

Positional Forgiveness

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First, let me be clear: I hold Bob Wilkin in the very highest esteem. I've learned so much from him over the years and am in awe of his impact (and output!) over these years for the cause of grace. We've been friends a long time and I only 'disagree' with him on some minor issues. On this issue of whether there is 'positional forgiveness' or not, is not so 'minor.' Either view (his or the 'traditional') can be held without contradicting positions on grace. However, because the Bible seems to affirm positional forgiveness in so many places, it must be important. However, Bob is denying those passages that have been traditionally used to teach positional forgiveness...

I believe in *positional* forgiveness for a # of reasons. The past tense aspect that we HAVE BEEN "washed," "cleansed," "purified," etc. (Jn 13:10; I Co 6:11; Eph 5:26; Titus 3:5; Heb 10:2, 22, etc.). Also, that Christ's death alone keeps God—at least on a judicial level?—from "not counting their trespasses against them" and that by faith we can be "reconciled" once for all (2 Co 5:19-20). What else could be meant, also, in the doctrine of "propitiation" but a once-for-all kind of release/forgiveness/ payment of the sin-debt (Jn 1:29; Ro 3:25; I Jn 2:2. Granted, *propitiation* is *not forgiveness* but it is intricately related)?

Who "having purged our sins (*katharismōn poiēsámenos*), sat down at the right hand..." (Heb 1:3b) certainly refers to a one-time cleansing. This is a type of forgiveness/ cleansing available to all and actualized forever in the believer. (I'm not sure how Bob would explain this since he has come to believe that we are not forgiven 'future' sins?)

Not to mention that there are explicit "positional forgiveness" verses (Eph 1:7; 4:32; Col 1:14; 2:13; I Jn 2:12).

Forgiveness Tantamount to Justification

As 'proof' that the Lord grants "righteousness apart from works," Paul actually cites Ps 32, "Just as David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works: 'Blessed are those whose lawless deeds *are forgiven*; And whose sins *are covered*; Blessed is the man to whom the Lord shall not impute sin'" (Ro 4:7). That can mean nothing but the positional 'forgiveness' which *is* justification (declaration of and imputation of righteousness)—*because Paul says it is*. —Nor do we need to debate Ps 32 'in its context,' as Paul is interpreting it for us.

Forgiveness A New Covenant Blessing

Same in the promise of the New Covenant, "On *the day* that I cleanse you from *all your iniquities*," Ex 36:33 (cp. Jer 31:34, "For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember *no more*" [in the singular this possibly refers to the sin 'principle' in general—and all sins pertaining thereto]); "The blood of the New Covenant which is shed for the remission of sins (*áphesis, pardon, forgiveness, cancellation of debt*)," Mt 26:28.

Combine with that *áphesis* and *aphíēmi*- the act of freeing, liberating something, *release*, *pardon*, *cancellation* (like of a debt). So, when Jesus says, “This is My blood of the New Covenant, shed for the remission of sins” (Mt 26:28), I wouldn’t think it’s referring primarily to ‘fellowship forgiveness,’ but the one-time offering, as spoken of in Heb 10, by which we are “purified” and cleansed in conscience “once for all, once for all, once for all.”

...Tantamount to Salvation

Or Lk 1:77, “To give knowledge of *salvation* to His people *by the remission of sins*.” — Wouldn’t you think in the OT believer’s mind “forgiveness of sins” equates to eternal salvation? I do. In contrast, in John 13, Jesus appears to be giving information the disciples wouldn’t likely have had— (distinction of one-time cleansing vs on going ‘washings.’ See below.). How else can “forgiveness of sins” bring about “knowledge of salvation”?

While “repentance” and “forgiveness” are inextricably linked to the Jewish nation, how about Ac 13:38-39, “through this Man is preached to you *forgiveness of sins*; and by Him everyone who believes is justified *from all things* from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses.” Spoken to Jews, but linked to *justification by faith* (see Ro 4:7 for same thing). In other words, the forgiveness doesn’t appear to be temporal/conditional (like ‘fellowship forgiveness’ which we can fall from). Similarly, Ac 26:18 equates forgiveness of sins with the “sanctification by faith” and the “inheritance” that *goes with it* (obviously the inheritance of just being a child of God, not the double-portion). Similarly, in Ac 10:43 forgiveness of sins is equated with eternal salvation (see 11:14 and Bb Bryant’s quote below).

Positionally God Does Forgive Future Sins...

In all 17 uses of *áphesis* it refers to remission/forgiveness of sins, except Lk 4:18 quoting the Isaiah passage about setting “at liberty” the captives. But in the 146 uses of *aphíēmi*, it can refer to leaving/departing/being left; divorce; and *releasing from a debt*, Mt 18:27, 32, etc.

Bob and Ken seem to be saying “forgiveness” means we are “only forgiven up to that point” but not forgiven, yet, of any *future* sins (haha, sounds Arminian doesn’t it?). And they reason, “Forgiveness is a relational concept, and we don’t ‘forgive’ someone of something they haven’t yet done.” But neither do we positionally “sanctify, purify, wash, and cleanse” someone once-for-all either! AND, when speaking of “releasing a debt,” God can, by the blood of His Son, “release” us from the overall “sin debt” and even use language like “*in Him...we have forgiveness...*”, or “having forgiven you *all* your trespasses...” —As Dr. Chafer noted, “all” wouldn’t really be *all* if this only referred to forgiveness “up to that point” and not forgiveness of “all” the other yet future sins. If, *in Christ* we’re “forgiven,” and since that ‘position’ is both timeless AND future, we have to be forgiven of “*all*”—including all *future*—sins...

In *The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant*, Lk 18:21-35, a servant “had been” forgiven an astronomical debt, yet he went on to be hard-hearted to his fellow servants, and unforgiving. That his “whole (much much greater) debt” had been forgiven is the reason the master is so incensed he could then be unforgiving of the ‘little stuff’ with his peers (cf.

Eph 4:32, “even as God in Christ has forgiven you”). This speaks of the magnitude of the Lord’s forgiveness *to us*: ALL our sins remitted and paid for. How can we, then, not be forgiving to others?—we who’ve “already been” forgiven of so much?

In I Jn 1:7, Hodges emphasized that the idea is, “and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son *goes on* cleansing us from all sin.” When we’re in fellowship, we know that experientially. But we can know and be certain of it *as a fact indeed*, because it’s *already true*: the blood of Jesus has *already* cleansed us once-for-all from “*all sin*” (cp. I Jn 2:12, “your sins are forgiven for His name’s sake”).

I’m sure MUCH more could be said. I gladly endorse Bob Bryant’s recent journal article where he said,

“All the prophets witness that through His name whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins” (Acts 10:43). Now, from that statement by Peter we learn that all the prophets witness that through His name—and from the context, he is talking about Jesus—whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins. *This means to believe in Him for everlasting life* (my emphasis). And with that comes forgiveness of sins. (JOTGES, Autumn 2022, vol 35/Number 69, *Cain: Testing the Limits of God’s Love*, Bob Bryant, p 3.)

The OT believer, looking at the prophecy of the New Covenant would have understood forgiveness of sins as eternal and referring to salvation (see above; also, Mt 26:28; Lk 1:77; Jn 13:10; Ac 26:18; Ro 4:7-8; Eph 1:7; Col 1:14; 2:13; Heb 8:12). It certainly fits with Paul’s teaching on justification, Ac 13:38-39; Ro 3:24-25; 4:1-8.

According to Ken and Bob, Zane felt the “forgiveness” in Ac 10:43 was “fellowship forgiveness.” Maybe so—I never heard him specify that. *If* he said this, perhaps he was only answering the question to the effect that “*we are in fellowship* at the moment of belief, unlike Paul on the Damascus Road.” But I *did* hear Zane often use this passage as an illustration that one is justified/regenerated/saved *at the very instant of persuasion*, “No second step. No raising a hand, walking an aisle, etc.” Zane could split hairs, but I don’t think he’d approve of this new FG idea that there is only “fellowship” forgiveness and not also “positional” forgiveness (I know he wouldn’t, see his quote below under **Zane’s View**). They admit he indeed believed in positional forgiveness.

In the New Covenant He says, “I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember *no more*” (Jer 31:34; Heb 8:12) and, “This is My covenant with them, When I take away their sins” (Ro 11:27). Wouldn’t a thoughtful Jewish convert—or maybe even a temple-going pious God-fearer like Cornelius, have known such a major theme? Without further explanation, it appears *on its face* as a ‘blanket’ once-for-all forgiveness, never to be re-visited (contra this new teaching). What is the motive for not wanting something so great, i.e., to denigrate this great doctrine?

Additional thoughts:

More on John 13:10

Bob admits that he “has changed his view,” but he’ll also need to change his comments in the GES commentary under John 13:10 (where taking a ‘bath’ is clearly more than the occasional foot-washing that will need to continue, a la I Jn 1:9). Some, maybe Bob, will say the “Gospel of John doesn’t speak of forgiveness,” but it most certainly delineates two types of forgiveness in John 13:10, “He who is bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all of you.” Even Bob, previously, said this anticipates I John 1:9 teaching,

This footwashing incident illustrates perfectly the truth John would later write about in I John 1:9. The metaphor of being clean refers to positional forgiveness—what Paul calls “the washing of regeneration” (Titus 3:5). All the disciples, except Judas (John 13:11), were believers and were “**clean**” in their position before God. However, even clean people need cleansing in order to keep their part in Jesus’ service (p. 215).

I totally agree with ‘old’ Bob here. Perfectly. But now, it would be nice to hear exactly how he handles this passage now with his new belief(s).

Zane’s view

Bob admits he has departed from Zane in his new view. Here’s a quote from Zane’s commentary on Acts, p. 22:

Two kinds of forgiveness in the NT must be clearly distinguished. The first of these may be called positional... it necessarily involves an instantaneous and perfect relationship with God which cannot be disturbed. Thus it covers all sins, past, present, and future. But the other kind of forgiveness is practical and experiential, and ... can only deal with sins as they occur.

Of course, it’s not just Zane Bob is disagreeing with, but Dr’s Chafer, Scofield, McGhee, Ryrie and a host of other interpreters we rightly hold in high esteem. Concensus theology should carry little weight admittedly; the *only* issue is simply: what does the Bible affirm, period. But since this traditional approach is a clear and simple way of harmonizing what the Bible affirms (see verses on positional forgiveness above), why the need to come up with a confusing (and contradictory, e.g., “having forgiven you *all* trespasses”/He ‘*hasn’t* forgiven you *all*’) new position, and one that requires much more explaining than the previous (Chafer, Hodges, Scofield, etc. etc.)?