and Conclusions

The results presented here reflect the importance of a psycho-social-spiritual and developmental approach to Christian forgiveness; connecting to God, self, and others throughout

the entire forgiveness process; integrating the full spectrum of forgiveness and reconciliation; as well as, incorporating various dynamics of forgiveness that may occur simultaneously, including interpersonal and intrapersonal forgiveness, and seeking forgiveness. This leaves educators, researchers, clinicians, and clergy members with a unique and holistic perspective on forgiveness in which Christians can develop and mature in their forgiving practices, which they consider to be part of their identity and way of life. The participants' narratives suggest that adapting current practices and processes of forgiveness is necessary to honor a multicultural perspective.

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**Appendix A**  
*Comparison of Three Christian Denominations*

	Catholicism	Mainline Protestants	Evangelical Protestants
Denomination	Traditional (since 1 <sup>st</sup> Century)	Non-traditional (Protestant Reformation 16 <sup>th</sup> Century)	Non-traditional (Protestant Reformation 16 <sup>th</sup> Century)
Theology	Tendency towards liberal	Conservative to liberal with tendency toward liberal	Tendency towards conservatism/fundamentalism
Authority	Biblical Scripture  Church Tradition (Popes, bishops, priests, etc.)	History  Biblical Scripture  Personal Conviction	<i>Solo scriptura</i> (Scripture alone; Bible inerrant word of God)
Doctrine/ Practices	Apostles Creed, Nicene Creed  Salvation/membership at child baptism  Communion (Eucharist elements convert to Jesus' body and blood)  Reconciliation/confession of sins through Priest  Atonement of sins through sacrament of penance and confirmation of faith  Evangelize through good works  Predestination to heaven only; purgatory to undergo purification	Various creeds, change based on societal and personal beliefs  Communion open to interpretation or conversion of Eucharist  Reconciliation/confession of sins to God  Practice great commission/evangelism by spreading "Good News"  The fatherhood of God and brotherhood of man	Calvinism/Reformed (TULIP) or Armenianism (FACTS) views  Baptism after faith (public confession of faith)  Communion is symbolic  Reconciliation/ confession of sins to God  Atonement through faith and proclamation; "born again"  Practice great commission/evangelism by spreading "Good News"  God elects certain human beings to heaven through predestination, or Humans beings and God contribute to salvation and entering heaven

(Fahlbusch, E., Lochman, J. M., Mbiti, J., Pelikan, J., & Vischer, L., 2008)

**Appendix B**  
*Recruitment Letter*

Hello,

My name is Sonia Lucci, and I am a graduate student researcher in the Educational Psychology Department at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Professor Thomas Baskin and I are recruiting seven adult Christians from three various Christian denominations (i.e., Catholic, Mainline Protestant, and Evangelical Protestant), for a total of twenty-one participants, to take part in a research study on forgiveness, their experiences of it, and the development of it in Christian's lives.

We are interested in individuals aged 25 and older who are proclaimed believers and followers of God/Jesus Christ; make decisions or engage in practices that signify their Christian worldview (e.g., reading of scripture, baptism, prayer, worship, church membership, etc.); participate in a Christian church community (for at least 6 months); believe forgiveness to be important to them; and, have practiced and continue to be in the process of practicing forgiveness for hurts experienced in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood.

Your participation would involve approximately 1.5 hours of your time. The in-person meeting will take place in a location of your choosing and will be recorded for research purposes. Names will be de-identified to ensure participant confidentiality.

Results from this study will be used to inform the psychology of forgiveness – your participation would contribute great value to the field of psychology and the Christian faith community. Upon completion of the interview, you will be entered into a raffle to win one of two \$50 Amazon gift cards.

If you are interested in participating or would like more information, please contact: Sonia Lucci, [smpinero@uwm.edu](mailto:smpinero@uwm.edu).

Thank you very much for your time!

## **Appendix C**

### *Catholic Participant Screening*

Hello, my name is Sonia Lucci, and I am a graduate student researcher in the Educational Psychology Department at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, conducting a research study under Dr. Thomas Baskin about a study on forgiveness. I see that you have expressed interest in the study. As mentioned in the recruitment letter, we are looking for individuals who meet the criteria that was mentioned in that letter\*. As a researcher, my role is to make sure that potential participants fit the expected category. There are multiple categories - this one is for Christian Catholics. I will conduct a brief screening with you, and then afterwards, Dr. Baskin and myself will decide whether participants meet criteria to engage in the study, and we will be sending out an email following the screening today.

#### *Identity*

1. Can you briefly tell me about yourself?

1a. (If do not state age) What is your age?

1b. (If do not state denomination) Which Christian denomination do you identify with?

#### *Faith Beliefs*

2. Now, I would like to understand what beliefs you hold regarding your faith. I want you to know that in no way am I passing judgement about who or what is correct – I am simply attempting to objectively describe the Catholic faith and discern whether you hold some or all of these beliefs. From my understanding as a psychological researcher, what would differentiate a Christian Catholic are the following beliefs: Being Catholic is a desire of a baptized person to grow into a closer relationship with Jesus Christ. Scripture and the sacraments of initiation (e.g., Baptism, Eucharist, and Confirmation) are pivotal for maturation in grace and holiness. Catholics believe in the Nicene Creed, 12 faith statements.

\*\* Do you agree with these tenets?

#### *Forgiveness*

3. Do you believe forgiveness to be important to you?

4. Have you practiced and continue to be in the process of practicing forgiveness experienced in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood? yes

*Participation*

5. As a Christian Catholic, what decisions, practices, or activities do you engage in?

6. How long have you participated in your church community?

\* Criteria: Individuals aged 25 and older who are proclaimed believers and followers of God/Jesus Christ; make decisions or engage in practices that signify their Christian worldview (e.g., reading of scripture, baptism, prayer, worship, church membership, etc.); participate in a Christian church community (for at least 6 months); believe forgiveness to be important to them; and, have practiced and continue to be in the process of practicing forgiveness for hurts experienced in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood.

\*\*Nicene Creed: I believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible. I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages. God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father; through him all things were made. For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven, and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary and became man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, he suffered death and was buried, and rose again on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets. I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. I confess one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins and I look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen.

**Appendix D**  
*Mainline Protestant Participant Screening*

Hello, my name is Sonia Lucci, and I am a graduate student researcher in the Educational Psychology Department at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, conducting a research study under Dr. Thomas Baskin about a study on forgiveness. I see that you have expressed interest in the study. As mentioned in the recruitment letter, we are looking for individuals who meet the criteria that was mentioned in that letter\*. As a researcher, my role is to make sure that potential participants fit the expected category. There are multiple categories - this one is for Mainline Protestants. I will conduct a brief screening with you, and then afterwards, Dr. Baskin and myself will decide whether participants meet criteria to engage in the study, and we will be sending out an email following the screening today.

*Identity*

1. Can you briefly tell me about yourself?

1a. (If do not state age) What is your age?

1b. (If do not state denomination) Which Christian denomination do you identify with?

*Faith Beliefs*

2. Now, I would like to understand what beliefs you hold regarding your faith. I want you to know that in no way am I passing judgement about who or what is correct – I am simply attempting to objectively describe the Mainline Protestant faith and discern whether you hold some or all of these beliefs. From my understanding as a psychological researcher, what would differentiate a Mainline Protestant are the following: An individual needs to be baptized in some form of religious tradition whose beliefs are grounded in the trinity (father, son, holy spirit), as well as have some form of connection or affiliation with a Mainline Protestant church. Regarding theology, there is flexibility in regard to what beliefs and practices you and others hold. Do you agree with these statements?

*Forgiveness*

3. Do you believe forgiveness to be important to you?



4. Have you practiced and continue to be in the process of practicing forgiveness experienced in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood?

*Participation*

5. As a Mainline Protestant, what decisions, practices, or activities do you engage in?

6. How long have you participated in your church community?

\* Criteria: Individuals aged 25 and older who are proclaimed believers and followers of God/Jesus Christ; make decisions or engage in practices that signify their Christian worldview (e.g., reading of scripture, baptism, prayer, worship, church membership, etc.); participate in a Christian church community (for at least 6 months); believe forgiveness to be important to them; and, have practiced and continue to be in the process of practicing forgiveness for hurts experienced in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood.

## **Appendix E**

### *Evangelical Protestant Participant Screening*

Hello, my name is Sonia Lucci, and I am a graduate student researcher in the Educational Psychology Department at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, conducting a research study under Dr. Thomas Baskin about a study on forgiveness. I see that you have expressed interest in the study. As mentioned in the recruitment letter, we are looking for individuals who meet the criteria that was mentioned in that letter\*. As a researcher, my role is to make sure that potential participants fit the expected category. There are multiple categories - this one is for Evangelical Protestants. I will conduct a brief screening with you, and then afterwards, Dr. Baskin and myself will decide whether participants meet criteria to engage in the study, and we will be sending out an email following the screening today.

#### *Identity*

1. Can you briefly tell me about yourself?

1a. (If do not state age) What is your age?

1b. (If do not state denomination) Which Christian denomination do you identify with?

#### *Faith Beliefs*

2. Now, I would like to understand what beliefs you hold regarding your faith. I want you to know that in no way am I passing judgement about who or what is correct – I am simply attempting to objectively describe the Evangelical faith and discern whether you hold some or all of these beliefs. From my understanding as a psychological researcher, what would differentiate an Evangelical Christian are the following beliefs: Salvation by faith alone (not works); that Jesus is fully God, fully man, and the only way to salvation; that the Bible is the inherent word of God and is the final authority; that Christians have a living faith, dependence, and personal relationship with God; that Christians believe in exclusivity of Jesus for salvation/eternal life; and that, forgiveness is mandated/a moral imperative. Do you agree with these tenets?

#### *Forgiveness*

3. Do you believe forgiveness to be important to you?

4. Have you practiced and continue to be in the process of practicing forgiveness experienced in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood?

*Participation*

5. As a Christian, what decisions, practices, or activities do you engage in?

6. How long have you participated in your church community?

\* Criteria: Individuals aged 25 and older who are proclaimed believers and followers of God/Jesus Christ; make decisions or engage in practices that signify their Christian worldview (e.g., reading of scripture, baptism, prayer, worship, church membership, etc.); participate in a Christian church community (for at least 6 months); believe forgiveness to be important to them; and, have practiced and continue to be in the process of practicing forgiveness for hurts experienced in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood.

**Appendix F**  
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MILWAUKEE  
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY  
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

You have been chosen to participate in an interview for a qualitative research study. Participation in the research study is completely voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time. All interview data will be de-identified after data completion is complete. A University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee graduate student from the Department of Educational Psychology will interview you about your experiences with forgiveness. A sample question is “What has motivated you to forgive people who have hurt you in your life?” This study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board. This interview is expected to take approximately one and a half hours. There are 21 expected participants included in this study. Every effort will be made to protect your identity as a participant in the study. Any identifying information provided will be deidentified. Identifying information will not be provided in any report or publication of this study or its results.

Anticipated benefits:

Benefits to participants include being entered into a raffle with the chance to win one of two \$50 Amazon gift cards. Potential benefits to society include providing the research, clinical, and religious community with a deeper, holistic understanding of Christian forgiveness as expressed by the participants, as well as future treatment and education directions within the psychological study of forgiveness.

Anticipated risks:

Risks to participants are expected to be minimal. Participants may experience some emotional discomfort when discussing times where they were treated unfairly and the process of forgiving those offenses. Participants may terminate interviews at any time for any reason.

After the interview is over, you are welcome to ask questions about the study. Any questions about the research study can be directed to the Principle Investigator:

Dr. Thomas Baskin  
Associate Professor  
University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee  
Enderis Hall  
2400 E. Hartford Ave.  
Milwaukee, WI 53211  
608-215-3292  
[baskin@uwm.edu](mailto:baskin@uwm.edu)

For information regarding the rights of human subjects participating in research, you may also contact the Institutional Review Board at [irbinfo@uwm.edu](mailto:irbinfo@uwm.edu) or 414-229-3182/414-229-3173 or <https://uwm.edu/irb/>

Thank you for your time and participation in this valuable research.

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Participant

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Signature

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Date

## **Appendix G**

### *Final Interview Protocol*

Introduction: The primary purpose of this study is to understand how and why Christians forgive and how that process is influenced by your Christian faith. I want to hear, in your own words, what forgiveness means to you and how your faith has influenced your perceptions and practices of it. Additionally, many times we experience situations where we have been hurt deeply by others, as well as where we have hurt others or ourselves across our life. I am interested in hearing your experiences of dealing with and overcoming these hurts through forgiving across your life, as well as how you have developed in your forgiving over time. Finally, I am interested to hear where you are now, and to what extent you believe you lead a forgiving life.

#### ***Christian Identity***

- Q1. Would you be able to tell me a little about yourself and your faith background?
- Q2. What does being a Christian mean to you?
- Q3. In being a Christian, to what extent have you incorporated forgiveness into your identity or way of life? (Kim & Enright, 2016)
- Q4. How does being a Christian have an impact on your beliefs and practices of forgiving? (Kidwell, Wade & Blaedel, 2012)

#### ***Forgiveness Defined***

- Q5. What do you believe forgiveness to mean? How do you perceive it?
- Q6. Essentially, what is the goal of forgiving? What are you trying to achieve when forgiving?
- Q7. So, are there concepts similar to forgiving, and if so, what are these? How might these concepts differ from forgiveness?

#### ***Forgiveness Across the Life-Span***

- Q8. How often and for how long have you been practicing forgiveness? (Kim & Enright, 2016)
- Q9. What has motivated you to forgive people who have hurt you in your life or yourself? (Kidwell, Wade & Blaedel, 2012)
- Q10. What has helped you most in being able to forgive across your life? (Kidwell, Wade & Blaedel, 2012)
  - Q10a. What role did your faith or beliefs play in helping you resolve hurts across your life?
  - Q10b. What role has God or the Trinity (e.g., father, son, holy spirit) played in your being able to forgive?
- Q11. How would you describe your ability to forgive now versus in the past?
  - Q11a. Do you feel like you have improved in your ability to forgive over time? Why or why not?

#### ***Forgiveness of Others***

- Q12. Reflect about times where people hurt you unfairly in your childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. How would you describe your personal forgiving history across time? (Kim & Enright, 2016)

Q13. Now I want to understand the actions or steps you take from the time you experience a hurt to the point of achieving forgiveness. You may use specific examples.

Q13a. What do you do at first when starting to forgive? Why do you do this? After that what do you do? Why do you do this next? What, then, do you do to forgive? Why? Are there other steps that you take when you forgive?

Q13b. What is the most difficult step for you?

Q13c. What is the most important step for you?

Q13d. Is reconciliation a necessary step to forgiveness? Why or why not?

### ***Self-Forgiveness***

Q14. What does the process of self-forgiveness look like for you?

Q15. Is there a difference between the way you forgive yourself and forgive others or seek forgiveness? How so?

### ***Seeking Forgiveness***

Q16. What does the process of seeking forgiveness look like for you?

Q17. Is there a difference between the way you forgive and seek forgiveness? How so?

### ***Effects of Forgiveness***

Q18. Are there any benefits of forgiving your offender? If so, what are they?

Q18a. What may be the psychological benefits?

Q18b. What may be the relational benefits?

Q18c. What may be the spiritual benefits?

Q19. Are there any benefits for the one who hurt you when you forgive them? Essentially, are there any benefits for yourself when you seek forgiveness? If so, what are these?

Q19a. What may be the psychological benefits?

Q19b. What may be the relational benefits?

Q19c. What may be the spiritual benefits?

Q20. Are there any benefits for you when you forgive yourself? If so, what are these?

Q20a. What may be the psychological benefits?

Q20b. What may be the relational benefits?

Q20c. What may be the spiritual benefits?

Q21. Are there any other benefits to others beyond you and the one who hurt you when you forgive? What are these?

Q21a. What may be the psychological benefits?

Q21b. What may be the relational benefits?

Q21c. What may be the spiritual benefits?

Q22. Since practicing forgiveness of others, what is your general stance toward people who hurt you?

Q22a. How do you generally think toward them?

Q22b. How do you generally feel toward them?

Q22c. How do you generally behave toward them?

Q23. Since practicing self-forgiveness or seeking forgiveness, what is your general stance toward yourself?

Q23a. How do you generally think toward yourself?

Q23b. How do you generally feel toward yourself?

Q23c. How do you generally behave toward yourself?  
Q24. Since practicing forgiveness toward others and self, has that influenced your faith? If so, how? (Kidwell, Wade & Blaedel, 2012; Kim & Enright, 2016)

***Tendency for Leading a Forgiving Life***

Q25. Do you consider forgiving a way of life for you? Why or why not? (Kim & Enright, 2016)  
Q26. Is it possible that forgiving, as important as it is to you, might fade away so that you do not forgive readily and consistently?

Q26a. If so, how can you persevere over the years in keeping forgiveness as a priority for you?

Q26b. What are examples of what will help you to persevere in your forgiving?

Q27. Do you believe there are any areas where you feel the need to develop in your forgiving? Why or why not? (Kim & Enright, 2016)

***Concluding Remarks***

Q28. Is there anything else you would like to share with me? Is there anything I should have asked that I have not touched on?



**Appendix H**  
*Curriculum Vitae*  
**Sonia Marta Pinero Lucci**

**EDUCATION**

- 2020      *Ph.D.*    *Counseling Psychology*  
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee  
Graduate School of Educational Psychology  
School of Education
- 2014      *M.S.*      *Educational Psychology - Community Counseling*  
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee  
Graduate School of Educational Psychology  
School of Education
- 2012      *B.S.*      *Psychology*  
University of Wisconsin-Parkside  
College of Arts and Sciences

**CERTIFICATES**

- 2014                      *Certificate of Trauma Counseling*  
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee  
Graduate School of Educational Psychology
- 2012                      *Certificate of Mental Health*  
University of Wisconsin-Parkside  
College of Arts and Sciences

**LICENSES**

- Present -                      *Licensed Professional Counselor*  
2018                      License Number 7023  
Department of Safety and Professional Services
- 2015 -                      *Substance Abuse Counselor – In Training (Expired; Not Renewed)*  
2014                      License Number 17244  
Department of Safety and Professional Services

## EMPLOYMENT – CLINICAL & COUNSELING

- 2020 - *Postdoctoral Psychology Fellow*  
2019 - *Licensed Professional Counselor*  
2018  
New Life Resources, Inc.  
Waukesha and Kenosha, WI  
Supervisor: Dan Green, Ph.D., Clinical Psychologist  
Christian Integration Outpatient Therapy and Psychological Testing services to children, adolescents, and adults within clinic and partnered church locations; as well as, engage in staffing, supervision, consultation, workshops, and seminars.
- 2020 - *Predoctoral Clinical Psychology Intern*  
2019  
Chicago Area Christian Training Consortium (CACTC) Accredited Internship Program  
Meier Clinics (Corporate Headquarters; Primary Rotation), Wheaton, IL  
Central DuPage Pastoral Counseling Center (Secondary Rotation), Carol Stream, IL  
Program Director: Jessica Marshall, Psy.D., CACTC Director, Clinical Psychologist  
Supervisors: Kelly Marquie, Psy.D., Clinical Psychologist; Lisa Naatz, Psy.D., ABSNP, Clinical Neuropsychologist; Kathleen Hayden, Psy.D., Clinical Psychologist; Patricia Francis, O.P., Psy.D., Clinical Psychologist  
Outpatient/Day Treatment Therapy and Psychological Testing services to children, adolescents, and adults, with special practice focus in Christian integration and working with underserved populations. Provide supervision to practicum students, as well as facilitate consultation and workshops. Engage in staffing, didactics, consultation, and seminars.
- 2019 - *Psychological Assistant and Social Worker*  
2016  
Rogers Behavioral Health  
Day Treatment, Partial Hospitalization, & Residential General MH or Dual Programs  
Child/ Adolescent/ Adult Units  
Kenosha, West-Allis and Brown Deer, WI  
Supervisors: Angela Stebbins, Psy.D., Clinical Psychologist; Nancy Goranson, Ph.D., Clinical Psychologist; and, Kristin Miles, Psy.D., Clinical Psychologist  
*Psychological Assistant:* Conduct psychological evaluations of patients for admission to the programs, collaborate with other staff in the coordination of care, and provide direct patient services (i.e., facilitate process-focused and DBT/behavioral therapy groups, individual therapy sessions, administer intervention outcome research measures, etc.);  
*Social Worker:* Manage a case load; facilitate individual, group, and family therapy; complete social services assessments; coordinate aftercare and follow-up resources; collaborate with other staff in the coordination of care.
- 2016 - *Advanced Behavior Therapist*  
2015  
Sonnenberg Consultants, L.L.C.  
Kenosha, WI
- 2012 - Supervise and train line therapists, as well as provide individual, intensive or post-intensive  
2010 applied behavior analysis (ABA) / play therapies to caseload of 3-5 children with disabilities (e.g., ASD, ADHD) at community clinic and in-home settings.

- 2015      *Student Success Mentor*  
 University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee  
 Milwaukee, WI  
 Counsel/mentor UW-Milwaukee young adult students deemed at-risk in academic, financial, interpersonal, intrapersonal, environmental, and/or other concerns.
- 2013 -      *Behavior Specialist and Interventionist*  
 2012      Easter Seals – Southeast Wisconsin  
 West Allis, WI  
 Supervise and train line therapists, conduct functional behavior analysis (FBA), and/or provide individual, intensive or post-intensive ABA / play therapies to caseload of 15 - 30 children with developmental disabilities (e.g., ASD, ADHD, PDD) at in-home settings.

### **GRADUATE PRACTICUM TRAINING**

- 2018 -      *Doctoral Student Extern, Counseling Psychology*  
 2017      New Life Resources, Inc.  
 Waukesha and Kenosha, WI  
 Supervisor: Dan Green, Ph.D., Clinical Psychologist  
 Private Outpatient Counseling Center multidisciplinary setting receiving training in the integration of counseling and spirituality. Manage a caseload of adolescents, adults, and couples; co-facilitate an adolescent and adult women's trauma group; as well as engage in staffing, supervision, and seminars.
- 2017 -      *Doctoral Student Extern, Counseling Psychology*  
 2016      Psychological Assessment Services, LLC  
 Wauwatosa, WI  
 Supervisors: Amy Gurka, Ph.D., Clinical Psychologist; and, Karyn Gust-Brey, Ph.D., School Psychologist  
 Private Practice setting receiving training in comprehensive psychological testing and risk assessments with diverse, low-income children, adolescents, and adults with a wide range of psychological conditions referred by the community and Wraparound Milwaukee; perform evaluations on and off-site; score measures and write psychological evaluations under psychological supervision; forensic and competency evaluation training.
- 2016 -      *Doctoral Student Extern, Counseling Psychology*  
 2015      Rogers Memorial Hospital / Rogers Behavioral Health  
 Child and Adolescent Inpatient Services  
 West Allis, WI  
 Supervisor: Jody Pahlavan, Psy.D., Clinical Psychologist  
 Private Inpatient Hospital setting receiving training in individual and group counseling with an acute, diverse child and adolescent population; focus on dialectical behavioral therapy (DBT), cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), experiential, and spiritual therapies; specialized training in general mental health (MH), complex trauma, suicidal ideation (SI), self-harm behavior (SH), homicidal ideation (HI), aggression, and at-risk behaviors.

- 2015 *Doctoral Student Extern, Counseling Psychology*  
 Wheaton Franciscan Healthcare  
 Counseling Center, St. Luke's Hospital, and All Saints Hospital Campus'  
 Racine, WI  
 Supervisor: Brandon Markel, Psy.D., Clinical Psychologist  
 Private Hospital Inpatient, Intensive Outpatient, Outpatient, and Medical Center setting receiving training in individual and group counseling with children, adolescent, and adult populations; focus on CBT, DBT, behavioral activation (BA), exposure and response prevention (ERP), and habitual response training (CRT) with adult individuals with anxiety, PTSD, OCD, and mood disorders; psychological testing with children, adolescents, and adults; health psychology training at geriatric and medical rehabilitation units.
- 2015 - *Doctoral Student Extern, Counseling Psychology*  
 2014 Acacia Wellness Center / Acacia Mental Health Clinic  
 Milwaukee, WI  
 Supervisor: Jennifer Lothian, M.D., Psychiatrist  
 Community Counseling Center conducting diagnostic psychiatric evaluations with diverse, low-income adults with dual diagnosis (AODA, general MH/trauma); facilitated IOP substance abuse recovery group using CBT and motivational interviewing (MI).
- 2014 - *Master's Student Extern, Community Counseling*  
 2013 Wheaton Franciscan Healthcare  
 St. Luke's Hospital, Counseling Center, and All Saints Hospital Campus'  
 Racine, WI  
 Supervisor: Paul Goetz, A.P.S.W., Clinical Therapist II  
 Inpatient and Partial Hospitalization, Intensive Outpatient, Child and Adolescent Day Treatment, Outpatient Private Hospital, and Medical Center setting, receiving training in individual, group, and family therapy with diverse children, adolescent, and adult populations; training in CBT, DBT, family systems, and solution-focused (brief) therapy (SFBT); health psychology training at medical rehabilitation unit.
- 2011 *Bachelor's Student Extern, Psychology*  
 Wheaton Franciscan Healthcare – All Saints Hospital  
 Racine, WI  
 Supervisor: Diane Mosnik, Ph.D., Clinical Neuropsychologist  
 Medical Center externship shadowing neuropsychological testing with children, adolescents, and adults.

## **EMPLOYMENT – TEACHING**

- 2017 - *Graduate Teaching Instructor*  
 2014 University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee  
 Milwaukee, WI  
 Courses Taught:  
 Educational Psychology 105: Motivational Strategies (Spring 2017)  
 Trauma I: Theory & Research, Trauma II: Diagnosis & Treatment (Spring 2016)  
 Educational Psychology 110 – Finding Your Major And/Or Career (2014-2015)

## RESEARCH PROJECTS

- 2020 - *Doctoral-Level Dissertator*  
2016 University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee  
How Adult Christians Incorporate their Faith with the Psychology of Forgiveness: A Qualitative Methods Study; Dissertation Chair: Marty Sapp, Ed.D.; Former Dissertation Chair: Thomas Baskin, Ph.D.
- 2016 - *Graduate Research Assistant*  
2012 University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee  
Group-to-Group Forgiveness between African-American and European-American College-Aged Students – Quantitative Study; Director: Robert Enright, Ph.D.  
Belongingness and STEM Careers in a Sample of African-American School Aged-Girls – Qualitative Dissertation; Directors: Anya Woronzoff Verriden, M.S., Doctoral Candidate, Thomas Baskin, Ph.D.  
Prevention and Reduction of Trauma among American Indian Youth in Corrections – Qualitative Study (CQR); Director: Leah Rouse Arndt, Ph.D.  
Police Suicide Prevention and Education, Risk and Coping, Male Gender Role in Law Enforcement, and Peer Support Intervention - Qualitative Study; Director: Leah Rouse Arndt, Ph.D.
- 2012 - *Undergraduate Research Assistant*  
2011 University of Wisconsin-Parkside  
Visual Recognition and Object Memory – Quantitative Study; Director: Moses Langley, Ph.D.  
Interpersonal Domains of Personality and Functioning – Qualitative Study; Director: Michael Gurtman, Ph.D.

## RESEARCH PUBLICATIONS

- Rouse, L. M., Frey, R. A., López, M., Wohlers, H., Xiong, I., Llewellyn, K. Lucci, S. P., & Wester S. R. (2014) Law enforcement suicide: Discerning etiology through psychological autopsy. *Police Quarterly*, 18, 79-108.

## RESEARCH MANUSCRIPTS

- Woronzoff Verriden, A. Baskin, T., Brown, S. & Lucci, S. (Under review). Perceptions of belongingness and career development in middle school African American girls.
- Rouse Arndt, L. M., Frey, R. A., López, M., Llewellyn, K. D., Pinero, S. M., Wohlers, H., Xiong, I., Hodges, R. G., & Wester, S, R. (Under review). Male gender role themes and law enforcement suicide: A psychological autopsy project.
- Rouse Arndt, L. M., Frey, R. A., López, M., Llewellyn, K. D., Pinero, S. M., Wohlers, H., Xiong, I., Hodges, R. G., & Wester, S, R. (Under review). Law enforcement suicide: Psychological autopsy with a sample of eight.

## RESEARCH POSTERS

- Lucci, S. M. P., & Baskin, T. (2017, April). Poster, Wisconsin Psychological Association, Madison, WI. Risk, Prevention, and Change in a World of Uncertainty 2017 Conference. The integration of Christian faith and forgiveness: A grounded theory pilot study (Presented at the Wisconsin Psychological Association).
- Frey, R. A., Rouse Arndt, L. M., López, M., Llewellyn, K. D., Pinero, S. M., Wohlers, H., Xiong, I., Hodges, R. G., & Wester, S. R. (2013, August). Poster, 121st Convention of the American Psychological Association, Honolulu, HI. Division 51, Men and Masculinity. Male gender role: Reporting mental health concerns in fellow law enforcement officers.
- Wohlers, H., Rouse Arndt, L. M., Llewellyn, K. D., Pinero, S. M., López, M., Frey, R. A., Xiong, I., Hodges, R. G., & Wester, S. R. (2013, August). Poster, 121st Convention of the American Psychological Association, Honolulu, HI. Division 18, Public Service. Utilization of peer support services in a law enforcement population.
- Llewellyn, K. D., Rouse Arndt, L. M., Frey, R. A., Pinero, S., Wohlers, H., López, M., Xiong, I., Hodges, R., & Wester, S. R. (2013, August). Poster, 121st Convention of the American Psychological Association, Honolulu, HI. Division 13: Consulting. Life review in law enforcement suicide: Proposed autopsy protocol for law enforcement.
- López, M., Rouse Arndt, L. M., Pinero, S. M., Wohlers, H., Frey, R. A., Llewellyn, K. D., Xiong, I., Hodges, R. G., & Wester, S. R. (2013, August). Poster, 121st Convention of the American Psychological Association, Honolulu, HI. Division 18, Public Service. Alternative avenues for help-seeking utilized in a law enforcement sample.
- Gurtman, M. B., Chayer, A., Frederiksen, B., Furby, A., Hauritz, C., Hellstrom, A., Li, K., Mehta, H., Pinero, S., Pinkalla, A., Ploeger, S., Stack, C., Tufnell, D., & Wooten, W. (Personality Research Group) (2012). Agency and communion as value priorities. Chicago, IL.

## MEMBERSHIPS / LEADERSHIP

- 2020 - *American Psychological Association (APA) Member*  
2015
- 2016 - *Educational Psychology Student Association (EPSA) Member*  
2015 *EPSA Officer*  
Representing officer from Counseling Psychology department.
- 2015 - *Counseling Psychology Student Association (CPSA) Member*  
2014 *Newsletter Editor*  
Writer and editor of newsletter on the topics like multiculturalism, self-care, updates, etc.
- 2014 American Psychological Association of Graduate Students (APAGS) Member