

An ethics of forgiveness

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ABSTRACT

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This article investigates the argument that the Christian idea of forgiveness can and should be translated into a socio-political context, from a Reformed perspective. It furthermore endeavours to provide guidelines that can be applied in the sphere of a political transition of the basis of an ethics of forgiveness. The new post-Apartheid society of South Africa is a good example of such a political transition. The central theoretical argument of this investigation is that the Christian theological perspective of forgiveness can indeed be translated into a socio-political praxis. Seen within the context of major biblical themes, this can provide a valuable, if not indispensable, contribution to the quest for reconciliation and nation-building in countries troubled by histories of colonialism, ethnocentrism, tribalism, racism and xenophobia.

1 INTRODUCTION

In post-conflict reconstruction it is important to establish institutions that are superior to those that existed before the violent escalation of conflict, and which do not contain the same failures that led to the conflict in the first place (Wolff 2007:156). The world has recently realised this sociological principle. As a result Truth Commissions have emerged in many countries that have become known for their political transitions from oppressive systems with mass human rights violations to stable democracies and sound economic policies. These Commissions attempt to deal with the past injustices in a manner that would ensure reconciliation and transformation to a better society (see Kritz 1995; Jaques 2000:22). Amongst these the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) attracted world-wide attention due to the astonishing change brought about by a negotiated settlement without the bloody revolution many people inside and outside South Africa anticipated (see Truth and Reconciliation Commission 1998). The few years that have passed since the publication of its report provide the researcher with a good opportunity to evaluate not only the findings, but also the effects of this process on the diverse South African society.

In the execution of their mandates these Commissions encountered issues that begged not only legal, but also ethical questions. This is also true of the South African experience (see Vorster 2004:354). One of these questions relates to the issue of collective repentance and forgiveness. In the recent past many scholars all over the world in such fields as law, sociology, criminology and psychology reflected on the socio-political meaning of repentance and forgiveness (Bash 2007:270). What do repentance and forgiveness entail in such a context? This question occupied many Christians in South Africa as well. The question can be formulated more precisely as follows: What is the significance of the Christian concept of forgiveness in a political transition signified by suspicion, racism, xenophobia, ethnocentrism and the violence caused by these phenomena? How can these core Christian concepts be translated into a socio-political praxis of restoration and reconciliation? This question is significant because reconciliation in South Africa is still somewhat inhibited due to an undeveloped culture of forgiveness in spite of the plea for and example of forgiveness set by the South African Nobel Peace laureates, Mandela (2007:732), De Klerk and Tutu (1999:1). The reason for this state of affairs is that the concept forgiveness and its relevance for socio-political reconciliation has not been developed in the same way as for example truth-seeking, guilt and restitution. To my mind, more scholarly reflection is necessary about forgiveness and how a culture of forgiveness can break the cycles of violence and suspicion. In such a reflection a Christian theological angle of approach can be of great value.

As early as 1995, Jones (1995:xii), writing from a United Methodist perspective in the United States, already investigated the way in which Christian forgiveness can be embodied in a modern society, how the craft of forgiveness can be learned and how communion can be nurtured in communities troubled by violence, potential violence and hostile divisions. He made a valuable point in his commendable study of forgiveness when he said that “people are mistaken if they think of Christian forgiveness primarily as absolution from guilt; the purpose of forgiveness is the restoration of communion, the reconciliation of brokenness” (Jones 1995:5). Forgiveness cannot function only in the sphere of the spiritual, but also, and foremost, in the field of social relations. However, in order

to apply the Christian concept of forgiveness in the social domain, one should first of all consider the ethics of forgiveness.

My intention with this article is to develop the argument further from a Reformed perspective. In addition, I aim to provide guidelines that can be applied in the sphere of a political transition on the basis of an ethics of forgiveness. The investigation is an ethical study because the purpose is to reflect on the praxis of forgiveness in a socio-political transition. The new post-Apartheid society of South Africa is a good example of such a transition in progress. The central theoretical argument of this investigation is that the Christian theological perspective of forgiveness can be translated into a socio-political praxis and, seen within the context of major biblical themes, can provide a valuable, if not indispensable, contribution in the quest for reconciliation and nation-building in countries troubled by histories of colonialism, ethnocentrism, tribalism, racism and xenophobia. I will discuss the notion of an “ethics of forgiveness” in order to prove this argument. The major biblical themes that come into consideration are the biblical call to forgiveness, the creation of humankind in the image of God, the destructive influence of sin, the restoration in Christ, and the possibility of introducing a new beginning in the face of distorted relations.

2 THE CALL TO FORGIVENESS

The concept of forgiveness is a prominent topic in the biblical revelation. Gestrich & Zehner (2001:330) compiled a useful list of the various uses of the concept in the biblical material. This list reveals the richness of the concept as well as the fact that the topic is deeply embedded in Christian theology. It is fair to say that forgiveness is amongst the most important topics of the Christian message. The atonement of Christ leads to the gift of God’s forgiveness and sets in motion the command to forgive in inter-human relations in order to restore communion. The biblical material presented by the comprehensive study of Gestrich & Zehner (2001:330) reveals the following facts:

- The Old Testament (OT) has a technical term for forgiveness (*slh*, in the Masoretic Text [MT] for example Ex 34:9; Num 30:6, 9 and Deut 29:19). Equivalent expressions are also used and these include the covering over of sin (*pi`el* of *kpr*, for example Lev 4-5, 19:22 “make

atonement for”), the removal of sin (*ns*, for example Lev 10:17), the wiping or washing away of sin, purifying it, or not remembering it. These terms are mostly cultic. Objectively, the divinely ordained cultic forms are the means of forgiveness: the guilt offerings of Lev 7:7, which are accompanied by restitution and often also fines, and the sin offerings of Lev 4:1-5:13, which may be social as well as individual. On the Day of Atonement the high priest as a representative of the whole people offers expiation in the ritual of the scapegoat (Lev 4:20; 5:10; 6:7; 16:1-34; 23:27-32; Num 15:25 and 29:7-11).

- More spontaneous metaphoric expressions are also used in the Old Testament. Yahweh removes sins far away “as far as the east is from the west” (Ps 103:12,); He puts them behind his back (Isa 38:17); He casts them into the depths of the sea (Mic 7:19); He heals people in an all-embracing way that includes dealing with their sin (for example Isa 57:18; Jer 3:22; Hos 7:1).
- The one who forgives is always God. Forgiveness in the OT signifies a divine act that brings liberation from sin, the pardoning of punishment, and comprehensive restoration and renewal (see for example Ex 34:7).
- Forgiveness is experienced in prayer and many psalms offer examples of this. It is also apparent in the various penitential exercises prescribed in the Old Testament, as well as in the commandment to love. The story of Joseph is amongst others presented as a paradigm of forgiveness. Most important is the fact that forgiveness still remains a gift of Yahweh that can be sought and received directly from Him. As a result of this gift, one human being can grant forgiveness to another as that person is moved by Yahweh’s own previous acts of forgiveness.
- Christ’s conduct as well as his proclamation shows that forgiveness is central and not merely peripheral to his ministry. When He suffered, died, and was raised again as the Messiah, the forgiveness He offered acquired a deeper meaning.
- For this reason forgiveness becomes central in the spirituality and anthropology of the New Testament (NT).

According to his teachings He will give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45). He is the Lamb of God (John 1:36), the suffering Servant (1 Pet 2:21-24) and the Servant of the Lord. As a result Jesus Himself receives the authority and the power to forgive sins and He proves this in some of his miracles (for example Mt 9:6; Mk 2:1-12 and Lk 5:17-26). The forgiveness of God and the command to be forgiving is a prominent theme in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Mt 6:2-14; Lk 11:2-4). However, unlike *slh* in the OT, forgiveness in the NT can have a human subject because the resurrected Christ expands the authority to forgive to his apostles and by implication also to the Church (John 20:23; see also Eph 4:32; Col 3:13). This expansion of the authority to forgive becomes evident in the authority given to the apostles and the Church to employ the "keys of the kingdom of heaven". The "keys" symbolise the authority and the ability of the Church to "bind" and to "loosen". Loosening means freeing people completely from their sins, from the powers of the world, of sin, and of death and opening to them the "gates" of the kingdom of heaven (see Ridderbos 1962:359).

- In the NT the Synoptics and Acts in particular prefer the words *aphiēmi* and *aphesis*. These concepts should be understood against the background of a juristic perspective. Seen from this angle these words can mean, among other things, release from office, from marriage, or from imprisonment, as well as release from guilt and punishment. Forgiveness thus entails that God releases people from the bondage of sin and the consecutive punishment and guilt.
- In his teaching on the restoration of the relation between God and humans, Paul thinks of forgiveness in terms of righteousness (*dikaïosunē*) and reconciliation (*katallagē*). According to the filological and theological explanations of these concepts by Bultmann (1953:266) and Barth (1961:28), a new relation between God and humans comes into being when God forgives sins on the foundation of the sacrifice and atonement of Christ. Furthermore, Paul links forgiveness to the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. This connection gave meaning to both the sacrament of

baptism (Acts 2:38) and the eucharist (Mt 26:28). Evidence of the deeper meaning of these symbolic acts can already be found in early penitential practice (Mt 16:18-19; 18:15-18; John 20:23; 1 Cor 5:9-13).

- Hebrews and the Epistles of John think of God's forgiveness in terms of sanctifying (*hagiazō*) and purifying (*katharizō*). Here the emphasis is on cleansing and holiness. Forgiveness of sin is a purifying act that turns the unholy person into a sanctified person. The blemishes of sin are removed. Forgiveness brings about a radical change to the inner self of the human being.
- The teaching of the parable of the unforgiving servant in Mt 18:22-35 is of specific importance in the NT. This parable relates God's forgiveness to human forgiveness. The evangelist explains how the merciful forgiveness of God should inspire interpersonal forgiveness using financial images. Verses 33 and 35 apparently say that those who receive mercy must show mercy to others and those who are forgiven must forgive others. Human beings should strive to practice the ideal of forgiveness that God models (Bash 2007:94). The same idea is evident in the Lord's prayer.

What is the theological significance of the call to forgiveness according to these various usages of metaphors, technical terminology, symbolisms and phrases in the biblical message? This significance becomes evident when the variety of explanations is investigated within the framework of certain major biblical theological themes. Such an investigation enables a scholar to distil an "ethics of forgiveness" applicable to a modern-day socio-political transition. I would like to propose that the following major themes can be considered: human dignity; human depravity; human redemption; and the new beginning brought about by the reality of the kingdom of God. Each of these topics shed light on the implications of forgiveness in the socio-political sphere.

3 HUMAN DIGNITY

God created people to live in a relationship of mutual love and care. This relationship is expressed in the creation of humankind as the image of God (*imago dei*). The *imago dei* has various implications for a Christian anthropology. Since the Reformation several

theologians enunciated these implications. Although Reformed theology emphasises the total depravity of humankind, it is fair to conclude that this theology did not depart from a total pessimistic view of humankind because of this angle of approach in its anthropology. It also reflected about the implications of the *imago dei* for human relations and hold the view that the *imago dei* teaches the inherent human dignity of all people, which should be respected by fellow human beings and social institutions. Human depravity does not inhibit the inherent human dignity of humans in the eyes of fellow-humans and social institutions.

Calvin (1:XI:2:147) did not use the term “human dignity”. However, he stressed the worthiness of the human being. In his view the creation of humankind on the “sixth day” is important to note because God first created a dwelling place for people, then the angels to act as protectors of humankind. These actions were the prelude to the creation of humankind. Humankind was bestowed with a certain status. Humans are the most precious and worthy to look at and this fact is proof of God’s righteousness (Calvin 1:XV:1:172). The most distinguishing quality of humankind is its likeness to God, which seats in the intellect and in the abilities of the “soul” (Calvin 1:XV:4:179). In spite of humankind’s alienation from God due to the Fall, the *imago dei* has not been destroyed (Calvin 1:XV:4:179). People maintain the dignity of their creation and all the responsibilities flowing from this inherent dignity remain intact.

Reformed theologians after the Reformation furthered his argument of the dignity of humankind – especially in the twentieth century with the emergence of the idea of human rights against the background of the human rights abuses in World War II. Barth (1961:116) emphasised the relational aspect of the *imago dei*. The *imago dei* is an expression of God’s willingness to enter into a relation with humankind. Man became a relational being and in their expression of relations of love and care, people express their basic dignity. In other words people’s ability to express humaneness is a sign of the *imago dei* (see Westermann 1997:344). That is the reason why God forbids manslaughter and why preservation of life is so important in the Old Testament laws (Barth 1961:344). The purpose of human conduct is to preserve and protect life and everything it entails, such as humaneness, compassion, caring and social concern. On this basis Barth designed a Christian anthropology that resisted the individualism and rationalism of the Aufklärung (Price 2002:97).

At the same time the prominent Dutch theologian Berkhouwer (1957:34) reflected on the relevance of the *imago dei* for modern ethics and social concern. He also maintains that the doctrine of *imago dei* is essential for the development of a relevant Christian anthropology. Through the *imago dei* and the atonement in Christ a human being becomes “*man of God*,” and receives as such the ability to strive after the justice of the kingdom of God. However, the main ethical implication of the *imago dei* is that it sets the possibility for humans to be free from any form of slavery and lack of freedom due to the blemishes of sin and feelings of guilt. Therefore, any person who uses the *imago dei* as an angle of approach should support the nations’ call to freedom and the Christian Church should also support their desire for freedom (Berkhouwer 1957:369). The consequence of Berkhouwer’s view within the framework of the topic under discussion is that the *imago dei* sets the stage for people to seek liberation by way of repentance and forgiveness. This doctrine says that in a world of suffering and hardship, people can achieve peace by respecting human dignity, seeking the kingdom of God and embodying forgiveness.

Moltmann (1997:1) developed the ethical implications of the *imago dei* even further. He also maintains that the concept is a theological concept with clear ethical implications. The concept should be explained in its close relationship with the *imago Christi* and *Gloria Dei est homo* (Moltmann 1993:216). The concept says something about God who created an image and then entered into a close relationship with that image. Therefore the *imago dei* is all about relationships – the relation between God and humankind and interrelations between humans. Humans are thus created as relational beings. They relate to God, to each other and to the rest of creation. They are representatives of God in this world to care for his work as stewards. The *imago dei* should be manifested not only in a few human characteristics, as early Reformed theology argued, but in the totality of human existence. He says: “The whole person, not merely his soul; the true human community, not only the individual; humanity as it is bound up with nature – it is these which are the image of God and his glory” (Moltmann 1993:221). The *imago dei* explains what human beings are and not what they have (see also Wright 2004:119; Vorster 2007:75).

The biblical idea of *imago dei*, as it is argued and applied in the Reformed tradition, has concrete implications for Christian

anthropology and social ethics. Not only does this concept explain the core value of human dignity, but it is essential to any approach to humaneness and human relationships. It has particular bearing on the ethics of forgiveness, because forgiveness has everything to do with the restoration of relationships. The doctrine of basic dignity of humankind as it is expressed in the *imago dei* is further developed by biblical themes such as the life-giving work of the Spirit of God. Brueggemann (*et al* 1999:51) says: “God’s very life is breathed into the sinner; something of God’s own self becomes an integral part of human identity, enabling life to move from God out into the larger world”. All humans are gifted with the creational gifts of the Spirit (Westermann 1997:450).

These gifts enable humans to fulfil their calling to be stewards of creation. Preuss (1991:238) summarises the purpose of these gifts as follows: “From the beginning, God has given the world to humanity. The world, and that does simply mean fellow human beings, is the object of human moral behaviour and discourse (cf Ps 8) and humanity may and should order the world responsibly before this God and in relationship with Him”. Humans can also inherit the new world. In the community of faith God saves humankind and restores his creation. All these topics developed throughout revelation-history demonstrate how God invested humankind with human dignity, not a dignity equivalent with God, but before God. The richness of this dignity lies in the relationships of humankind – the relation with God, with each other and with creation. In a later part of the article this principle will be revisited.

4 HUMAN DEPRAVITY

The concepts sin, original sin and evil are discussed anew in Reformed theology. Schmid (2007:373) indicates how interpretations are determined by denominational presuppositions. I do not want to enter into this debate because the purpose of this study is to focus on the reality of evil in creation and its effects for the relational quality of human existence. Whatever the different presuppositions in current Reformed thinking Reformed theology generally maintains that the Fall blemished the perfection of creation and disturbed the harmonious relations brought about by the *imago dei*. Calvin (Institutes II:1:1:239) taught that the whole human race inherited the sin of Adam and became objects of God’s curse on evil. In this respect he reaffirms the early teachings of, amongst others, Augustine, about original sin. Whatever one’s opinion about the

doctrine of original sin, Reformed theologians today still concur that humankind as a whole suffers the destructive influence of evil. As a result the creational relational quality of human existence became totally distorted. In his analysis of the Pauline theology the Dutch Reformed theologian Ridderbos (1971:94) explains that sin became the main attribute of this worldly dispensation. Sin and evil became a power that infected and contaminated this cosmos in such a way that this *aeon* turned against God and became a hostile reality revolting against God. He refers amongst others to Romans 3:6, 19; I Corinthians 11:32 and II Corinthians 5:19.

Human depravity manifests itself in the fallen humankind's basic violent nature (Vriezen 1962:56); human pride (Augustine, *City of God* XIV.4); its fundamental infidelity and rebellion (Calvin Institutes II:1:1:239); its tendency to become its own lord (Hauerwas 2004:31; Schmid 2007:376); its self-centred exploitation of nature (Moltmann 1993:229) and the adoption of a false self-image that God in his truthfulness cannot accept (Watts 2001:62). The destructive influence of sin has indeed been defined in various ways from the Church fathers up to date (see Wogaman 1993:338). In a reflection on an ethics of forgiveness the role of sin in the distortion of communion should be emphasised. Then sin can be seen as the force that acted diametrically against God's creation of harmony between humans and between humankind, nature and God. God created communion, sin distorted communion. Due to the Fall, humankind found itself in a distorted reality of for example enmity, hostility, greed, suspicion, selfishness and exploitation. Indeed, people are "filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil, they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless" (Rom 1:29-31).

This distorted reality became the predicament of humankind which became known for the many cruel wars the world has seen, slavery and oppression of people by others, exploitation by way of colonialism and selfish politics, ethnic cleansings in the name of cultural identity, racism, xenophobia, sexism and destruction of the ecosystems in the name of progress and civilisation. As a result of this typical human predicament humankind estranged itself from God and nature, and humans estranged themselves from each other. Sin also made it impossible for humans to change this predicament.

In spite of all the developments in science and technology, humans can not change their inner selves for the better. Redemption from the bondage of evil must come from outside, and this is an action that can only be taken by God.

Understanding of evil broadens the perspective on the understanding of God's grace in Christ. Throughout the Old Testament revelation God promises restoration of the *imago dei* and everything it entails in spite of the reality of evil. Bright (1963:98) explains the deeper meaning of the promise in his classic study of the kingdom of God in the biblical revelation. This restoration includes the restoration of community. Just as evil separates, God reconciles. Human depravity can only be overcome by this divine act of human redemption.

5 HUMAN REDEMPTION

Forgiveness is firstly an act of God and then an act of humans. The act of God makes the act of humans possible. His forgiveness is “the setting aside, on God's initiative, of enmity between God and humanity and the restoration of right relations between them” (Lehman 1986:233). This divine forgiveness is the fruit of the act of justification and reconciliation, which on their part, are founded in the atonement of Christ. Lehman (1986:234) speaks of the *at-one-ment* between God and humanity that come about through the death of Christ, who sacrificed Himself – one for all, and once for all. By this act of self-sacrifice Christ averted the judgement of God on humanity and deserved God's justification. His sacrificial offering is a height, range, and depth expiation of human sin and guilt. In the power of his resurrection Christ has at once nullified and fulfilled all the need from the human side to “get right with God”, and has surrounded and sustained human failure, frailty, and hope with the promise and the power to live humanly, as God has purposed his human creatures to live and to be. The atonement identifies the reality, possibility, and power of trust in God's assurance that things are so *right* with him that we are set free to trust and to risk trusting our neighbours *and* our enemies, as companions of the gift of being human that God has given (Lehman 1986:234).

Seen from another angle, in Christ the Kingdom of heaven has come near (Mt 3:2; 4:17; 10:7; Mark 1:15; Lk 10:9; 11; 21:31). The ethos of this kingdom is shaped by his proclamation and enactment of God's manifesting Kingdom, and central to that proclamation and

enactment, is the forgiveness of sins. With his suffering, death and resurrection, the covenant is restored. Therefore He calls and empowers his disciples to go to the nations proclaiming a gospel of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Lk 24:47; Acts 2:38; 5:31; 10:43; 13:38; 26:18). Thus the promises of the Old Testament are fulfilled. Central to the proclamation of the kingdom of God is the affirmation of the eternal kingship of the triune God; the judgement of evil and the restoration of the covenantal relation between God and humankind. The Kingdom manifests as a kingdom of reconciliation of humankind and God and of people across the limitations caused by evil. It is a peaceable Kingdom, as Hauerwas (1983:72) says. Believers in Christ become united as brothers and sisters in God's household of grace that is manifested in the Church as a new community. However, relations between Christians and people of other convictions are also affected. The reconciliation with God renews all other relations – between humankind and creation and between humans and humans. No boundaries should inhibit this new relationship. Christians are called and instructed to love all people - even their enemies – and must be willing to forgive others irrespective of deep social differences.

Forgiveness, as an act of God and an act of humans, is so important in the new kingdom that it forms an essential part in the Lord's prayer. Jesus teaches his followers to pray for the forgiveness of sins both as a graceful gift from God, but also as an example and motivation for their own forgiveness of others. Furthermore, the Spirit equips people with the craft of forgiveness. The work of the Spirit is directly related to the mutual forgiveness of sins. In John 20:21 Jesus breathed on the disciples and said: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them they are not forgiven". In this act the created communion becomes restored (Jones 1995:147).

6 A NEW BEGINNING UNDER NEW CONDITIONS

The resurrection of Christ entails that God offers all people the possibility of living in peace through the power of forgiveness (Hauerwas 1983:89). The Kingdom with its emphasis on communion between people and the commandment of love and reconciliation emerged as a new reality in history. Forgiveness leads to reconciliation, and the reconciliation between people, amidst the brokenness caused by evil, manifests this new reality. Acts of forgiveness in the social sphere must therefore be seen as

manifestations of the kingdom of God. By embodying forgiveness Christians erect signs of the kingdom of God. In other words: the peaceable Kingdom is, amongst others, realised by the forgiving acts of Christians. Every act of forgiveness symbolises this new reality because it constitutes a new beginning in a particular relation.

Where sin distorts communion, forgiveness restores communion (Jones 1995:59). This is the way in which forgiveness can break the cycle of violence in a violent political situation. Tutu's (1999:209) advice to the government of Rwanda after the genocide is worthwhile to consider in this regard. He said that the only way to break the cycle of reprisal and counter reprisal that had characterised their national history, had to be broken, and the only way to do so is to move on to restorative justice and forgiveness.

The theology of forgiveness reveals further that in spite of the grace and joy embedded in the ethics of forgiveness, forgiveness cannot be unconditional (see Jer 5:1; 2 Ki 24:4; 2 Chr 7:14; Is 55:7). The new reality can emerge only when certain conditions are met. Firstly, human forgiveness requires true repentance. The Scriptures teach that God forgave in response to repentance (Bash 2007:24). When forgiveness is prompted, true repentance, a new way of life arises. According to Jones (1995:66) this way of life is a fidelity to a relationship of friendship that must be learned and re-learned by people on their journey towards holiness in God's eschatological Kingdom. It is a way of life that enquires the ever-deepening and ever-widening sense of what life with God and God's creatures entails. Repentance and forgiveness are thus central in the Christian way of life. This is true for Christians in their calling in all spheres of life, whether in the macro sphere of politics or in the micro sphere of marital relations.

Secondly, the injustice of the damaging social conditions must be confessed as David confessed his sins to God and the prophet in Psalm 51. Jones (1995:19) is to the point with the following statement: "Repentance and confession must be practiced in specific and concrete ways, as part of the larger craft of forgiveness, if they are to result in that truthfulness that empowers people for faithful discipleship to Jesus Christ". His argument roots in Bonhoeffer's view about the cost of discipleship, which is still a powerful reminder of what true forgiveness entails. Christ's sacrificial and atoning death makes self-knowledge and repentance possible, and this possibility of repentance is a gift of the Spirit that can lead to

confession as the overture to forgiveness. Otherwise forgiveness becomes cheap. Smit (2007:322) correctly states that confession is not easy, forgiveness is not cheap, and that reconciliation is not superficial.

Smit (2007:315) makes a sound case for the need of interpersonal and inter-communal confession, such as was done in the proceedings of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. People had the opportunity to confess to each other and to heal broken relations through mutual forgiveness. These actions strengthened the social fibre of the new reality in the country. Although he rightly contends that confession does not have to be done in public, public confession has the ability not only to heal, but also to feature as an example to the community at large of the powerful effect of the reconciliation brought about by forgiveness and reconciliation. Here again, confession should be characterised by a determination to rectify social injustices and economic injuries caused by the system. Confession must have an impact on the inequalities by way of concrete intentions and plans for redress and restitution. A confession that does not promise and plan something new and better in the socio-political context is a meaningless exercise and does not comply with the Christian concept of self-denial with the purpose to attain something new and better for the neighbour in need.

Thirdly, forgiveness should inspire a willingness to promote social justice in a general sense. True repentance is much more than “lip-service” and false piety. Translated into a socio-political praxis, this repentance should be manifested into a willingness to restore and to redress. Seen against the background of the South African context whites have to admit that they were wrongly benefited by the system at the expense of black interests but this submission has to be contextualised in a willingness not only to restore the human dignity of black people, but also to redress the socio-economic injustices that had been developed by Apartheid. The willingness must be willingness to sacrifice through concrete deeds of sharing their wealth in an orderly and legitimate fashion. The Land Restitution Act makes provision for such restitution and this process should be supported by all who are sincere with their repentance, in order to be forgiven.

Hauerwas (1983:90) reminds us that God made Christians agents of the history of the Kingdom. Christians should therefore not

only be active agents in the restoration of distorted relations, but also whistle blowers when-ever and where-ever the table is set for new social injustices that may emerge. Forgiveness thus requires an ethos of “this may not happen again”. The confessing person is the most able agent of this ethos, because the guilty party is in the best position to illuminate the causes of the unjust worldview and system. Who can be better agents against racism than white people in South Africa and who can be better agents against anti-Semitism than Germans?

Fourthly, repentance, confession and the implementation of social justice must be answered with forgiveness, which entails a closing down of all enmity, with an elimination of bitterness and a willingness to start the new relations with a clean slate. “Forgiveness” that still nurtures blame, hate speech and continuing references to the uneasy past can not be described as a virtual image of God’s forgiveness and a sign of the new reality that can be brought about by the gift of forgiveness. These conditions indicate that forgiveness is indeed costly.

Lastly, Christians must learn to live as forgiven people. Hauerwas (1983:89) stresses this important virtue in the ethics of forgiveness. Just as forgiving people have the responsibility to refrain from blame, hate speech and constant references to past conditions, forgiven people should refrain from living with the frame of mind of a victim. This condition can emerge when forgiven people continue to live with a guilt complex and with self-reproach. Forgiven people should be active in nurturing the new reality – manifesting the kingdom by living in the spirit of reconciliation.

The Church has a highly important role in the promotion of a spirit of repentance and forgiveness. Smit (2007:313) reminds us that God took mercy on the godless, the unjust, the guilty, in fact on God’s enemies. The Christian church has been given this message of reconciliation to proclaim and administer. In societies recovering from hostility, injustices and injuries to many people, such as the present South African community, churches should be active agents of the art of forgiveness with everything it entails. This can be done in two ways. Firstly churches should be the voice of the injured by pointing out the injustices in society. They should be the conscience of the perpetrators in order to initiate repentance in its socio-political mode, and they should be the advocates of the spirit of forgiveness in all spheres of societal relations. The huge challenge for Churches

in their quest for repentance and forgiveness in a socio-political environment is to overcome what Jones (1995:37) identified as the marginalisation of forgiveness in modern culture due to modernity's emphasis on individual autonomy. He contends that in modernist culture the individual is told to opt for self-determination instead of humiliation and forgiveness. The hero is the unforgiving strong individual and not the forgiving disciple of Christ. Churches should teach the opposite.

Secondly, churches should be examples of repentance and forgiveness. The communion of believers, living by the principles of repentance and forgiveness and expressing it in their Holy Communion, has to be an exemplary community which manifests the richness of restored communion. Churches should show broken societies communities in which the spirit of repentance and forgiveness lives and which are models of reconciled communities. If churches reflect the same images of a broken and divided society, they can not be symbols of hope and signs of the kingdom of God, which is God's way to show his compassion to humankind.

7 CONCLUSION

These broad contours of an ethics of forgiveness provide a paradigm for further reflection on other prominent issues resurging in a process of truth and reconciliation. Issues that need further consideration include the following questions:

- What is the relation between forgiveness and remembrance? Should bygones be merely regarded as bygones or is remembrance essential as a shield against the recurrence of injustices?
- How should anger be dealt with and towards what should the anger of the victims be directed?
- Should forgiveness close the eyes to retributive justice and pave the way to restorative justice? Should the ethics of forgiveness also be underpinned by a legal system as Vogel (*et al* 2007:90) appeals for?
- The last question also raises the extremely important issue of impunity. What are the parameters and the underlying ethical norms for a jurisprudence of impunity?

- Furthermore, what should the extent of restitution be? Restitution must be seen as a natural consequence of forgiveness, but to what extent and what should the response of the perpetrator and the victim be in cases where restitution is not possible?

The ethics of forgiveness described in this article can only stand the test of time when these and other crucial questions are addressed convincingly. Christian ethicists should deal with these issues in future research about the much discussed topic of forgiveness in times of a socio-political transition.

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