Forgiveness and reconciliation have become a hot topics in theological circles. Miroslav Volf’s 1996 Grawemeyer winner *Exclusion and Embrace*, a notable early contribution to theological reflection on the subject, has gone on to become a seminary staple. A robust conversation has emerged, evidenced in a steady stream of theological books\(^1\) and the increasing popularity of certificates, concentrations, and graduate programs focused on forgiveness, reconciliation, and peace building in seminaries and theological schools.\(^2\) Less often, however, have biblical scholars approached this subject. Anthony Bash’s *Forgiveness: A Theology* is therefore a rare contribution from a New Testament scholar to the question of what a scripturally-grounded ethic of forgiveness and reconciliation might look like. In fact, this is Bash’s third foray into the topic of forgiveness. His previous two monographs, *Forgiveness and Christian Ethics* and *Just Forgiveness: Exploring the Bible, Weighing the Issues* cover much of the same terrain as does *Forgiveness: A Theology*, although the former presents by far his most sophisticated analysis for an academic readership, while the latter two are clearly written for a general audience.

Evident from the outset, *Forgiveness: A Theology* is crafted for congregational settings. Not only does Bash point to the topic of forgiveness as pastorally significant (xiii), but this is apparent from the discussion questions that conclude each chapter and Bash’s sustained explanation (or avoidance) of theory and technical terms one might pick up only through a seminary education. For instance, Bash spends his first chapter breaking down the way hermeneutical presuppositions shape the way biblical scholars interpret the biblical text and how his own hermeneutics inform his study on forgiveness. Bash opens *Forgiveness* with the claim that a theology of interpersonal forgiveness remains relatively undeveloped and under-researched in the theological literature. Rather, he asserts, theological attention continues to center on what are regarded as “weightier” matters: the “great doctrines” such as salvation, atonement, and divine justice (xi-xii). Bash argues that this is problematic because the synoptic Gospels make plain that when people do not forgive those who have wronged them, they cut themselves off from God’s forgiveness and salvation (xii-xiii).

Bash lays the groundwork for his conceptual claims about forgiveness and their relationship to Christian scripture by looking to how people in the ancient world understood and prac-

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2 A few prominent examples include the concentration in Religion and Conflict Transformation available to students in the Boston Theological Institute consortium schools, Emory University’s Religion, Conflict, and Peacebuilding concentration for Religion Ph.D. students, Notre Dame’s Ph.D. in Theology and Peace Studies, and the M.A. in Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation at the Irish School of Ecumenics.
ticed forgiveness (Ch. 2). While forgiving behavior is demonstrated in the Hebrew Bible and ancient Greek literature, Bash argues that Christian scripture is unique in its lifting up of forgiveness as virtuous (16-17). Bash contends that such virtuous behavior is grounded in Jesus’ summary of the Jewish law as love of God and neighbor, and he extrapolates from this that to love neighbor is to forgive one’s neighbor (18). This move allows Bash to give interpersonal forgiveness a prominent place in New Testament ethics and to tie forgiveness of neighbor with one’s relationship to God. Unforgiveness toward neighbor, Bash argues, renders one unable “to seek or receive God’s forgiveness” (19). What does it mean to forgive? Bash demonstrates how notoriously difficult it is to define forgiveness with precision. Hearkening to Wittgenstein, he opts rather to look to the “network of similarities overlapping and crisscrossing” in New Testament and modern conceptions of forgiveness to construct his own account (24).

Bash sets out to identify these confluences in three movements. Part I of the book explores forgiveness conceptually, toggling between his original biblical and theological reflections on forgiveness and conceptions of forgiveness in modern philosophy, psychology, and political science, fields he maintains hold more robust literatures than theology on interpersonal forgiveness. Part II delves systematically into the scriptural text to draw out New Testament theological claims about forgiveness. Part III addresses additional points for consideration and lingering questions.

The chapters in Part I take on various practical questions around forgiveness: What does the language early Christians used to reference forgiveness tell us about the meaning they ascribed to the concept (ch. 3)? How can one become a faithful forgiver as forgiveness is expressed in the Christian scripture (ch. 4)? Is forgiveness irrevocable? Can it be offered to the unrepentant (ch. 5)? How do contemporary conceptions of forgiveness relate to a New Testament framework for forgiveness (ch. 6)? What does reconciliation have to do with a New Testament framework for forgiveness (ch. 7)? Do we even have the capacity to forgive (ch. 8)? Bash weaves together ancient and modern sources to respond to these questions. For instance, in chapter 3 Bash concludes that interpersonal forgiveness can only be expressed through metaphor to divine forgiveness because it is a model or imitation of divine atonement (30). The metaphors Bash draws out from the language used for forgiveness in Christian scripture are those of “letting go,” “giving an undeserved gift to the wrongdoer,” and “offering release from the wrongdoer” (25-28). In chapter 4, Bash carries these insights to the question of how one can become a forgiver by looking to how one can faithfully live those New Testament metaphors. He draws on the principles of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) to define the necessary preparations humans must take to enter the process of forgiveness: addressing thoughts, behavior, and feelings to move from a destructive form of resentment to an openness to letting go of a wrong (33). While engagement between the social sciences and scripture can be fruitful, Bash’s use of modern frameworks like CBT can feel at times as if he is telescoping the modern onto the ancient a bit too simplistically. Bash asserts, for example, that Paul was aware of the distinction between various forms of resentment as they appear in modern definitions of the concept, arguing that this can help us to reconcile the two seemingly contradictory commands in Ephesians 4 to “put away all bitterness, wrath, and anger” (Eph 4:31) and to “be angry, and do not sin” (Eph 4:26).
Chapters 3 and 4 are among Bash’s more logical chapter sequences. Much of Part I leaves the reader unclear as to why chapters jump from one conceptual question to another. Bash also leaves the reader wondering why he chooses to draw on some thinkers but not others, particularly the notable voices on forgiveness that are conspicuously absent. It is of course necessary to make choices about which thinkers to engage to make one’s argument well. Bash’s own analysis, however, would have greatly benefitted from robust interaction with more than a skeleton crew of scholars engaging his conceptual questions. For example, Jeffrey Bluestein and Margaret Urban Walker have both developed rich accounts of the moral psychology of interpersonal forgiveness, which would have added significant depth to Bash’s response to the question of whether we can forgive (ch. 8) and how we enter the process of forgiveness (ch. 4). Further, leaving out prominent theological voices on interpersonal forgiveness, such as Miroslav Volf and Donald Shriver, seems misleading in light of Bash’s claim that there is a dearth of theological scholarship on the subject. To be fair, both of these theologians do make an appearance in Bash’s earlier monograph, _Forgiveness and Christian Ethics_, which provides more robust engagement with a variety of thinkers on forgiveness. For example, Bash engages with Volf in his discussion of whether victims must relinquish their demand for justice against wrongdoers as part of genuine forgiveness. Nevertheless, to claim in _Forgiveness: A Theology_ that there is little theological scholarship on this subject, and then to leave out some of the major theological scholarship that has been produced on the topic, leads the reader to believe that Bash is developing his theology in a vacuum rather than engaging an active conversation. This is problematic for a book intended to reach a congregational readership that may not have the background to know that there are alternative theological accounts on this topic available.

One gets the sense that Part II of the book is where Bash hits his stride. Bash is clearly an astute scholar of the New Testament. He spends the five chapters in Part II carefully and systematically combing through the Gospels, Pauline and Deutero-Pauline epistles, and some of the later New Testament writings to determine what an understanding of interpersonal forgiveness grounded in the New Testament looks like. Of course, Christian scripture is multi-vocal, and Bash’s conclusions reflect this. In Paul, Deutero-Paul, and later letters like 1 John, Bash demonstrates that the command to love is the organizing principle. He also establishes that, for Paul, showing grace to others is an imitation of the free gift of divine grace. Turning to the Synoptic Gospels, Bash maintains that, unlike Paul, all three authors understand repentance to be a crucial component to interpersonal forgiveness and stress that not to forgive the repentant sinner is to be indifferent to, and even to cut oneself off from, God’s forgiveness. These conclusions provide the basis for Bash’s opening assertions that a New Testament ethic of interpersonal forgiveness is subsumed under the ethical imperative to love God and neighbor, that interpersonal forgiveness is a metaphor for divine forgiveness, and that unforgiveness toward another cuts one off from God’s forgiveness. They also leave some lingering questions, due to tensions between the Pauline and Synoptic Gospel accounts, such as how to balance the love ethic with justice. Bash outlines these questions in Part III, leaving them for the most part unresolved because of the lack of resolution in the scriptural text itself. Here again, rather than simply dropping questions

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around such tensions as love and justice, Bash might have drawn on established theological conversations on these tensions.4

Bash argues in his concluding chapter that it has become more fashionable to speak about “reconciliation” than “forgiveness” because the concept of reconciliation is not loaded with faith-based implications (137). For this reason, Bash asserts, the field of reconciliation has been dominated by new secular academic disciplines, such as conflict resolution, that are generally allergic to public religion. This claim again leaves out important Christian theologians and ethicists working in the field of reconciliation.5 It also omits an important political movement with Mennonite roots, the Restorative Justice Movement. Bash does interact with the Restorative Justice framework quite extensively in Forgiveness and Christian Ethics. Bringing Restorative Justice into this book as well would have given Bash a concrete and relevant example with which to explore how tensions between love and justice are negotiated in a contemporary context.

Overall, Forgiveness: A Theology is strong in developing a New Testament foundation for interpersonal forgiveness, but it would benefit greatly from more sustained engagement with the existing theological scholarship on forgiveness and reconciliation. Bash’s framing arguments flow directly from his detailed exegesis in Part II, but these claims feel alienated from much of Part I of the book. Part III might have served to synthesize these two halves, but it fails to draw together Bash’s conceptual and textual conclusions and to place these in conversation with active theological conversations on the topic at hand. This may simply reflect the unfortunate divide between biblical studies and theology, which too often leads to theological scholarship that lacks scriptural depth and biblical scholarship that lacks theological depth. One also gets the sense, however, that Bash was trying to boil down his more rigorous Forgiveness and Christian Ethics into a book digestible for congregations, and in the process he left out key interlocutors. As a result, Forgiveness: A Theology implies that Bash’s theological claims have been developed in a vacuum and does not invite congregations to engage and contribute to ongoing theological debate. As theologian Kathryn Tanner argues, such interaction between academic theologians and who she calls the “everyday” theologians that fill church pews is vital to theological production. From this interaction organically arises the questions and raw materials for theological inquiry on precisely such practical topics as interpersonal forgiveness.6 Bash’s work has the potential to contribute to fruitful engagement between the academic and everyday theologies of interpersonal forgiveness, but in sacrificing robustness for digestibility, it fails to issue an invitation for everyday congregations to make their contribution.

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4 A few examples of prominent theologians and Christian ethicists that engage the tension between love and justice include Eric Gregory, Timothy P. Jackson, and Gene Outka.

5 Some prominent examples include John de Gruchy, Emmanuel Katongole, John Paul Lederach, Glen Stassen, Susan Thistlethwaite and Miroslav Volf. See fn. 1 for representative works on reconciliation by some of these authors.

6 Kathryn Tanner, Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).