



Q & A



Jon Coutts (PhD, Aberdeen University) is tutor of theology and ethics at Trinity College in Bristol, England. Ordained in the Christian and Missionary Alliance, Coutts has extensive ministry experience in Canada, including serving as pastor in Richmond, British Columbia and Selkirk, Manitoba. He writes and speaks on a variety of topics including church and pastoral theology, forgiveness and reconciliation, gender and ministry, film and fiction, and the works of Karl Barth and G.K. Chesterton.

What is the true meaning of forgiveness?

What made you want to study the subject of and write a book on interpersonal forgiveness and Christ's ongoing ministry of reconciliation while interacting with Karl Barth's theology in *Church Dogmatics*?

Jon Coutts: My interest in the topic arose from my first entry into pastoral ministry, where unreconciled relationships were tearing apart the church and the church growth movement was tearing apart its pastor. This led me to seminary for a re-think about *what it is that makes a church* – particularly in the middle of untidy resolutions and unmeasurable returns on investment. It was there that I read Wolf's *Exclusion and Embrace* and Barth's *Doctrine of Reconciliation* and began to see ecclesiology in a new light, as an ever-new event within the reconciling work of God.

With this vista opened up in front of me, I wanted to write this book in order to pinpoint the central issue for both ecclesiology and reconciliation – namely, forgiveness. How is this different from the privatized peace of tolerance and conflict avoidance? With a closer look at this I believe I am addressing the need for a less abstract and sentimentalized account of Christian life, communion, and mission. If love and acceptance and grace and diversity are the gospel community's buzzwords, what do they actually mean, and what are the specific imperatives that they entail? By pulling this out of Barth's work, I believe I end up offering a crucial layer of underlying nuance to a distinctly (but not exclusively) Protestant ecclesiology.

How is this book different from others on the topic of reconciliation?

Coutts: What distinguishes this book is that it lives in the gap between dogmatic and practical theology – not by talking about the gap itself, but by actively bridging it. On its own this might be of little consequence except that it does so in a place where bridges are still needed on both sides of the church/academy divide. As a critical, accessible commentary on the final volume of Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, the book explains the place and meaning of forgiveness by embedding it in an account of Christ's ministry of reconciliation.

How do you think your book furthers the discussion of forgiveness?

Coutts: Forgiveness is more than therapy for sin and enmity: it finds its impetus and extent in the positive mission of God as a divine gift of freedom that is meant to be shared. Inspecting this central tenet of gospel and creed with a view to its ramifications for ecclesiology and ethics allows us to see the constancy and character of Christian life and community as an ever-new but knowable event in the work of Christ. The once-for-all and ongoing quality of the Christ event serves to perpetually intertwine matters of justification with sanctification and vocation, closely joining the communal to the personal. This opens

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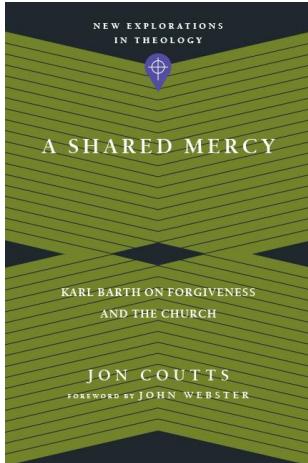
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A Shared Mercy: Karl Barth on Forgiveness and the Church
(New Explorations in Theology)

Available September 2016

\$39, xii + 244 pages, paperback
978-0-8308-4915-4

"As A Shared Mercy unfolds what Barth has to say, it also invites its readers to reflect on the theology and practice of forgiveness. . . . In short: this book is both a sure-footed and perceptive study of a largely undiscovered element of Barth, and an astute and at times moving essay in doctrinal, moral, and pastoral theology."

—From the foreword by John Webster

the way for a detailed exploration of the practical relationship of forgiveness with the reconciling activities of forbearance, confrontation, confession, repentance, correction, and restoration. In the process one gets not only a readers' guide to Barth's *Doctrine of Reconciliation*, distilling complex themes and amplifying applicability for church leaders and teachers, but also a constructive contribution to contemporary thought and practice.

What do you hope readers can take away from *A Shared Mercy*?

Coutts: *A Shared Mercy* furthers ethical and ecclesial conversations opened up by such works as Miroslav Volf's *Exclusion and Embrace* and L. Gregory Jones' *Embodying Forgiveness*, providing nuance to the meaning of forgiveness and specificity to the way it manifests itself in the interpersonal/political.

It brings together key threads interwoven through Barth's expansive ecclesiology and ethics of reconciliation and makes them accessible to pastoral, practical, and missional theologians. It traces core convictions in Barth's mature theology and gives an account of the character and constancy of his ethic, thereby furthering the scholarly discussion as it relates both to these finer points and to the endeavor for a fulsome articulation of Protestant ecclesiology.

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***A Shared Mercy* is a part of IVP Academic's New Explorations in Theology series. Theology is flourishing in dynamic and unexpected ways in the twenty-first century. Scholars are increasingly recognizing the global character of the church, freely crossing old academic boundaries, and challenging previously entrenched interpretations. Despite living in a culture of uncertainty, both young and senior scholars today are engaged in hopeful and creative work in the areas of systematic, historical, practical, and philosophical theology. New Explorations in Theology provides a platform for cutting-edge research in these fields.**