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**Using the Concept of Assurance of Salvation to  
Cultivate a Spirit of Forgiveness in the Christian Life**

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### **Abstract**

In the centre of the assurance of Christian salvation is the assurance of the forgiveness of sins and reconciliation to God. In the Hebrew Scriptures forgiveness was the exclusive prerogative of God. However, in the New Testament forgiveness of sins is an essential mark of a disciple of Christ. The Bible assertively demands that Christians should be ready to pass on the forgiveness they have received from God through Christ to those who wrong them. This does not mean that it is easy to forgive perpetrators of wrongdoing. Some acts of wrongdoing are not only gross, but outright excruciating and costly. This makes forgiveness a very difficult issue. It is important for Christians to be mindful of the importance of forgiveness and how they can develop a spirit of forgiveness in their lives. The Holy Communion stands as a symbol of assurance of salvation and a symbol that beckons Christians to embrace one another even their enemies.

### **Introduction**

This essay is an attempt to foster a spirit of forgiveness in Christian life by using the concept of assurance<sup>1</sup> of salvation. It builds a case for a spirit of forgiveness in Christian living on the basis of assurance of Christian salvation. The urgent need for a forgiving spirit in Christian living is best illustrated joke narrated by Ernest Hemingway (in Miroslav Volf 2005: 127) about the name Paco in Madrid, Spain:

Madrid is full of boys named Paco, which is diminutive of the name Francisco, and there is a Madrid joke about a father who came to Madrid and inserted an advertisement in the personal columns of *El Liberal* which said: PACO MEET ME AT HOTEL MONTAN NOON TUESDAY ALL IS FORGIVEN PAPA and how a squadron of Guardia Civil had to be called out to disperse the eight hundred young men who answered the advertisement.

The story was originally told to spite the prevalence of the name ‘Paco’ in Spain. However, it derives its essence on the ubiquitous need for forgiveness (Volf 2005: 127). It is not overstating the case to say that just as there were eight hundred Pacos who so desperately wanted to be freed from condemnation, there are also many who are

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<sup>1</sup> In this essay I have deliberately avoided the controversial Calvinistic term “Irrevocable Nature of Salvation” in preference for the lesser problematic “assurance of salvation”.

in the father's shoes who are heavy-laden with grudges, who so desire to forgive. And yet to forgive is not an easy and cheap task. That forgiveness is a rare commodity in our world is evidenced by the ubiquity of revenge motivated violence in our world. This can be seen in all levels of human existence – at interpersonal, interfamily, intertribal, and international, just to name but a few levels.

I approach the issue of developing a spirit of forgiveness in the Christian life as a black African Christian who has lived all his life in conflict-riddled Africa. I have come to know what it means to hate and to begrudge, both as a perpetrator and as a victim. I also know the discomfort of God's call to forgive others on one nursing bitter wounds and memories inflicted by a fellow Christian, family members and close friends. I know what it means, to clench one's heart and fist and say, 'No, I will not forgive this evil person. You just don't know the harm he did to me!' Conflict, hurt and bitterness are real realities that African Christians must deal with at one point in their lives. Africa has become synonymous with bitter conflicts among Christians; some of these conflicts have left scars that will never heal. Slavery, colonialism, the wars for independence and the never ending tribal conflicts that have escalated to genocide, political violence, nepotism, domestic violence, and HIV and Aids issues are but a few of the many problems that foster bitterness and a spirit of revenge among many Africans.

The problem statement of this essay centres on the question: Why should the assurance of God's salvation determine how Christians deal with the sins of others? To this end, this essay is not interested in expounding the doctrine of the assurance of salvation; it is interested in the ethical implications of being assured of one's salvation. The essay will begin (in section 1) by a brief description of the problems associated with understanding the concept of the assurance of salvation. It will proceed to (in section 2) to highlight that the central issue in the assurance of salvation is assurance of the forgiveness of sins. The essay will further (in section 3) examine the nature of God's forgiveness. Having expounded on the nature of God's forgiveness of sins, the essay will (in section 4) examine the communal implications of God's forgiveness of sins in Christian living this will be followed (in section 5) a brief exposition on the importance of forgiveness. It is important to understand the factors that are necessary in order to

develop a spirit of forgiveness in the Christian life (in section 6). The essay will (in section 7) close by highlighting that Holy Communion is a symbol of God's assurance of salvation that continually challenges Christians to embrace their enemies.

### 1. The Concept of Assurance of Salvation

The concept of assurance of salvation is usually expressed in the controversial dictum: 'once saved, always saved'. This is a hotly contested subject in evangelical Christianity. The best settlement to the debate was breaking up into two theological schools of thinking, the Reformed/Calvinist and the Arminian. There is a large body of research material on the subject of the assurance of salvation or the irrevocable nature of salvation<sup>2</sup>. This journal has in the past devoted significant attention to the topic<sup>3</sup>. Scholars are in concert concerning the inconclusiveness of the debate on whether salvation is irrevocable or not<sup>4</sup>. In view of the previous in-depth deliberations on the irrevocability of salvation, it is pointless to repeat that discussion in this essay.

However, while not finding consensus on the irrevocability nature of salvation, there is a greater consensus on the assurance and certainty of salvation. While it is hotly contested whether it is possible for a truly saved Christian to apostatize and lose salvation, there is less contest on the fact that Christians can be sure that they are indeed saved<sup>5</sup>. In other words, there is greater consensus that the Bible does assure Christians of their salvation. Therefore, Christians must not stand in doubt. The assumption of this essay is that there is measurable certainty that God is faithful and powerful enough to fulfil his promise of the salvation of the saved sinners.

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<sup>2</sup> For a detailed analysis of the various views eternal security see, Pinson, J. W. 2002 (editor). *Four views on eternal security*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan; Marshall, I.H. 1969. *Kept by the power of God: a study of perseverance and falling away*. Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship; Grudem, W. 1994. *Systematic Theology: An introduction to biblical doctrine*. Leicester: IVP. Chapter 40

<sup>3</sup> This was in the case in Testamentum Imperium – Volume 2 (2009) edition.

<sup>4</sup> Godwin N. Toryough (2009: 1) provides this fitting description of the inconclusive nature of the question of the irrevocable nature of the salvation: "While many volumes have rolled out of the printing press portending to solve this problem, the debate rages on without any end in sight, at least in the nearest future. Whether consensus will ever be reached on these issues or not is unpredictable"

<sup>5</sup> However, even then the understanding of church as visible and invisible can confuse this debate.

In order to toe the line of our topic, it is best to concentrate on the dependent variable of living a Christian life of forgiveness. The assurance of salvation is our independent variable upon which forgiving others stands. Since in the certainty of Christian salvation is certainty of God's forgiveness of sins, Christians should therefore be forgiving to others.

## **2. The Centrality of the Forgiveness of Sins in Assurance of Salvation**

It is important to start by emphasizing that central to the assurance of salvation is the forgiveness of sins and the reconciliation of the forgiven sinner to God. In this section the essay will expound on the fact that to be assured of salvation is to be assured of forgiveness of sins and reconciliation. Since the intent of this essay is to cultivate a spirit of forgiveness in the Christian life it is imperative to clearly articulate God's forgiveness to the Christians.

Forgiveness of sins is central in Christian salvation. It is important to realise that at the core of Christian salvation is the mending of the relationship between God and the human race damaged by sin. As Demarest (1997: 147) affirms, "human sin is an offense to the holy and righteous God". The bible is vehemently explicit: sin has put God and humankind asunder. Unfortunately, modern Christianity seems to lose focus of this fact. For instance, in Zimbabwe, [this could be true in many other parts of the world], the subject of sin is increasingly being replaced by a vogue understanding of the word 'curse'. Whereas the message of salvation was, 'sinner, repent from your sins and be saved', it is becoming common to hear, 'come and be delivered from your curses'. And by curse is not meant the curse incurred by personal sin such as we see in the Garden of Eden. Curse has come to resemble those things that inhibit one from attaining health and wealth prosperity. This means that salvation is now less associated with the forgiveness of sins, but is now associated with deliverance from prosperity inhibiting spiritual powers and curses.

The theme forgiveness and reconciliation was aptly demonstrated in Jesus' earthly ministry. Jesus bore this name on account of the fact that he would will save his people from their sins (Matt. 1: 21). Sin is the reason Christ came and died on the cross. According to Paul, God demonstrated his own love toward the human race, "in that while we

were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5: 8, New American Standard Bible, throughout). In being forgiven, the saved sinner is rescued from suffering the wrath of God on account of sin is reconciled to God (Rom 5: 9). Schreiner and Caneday (2001: 75) express this in these words, “We are guilty because we have sinned and therefore deserve judgement and God’s eschatological wrath”. Therefore, “[f]orgiveness of sins is our greatest need before God” (Schreiner and Caneday 2001: 75). In this regard Christianity is settled in that “forgiveness and justification are fundamental to God’s saving work” (Schreiner and Caneday 2001: 75). The New Testament writers have made this abundantly clear<sup>6</sup>. The broken relationship between God and the human race is restored by the forgiveness of sins that comes through the death of Christ. To emphasise the magnitude of the problem of sin it has become traditional for theologians to talk of ‘total depravity’, although there is also immense controversy over the term<sup>7</sup>. Accordingly Paul writes, “It is a trust worthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all” (1 Tim. 1: 15). It can therefore be affirmed that assurance of salvation is in fact assurance that the repentant sinner has been forgiven and reconciled to God.

### **3. The Nature of God’s Forgiveness**

Having established that in the assurance of salvation is assurance of forgiveness and reconciliation, it is essential to proceed to understand the nature of this forgiveness. It is important to do this in order to arrive at a sound theology of forgiveness of others. Since God is the God who forgives it is important realise that in order “to understand our own forgiving, we need to start with God’s.” (Volf 2005: 131).

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<sup>6</sup> Romans 5; Ephesians 2 and 1 Thess. 1: 10 articulate the fact of human need for God’s forgiveness. God’s forgiveness saves humanity from the punishment of sin.

<sup>7</sup> As Graham Cole (2009: 70) helpfully points out, ‘total depravity’ is not the most fortunate of terms. He points out that it does not refer to the intensity of depravity but its extent (Cole 2009: 70). Marshall (in Cole 2009: 69), puts it this way: “Sin...affects every relationship of man, to God, to his fellows and to himself. Its influence is seen in every part of his life. Its badness corrupts all that he thinks, says and does. This does not mean that he is as bad as he can be, but that no part of him is entirely free from the taint of sin. This is what theologians call ‘total depravity’”.

The biblical view of forgiveness is that it is first and foremost the exclusive entitlement of God. The Hebrew Scriptures affirm the exclusive right to forgive “iniquity, transgression and sin” (Ex. 34: 7) belongs to God. The same affirmation is made in Isaiah 43: 25, where God declares himself as “the one who wipes out your transgressions for My own sake; and I will not remember your sins”.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps it was out of this understanding that the Jews could not stomach Jesus’ statement to the paralytic man: “My son, your sins are forgiven” (Mk. 2: 5). They bitterly objected to that act by Jesus because by doing so he was making himself to be God (Mark 2: 9). Jesus was assuming a role that exclusively belonged to God.

If forgiveness is the sole prerogative of God, it means that the very initiative to forgive is also his. It is from this perspective that forgiveness in Christianity is an act of underserved favour. In Christianity is held that God has promised that he completely forgives sins and that the initiative of this forgiveness lies exclusively with him (Grider 2001: 460). At the same time, it is important to understand that according to the Hebrew Scriptures there “was no guarantee that God would necessarily forgive if a person repented” (Bash 2007: 25). In this is affirmed that forgiveness “was a gift of grace, and God did not have to forgive except by God’s own choice and volition” (Bash 2007: 25). And yet, repentance remained a prerequisite to forgiveness, for the forgiveness of God came as a result of repentance (Bash 2007: 24). And the outcome of God’s forgiveness was the reconciliation of the forgiven sinner to God.

In the act of forgiveness God balances his love for the sinful world and his disapproval of its sinfulness (Volf 2005: 140). The Bible presents God as the just God who disapproves of sin and decisively deals with it when it occurs. Paul declares, “the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of man” (Rom. 1: 18). On the part of God, the motivation of this wrath is his righteousness and his holiness. The righteous and holy God cannot overlook sin. Stott (1994: 72) explains that God’s “wrath is his holy hostility to evil, his refusal to condone it or come to terms with it, his judgement upon it”. The reality of sin separates God and humankind, making human beings rebellious

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<sup>8</sup> Other useful texts in this regard are Psalm 103: 3 and Micah 7: 18.

children who deserve the wrath of God. Sin is thus not acceptable to God; neither can he tolerate it. Hence his anger burns against sin. The rest of Romans 1 is an inventory of the things that have stirred God's anger and how he has dealt with sin. In his love, rather than serve death which is the natural outcome of sin (Rom. 3: 23), he has served life by forgiving the sinner. While to "be just is to condemn the fault and, because of the fault, to condemn the doer as well" (Volf 2005: 141). Yet, to "forgive is to condemn the fault but to spare the doer" (Volf 2005: 141). And indeed this is what the forgiving God has done to us sinners and our sins. At the cross the justice of God was sufficiently fulfilled and his love truly expressed. One could say the cross was the balance between God's love and justice. Indeed Scripture is awash with affirmations that God is a God who forgives continually. In theology this is best summed by ascribing such attributes as love, good, merciful and gracious to God. God's love, goodness, mercifulness and graciousness are best seen in how he deals with sinners, calling them to repentance and salvation. In his love he granted life to the sinners who deserved death; in his justice he took upon Christ the sins of the sinners so that the sinners did not have to pay the penalty for their sins.

Volf (2005: 142) poses the question, "What does God do when forgiving?" In response to this question he provides a variety of Scriptural metaphors depicting what God does when he forgives (Volf 2005: 142). When God forgives he does not reckon sin<sup>9</sup>; he covers sin<sup>10</sup>; puts our wrongdoing behind his back<sup>11</sup>, he removes our transgression from us as far as the east is from the west<sup>12</sup>; he blots out<sup>13</sup> our sin and he sweeps away our sins like mist<sup>14</sup> (Volf 2005: 142-143). In granting his forgiveness God completely removes the record of wrongdoing. And the act of forgiveness is immediate; it "is not a future gift; we enjoy it as a present possession" (Schreiner and Caneday 2001: 75). This means that the Christian stands fully forgiven. What is the outcome of all this? Volf (2005: 143)

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<sup>9</sup> Romans 4: 8 and Psalm 32: 1-2

<sup>10</sup> Psalm 32: 1; Romans 4: 7

<sup>11</sup> Isaiah 38: 17

<sup>12</sup> Psalm 103: 12

<sup>13</sup> Isaiah 43: 25

<sup>14</sup> Isaiah 44: 22



announces: “And then, miracle of miracles, God doesn’t even remember our sins” (sic). The forgiven sins are blotted out and “gone, gone from reality and gone from memory” (Volf 2005: 143, emphasis added). The wonder of this outcome is depicted in the Bible by a variety of motifs such as justification, redemption and reconciliation to describe how God views the Christian<sup>15</sup>. Demarest (1997: 345) explains that justification is related to important motifs such as forgiveness of sins, restoration to fellowship, adoption into the family of God and the gift of eternal life. The gist in all these metaphors is simple: all condemnation has been removed from Christians; God has forgiven them that they stand before God as if they have not committed any sin at all, that is they are fully reconciled to God (Rom. 8: 1).

Forgiven and reconciled to him, God grants to the Christian the status of a child (John 1: 12), and the seal of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1: 13-14). Furthermore, the Christian becomes the temple of the Holy Spirit; God lives in the Christian while the Christian in turn lives in God (Banda 2010)<sup>16</sup>. Christ has given those that have received and believed in him the “right to be children of God”. Explains Morris (1971: 98), “When they receive the Word they are born again [John 3] into the heavenly family. It is only in this way that they are really God’s ‘children’”. Directly related to this is the principle of adoption. Christians are adopted as children of God (Rom. 8: 15). Above this the Holy Spirit bears witness that Christians are children of God (Rom. 8: 16-17). Another family image used in the Bible to depict assurance of salvation is that of Husband and Wife relationship (Eph. 5: 23-33)<sup>17</sup>. It means that when sin is dealt with humanity can fellowship with God, be part of God’s family and be rescued from eternal death. These motifs communicate certainty of salvation.

Scripture is frantic to give full assurance that the repented sinner indeed stands forgiven. Of great significance to this regard is Romans

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<sup>15</sup> Leon Morris’ *The atonement: Its meaning and significance* (1983) best captures the significance of these motifs and their meaning.

<sup>16</sup> In this study, *The Sufficiency of Christ in Africa: A Christological Challenge from African Traditional Religions* (2010) I have highlighted the significance of these motifs to African Christians.

<sup>17</sup> This passage clearly demonstrates Christ’s gracious commitment to save the church. Just as he loved us while we were yet sinners (Rom 8: 5), he married an unattractive bride in order to beautify her and make her glorious.

8. The chapter begins by announcing that those who are in Christ are freed from all condemnation. Their sin has been taken away or covered. The chapter closes by declaring that there is absolutely nothing that can separate the Christian from the love of God. The bases of confident assurance of forgiveness of sins rests on God's holy character, the death of Christ and the promises he has made to the sinners. This means that to be saved is to be forgiven of sins and be freed from the penalty due to them.

#### **4. The Communal Obligations of God's Forgiveness of our Sins**

The doctrine of the assurance of forgiveness of sins challenges Christians to live a life of forgiveness. Having established the nature of God's forgiveness to the Christians, we can now deliberate on its implications on Christian living. Certainty of God's forgiveness and salvation should result in the cultivation of a spirit of forgiveness in the believers' life. The God who forgives and has forgiven demands that Christians be forgiving to each other. We have established that salvation concerns the forgiveness of sins and that God has solemnly assured Christians of his forgiveness of their sins. In this section we will look at the communal obligations of the assurance of God's forgiveness of sins. To be forgiven by God comes with the great responsibility to be forgiving to fellow Christians as well.

##### **4.1. God's Forgiveness Obliges the Christian to Be Forgiving**

Whereas in the traditional Hebrew understanding forgiveness is the prerogative of God (see section 3), in the New Testament forgiveness is central to Christian faith and practise and a central essence in being a true disciple of Christ (Bash 2007: 26). Paul declares: "just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you" (Col. 3: 13b). In other words, to benefit from the work of the cross demands that "every aspect of the Christian community's life is shaped and coloured by it" (Stott 1989: 295). Expressing the same point much more strongly, Tidball (2001: 21) says, "The Christian life is viewed primarily as a life that finds its origin in the cross and is lived in grateful response to it and humble imitation of it". In this Tidball emphasises that Christianity is what it is because of the cross. To be much more precise, Christianity is established by the death of Christ on the cross to take away the sins of humankind. To live in grateful response to the cross and imitate it essentially encompasses having an

attitude of forgiveness towards the sins of others. In his Foreword, in Miroslav Volf's *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (2005), the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams (2005: 9) writes, "the true God is a God who cannot stop giving and forgiving, and that our knowledge of this true God is utterly bound up with our willingness to receive from the hand of God the liberty to give and forgive". To emphasise this implication upon the Christian community, Volf (2005: 131) says, "For Christians, forgiving...always takes place in a triangle, involving the wrongdoer, the wronged person, and God." In saying this Volf fingers the matrix in Christian forgiveness. This can be clearly seen in the remarks made by Jesus in the conclusion of his lesson on prayer in Matthew 6: 14-15. In the statement by Jesus, we see that there is God the overall forgiver, the human wrongdoer and the human wronged. Jesus categorically states that as much as the wronged would want to be forgiven by God, he too must be willing do the same to people who wrong him.

#### **4.2. The Difficulty of Forgiveness**

Can one forgive? This is a question that all human beings, the religious and the atheists often ponder on. It is common to hear cynically pessimistic expressions concerning the human ability to forgive. Mere observation of reality shows that there are some things that are just too difficult to regard as forgivable. Volf (2005: 128) acknowledges that forgiveness, notwithstanding its necessity and importance, is "hard to carry out". The reality of bitterness is real among Christians. Throughout whole Bible we encounter God's people who struggled to forgive their offenders.

While there are some who are unwilling to forgive others believing that all who wrong them must be held accountable for their wrong actions, for many people the difficult to forgive arises from the pain of being at the receiving end of wrongdoing. Naturally, the desire to see all wrongs punished accordingly, if not severely, runs deep in most human beings. Many people continue to desire the redress of the wrongdoing they have suffered regardless of the long passage of time (Bash 2007: 57). What makes forgiveness extremely challenging is its concern for justice (Bash 2007: 57). The emerging contentious question is whether a wrongdoer should be let free to get away with wrongdoing without any just recompense for their wrong actions.

Indeed, it does not matter from whom wrongdoing has been suffered; the pain of being a victim is unquestionably real. Some offences are minor and easy to deal with. And yet some offenses are so huge that to talk about forgiveness in regard to them seems rather blasphemous. Situations such as a betrayed trust, public embarrassment, carelessness that maims or destroys life, atrocious and callous acts such as Apartheid, Rwandan genocide, Ghuguraundi Massacres<sup>18</sup> in Zimbabwe, and the countless acts of brutality across the world are situations that have left indelible historical scars. Processes of addressing some of these situations have been undertaken both at national and international level. And indeed, in some situations justice has been served. And yet in the majority of these cases very little or no serious effort has been done to deal with the wounds inflicted by these brutal acts. A measurable seriousness to the hurt of victims was displayed by the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, convened immediately after the country's independence, to promote national healing after three centuries of Apartheid rule that "dehumanised and oppressed" (Maluleke 1997a: 324) the black majority. Even then scepticism was expressed about the commission's capacity to not "deal rather lightly with deep wounds of God's people" (Maluleke 1997a: 341)<sup>19</sup>.

And yet not all such deep wounds attract the attention of the magnitude of government and donor funding. Betrayed confidence, broken promises, and family conflicts, bitter tiffs with other Christians, marital rape, gossip and many other offenses that occur at interpersonal levels go undetected and unknown to those outside the circle of the concerned relationships. It is at interpersonal level that forgiveness takes an extremely challenging posture. Whereas those involved in a public conflict have the cheering of the broad gallery, in private interpersonal conflicts the wounded face their pain alone. There are offences that are easy to forgive and yet there are those for which to be forgiven seems out-rightly impossible. It is probably at this level that the challenge to forgive is met with firm resistance.

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<sup>18</sup> These were mass killings of civilians in Zimbabwe (1982-1987) by the North Korean Fifth Brigade of the Zimbabwe National Army and Human Rights defenders have been lobbying for this to be classified as genocide.

<sup>19</sup> In an earlier work he raised similar reservation (Maluleke 1997b).

God is a perfect example of what it means to suffer offence and yet be able to forgive. Sure thing, to forgive is a difficult and costly task, but there is a sense to which what humans incur can never be compared to what Christ incurred on the cross. Nonetheless, it remains a fact, however incomparable it may be to God, in forgiving others we pay a price. In forgiving sinful human beings it cost God Calvary. Furthermore, in forgiving God does not act as if nothing actual happened or as if things are not what they are. The sinner must acknowledge his sinfulness and repent. In this regard, “forgiving and being reconciled are not about pretending that things are other than they are” (Tutu 1999: 270). In fact in forging sinners God does not pretend as if the sinner has done nothing seriously. Forgiveness and reconciliation, furthermore, are “not patting one another on the back and turning a blind eye to the wrong” (Tutu 1999: 270). Care and seriousness is therefore necessary because “spurious reconciliation can bring only spurious healing” (Tutu 1999: 270). However, it still needs to be bone in mind, that God who stands ready to forgive sinners and give them assurance of forgiveness and reconciliation constrains his followers to do the same to all people who wrong them (Bash 2007: 26). In all this, Jesus remains assertive in his demand upon Christians to be ready to forgive others in unlimited measure<sup>20</sup>.

## **5. The Necessity of Cultivating a Spirit of Forgiveness**

Why is it necessary for Christians to develop a spirit of forgiveness in the Christian life?

### **5.1. The burden of Anger and Bitterness**

The spirit of forgiveness is necessary because bitterness and anger are heavy loads to carry around oneself. Christians are commanded to avoid the burden of anger and bitterness by being kind-hearted and forgiving to each other (Eph. 5: 31-32). To develop a spirit of forgiveness is to reject being overburdened with the load of anger and bitterness. The Archbishop Emeritus Tutu (1999: 272) emphasises this point by saying that forgiving “means abandoning your right to pay back the perpetrator in his own coin, *but it is a loss that liberates the victim*” (emphasis added). In what way does the

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<sup>20</sup> Bash (2007: 55-78) offers a helpful perspective on how to balance justice and unlimited forgiveness.

victim experience liberation? Tutu (1999: 272) cites as an example the people he encountered while leading the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. He says, “In the commission we heard people speak of sense of relief after forgiving” (Tutu 1999: 272). In forgiving the victim finds liberty from anger and bitterness. His life ceases to be dominated by the bitter feelings of harm suffered in the past. It is not uncommon to find people who are well into their advanced adulthood ages who are gripped and burdened by a wrong they suffered when they were children. Cultivating a spirit of forgiveness in the Christian life keeps one from being burdened by anger and bitterness which leads to strife and conflict.

## 5.2. The circular nature of bitterness and violence

Forgiveness is essential in order to stop the vicious circle of bitterness and violence. To highlight the vicious circular nature of violence Volf (1996: 111) recounts this encounter with a Muslim woman in former Yugoslavia:

I am a Muslim, and I am thirty five years old. To my second son who was just born, I gave the name ‘Jihad’. So he would not forget the testament of his mother-revenge. The first time I put my baby at my breast I told him, “May this milk choke you if you forget”. So be it. The Serbs taught me to hate. For the last two months there was nothing in me. No pain, no bitterness. Only hatred. I taught these children to love. I did. I am teacher of literature. I was born in Ilijas and I almost died there. My student, Zoran, the only son of my neighbour, urinated into my mouth. As the bearded hooligans standing around laughed, he told me: “You are good for nothing else, you stinking Muslim woman...” I do not know whether I first heard the cry or felt the blow. My former colleague, a teacher of physics, was yelling like mad, “Ustasha, ustasha...” And kept hitting me. Wherever he could. I have become insensitive to pain. But my soul? It hurts. I taught them [her students] to love and all the while they were making preparations to destroy everything that is not to the Orthodox faith. Jihad-war. *This is the only way....*<sup>21</sup> (emphasis added).

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<sup>21</sup> Similarly, in his sermon to the people of Rwanda, on the aftermath of the dreadful genocide The Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu best capture the dynamics of the circle of violence in these words:

I said that the history of Rwanda was typical of a history of ‘top dog’ and ‘underdog’. The top dog wanted to cling to its privileged position and the underdog strove to topple the top dog. When that happened, the new top dog engaged in an orgy of retribution to pay back the new underdog for all the pain and suffering it had inflicted when it was top dog. The new underdog fought like an enraged bull to topple the new top dog, storing in its memory all the pain and suffering it was enduring, forgetting that the new top dog was in its view only retaliating for all what it remembered it had suffered when the

[Footnote continued on next page ...]

This is an account of one who endured extreme provocation and humiliation. From a natural point of view, her reaction is justified. One may be tempted (or even wish) to see this as a phenomenon that is only alive in Islam. But that will not only be serious prejudice, it will be, above all, be turning a blind eye to what is common even among Christians. While the details differ, many Christians in Africa are familiar with such scenarios. At family level, one can think of the often-too-common scenario of domestic violence marked by wife-battering (and even husband-battering). One can think of a daughter-in-law who has experienced so much heart-rending mistreatment from her mother-in-law or even from the sisters of her husband gang up against *umuntuwokuza* [foreigner<sup>22</sup>]. Pastors in African churches can relate such bitter disputes. We could also think of widows and orphans who were left fortunes by their dead husbands only to lose literally everything to the greedy brothers of the late man. We could also think of the recent political violence in Zimbabwe where Christians suddenly turned against each other on account of MDC and ZANU-PF affiliations. Accounts of accounts of rape, robbery, discrimination and all forms of violence are not mere stories but reality. One can relate the trauma of being betrayed by once trusted associates. In some of these situations the perpetrators are not strangers, but known people, some occupying places of social, economic, political and religious honour. Is it possible to have a forgiving spirit in such situations? Furthermore, how can one be expected to be forgiving in the midst of such losses of one's human dignity?

A spirit of forgiveness is necessary in order to break the circle of violence. The solution of the Serbian woman recounted by Volf enhances the circle of violence. She dealt with her offenders in a way that prolongs and widens the circle of violence. The ubiquity of violence, bitterness and vindictiveness in our world is testimony that indeed many children around the world “are growing up with ‘jihad’, ‘war’, ‘crusade’, ‘revenge’, ‘hatred’, not only inscribed in their names but woven into the very fabric of their lives!” (Volf 1996: 111). Indeed, the inscriptions are there for all who care to see! In

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underdog had been its master. It was a sad history of reprisal provoking counterreprisal (Tutu 1999: 259).

<sup>22</sup> In this the wife is regarded as a foreigner from a consanguineous relational point of view.

Zimbabwe, like in all non-literal societies, history is encapsulated in names of people and places. It is therefore not uncommon to find people with names that serve as reminders of past experiences. Furthermore, just like the Muslim woman cited above, it is not uncommon to find those who are intent on fanning non-forgetfulness of past hurtful experiences. In Zimbabwe it is not uncommon to experience outbursts of a desire by the Ndebeles to revenge on the Shonas over the Gughurahundi atrocities<sup>23</sup>. A spirit of forgiveness would sedate the desire for revenge. The Archbishop Emeritus Tutu (1999) tells of how he challenged the people of Rwanda, as they were trying to rebuild their nation after the 1994 genocide to break the circle of violence. He told them that “the cycle of reprisal and counterreprisal that had characterized their national history had to be broken and that the only way to do this was to go beyond retributive justice to restorative justice, *to move on to forgiveness, because without it there was no future*” (Tutu 1999: 262, emphasis added). This point is buttressed by Volf (2005: 127) who says, “We desire forgiveness because we value relationships, and we know that relationships cannot be mended without forgiveness”. Forgiveness is essential to good community life.

The responsibility of breaking the chain of violence is placed on the victimised, not the victimiser. Jesus declares: “You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour, and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt 5: 43-44). In buttressing this teaching of his Lord, Paul taught, “Bless those who persecute you; bless and curse not”. (Rom 12: 14). In this the power of breaking the chain of violence does not lie with the persecutor but with the persecuted. Here Paul shows the seriousness of the commandment by expressing the command positively and negatively in the same breath: **positively**, *the Christian victims must bless their persecutors*; **negatively**, *they must not curse their persecutors*. Indeed, when persecuted the natural response is to seek revenge and to curse the persecutor. But Christ requires the Christian to respond differently: Christians must be redemptive and

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<sup>23</sup> In saying this I am not overlooking the importance and necessity of confession, justice, reparations and restitution. However, as Tutu (1999 : 272) points out, “There is no question that, of course, such a confession is a very great help to the one who wants to forgive, *but it is not absolutely indispensable*” (added).



not vindictive. Instead of extending wrath to the persecutors, Christians are commissioned to extend grace and mercy. In Leon Morris' (1988: 449) words, Paul makes it clear that to curse one's persecutors "has no place among those whom Christ has saved". This means that the violated and the victimised must from the beginning opt to be a channel of peace, restoration and reconciliation.

### 5.3. De-sacralisation of Victimhood

A spirit of forgiveness is necessary in order to de-sacralise the state of victimhood. There is a tendency to sacralise the wrongs suffered in the past. By sacralisation I mean the *absolutization* or *religiocization* of the state of being a victim so that it becomes an identical tag. People who religiocise their victimhood want to dwell on their past injuries as if there is no future. Sometimes those who have suffered an offence want to treat their suffering in absolute or religious terms that they can never be liberated from the pain they have endured. This often results in passivity and determinism. But it can also lead to a situation where our pain and hurt becomes the most important one than the pain of others. This is when victimhood becomes immortalised and celebrated. Tutu (1999: 267-268) recounts how he suffered the wrath of the Jews and was taunted as anti-Semitic for calling on the Jews to forgive the perpetrators of the Holocaust. For condemning the Israel's harsh treatment of Palestinians he was lampooned with the tag, "Tutu is black Nazi pig" (Tutu 1999: 268). It will indeed be anti-Semitic to take lightly the excruciating ordeal the Jews encountered at the hands of the Nazis. But to just shy away from pleading with the Jews to be forgiving to their evil perpetrators, and to simply allow Israel to get away with anything, even as worse as their gross mistreatment of the Palestinians, on account of their past evil experiences is to sacralise their victimhood. In so doing, history is kept focussing backward instead of forward. The problem of the sacralisation of victimhood is that, rather than forging a better tomorrow yesterday's pain ends up becoming a destination. In the long run the victims of violence in turn become perpetrators or use their victimhood to hold others at ransom.

In seeking to de-sacralise victimhood we are not saying that the victims must forget about their past and never seek to remember it. Indeed, while they should continue to remember it, they do not fan a spirit of revenge but a healing. As Tutu (1999: 271) points out, "In

forgiving, people are not being asked to forget”. And for that matter, neither are they being asked to trivialise the harm that has been served to them. On the contrary, Tutu (1999: 271) notes, “it is important to remember, so that we should not let such atrocities happen again”. Forgiveness means “taking what happened seriously and not minimizing it; drawing out the sting in the memory that threatens to poison our entire existence” (Tutu 1999: 271). Thus, the spirit of forgiveness attempts to deal with what has happened in a therapeutic manner.

#### **5.4. Not all wrongs can be adequately compensated**

A spirit of forgiveness must be cultivated in Christian life because few wrongs in this life can be adequately compensated. This does not mean that restitution and reparations should not be made. It acknowledges that in the midst of restitution there are some things that will never be adequately compensated whatever the amount paid. It is in view of this that a spirit of forgiveness is absolutely necessary in the Christian life. Perhaps one may say it is because few wrongs can be adequately compensated in this life that Christ has placed the responsibility of ending the conflict upon the wronged.

### **6. The Requirements in Developing a Spirit of Forgiveness in the Christian life**

We have highlighted that assurance of salvation is essentially the assurance of forgiveness of sins and that assurance of the forgiveness of one’s sins should motivate Christians to develop a Spirit of forgiveness in the believer’s life. Indeed, forgiveness is mountainous task. What must one have in order to develop a spirit of forgiveness in one’s life?

#### **6.1. A life of grace**

Assurance of God’s gracious salvation calls Christians to a life of grace. A spirit of forgiveness in the Christian life is essentially shaped by grace. Indeed, if we have received so much grace how can we insist on living by justice? As we have pointed out already, we do not mean that wrongdoing should be avoided or handled spuriously. Indeed, in situations where reparations must be made for wrongdoing an attitude of grace must still prevail. By a life of grace is meant that Christians must be ready to forgive. In the midst of victimization, even as extremely excruciating as the grievous torment crucifixion,

God continues to demand that the Christian be soften-hearted and willing to forgive instead of being hard-hearted. And Jesus offers himself as the perfect example of such: in the climax of the pain of the cross he cried, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23: 34).

### **6.2. Willingness to Bear the Cost**

Assurance of God’s gracious salvation calls Christians to bear the cost of forgiveness. We have already affirmed that forgiveness is costly. It comes at a price, and quiet often it is the wronged bears the heavier cost. In being called to cultivate a spirit of forgiveness in their lives, Christians are being called to sacrificial living. The pain and the loss to the wronged are far from triviality, the reality of the pain of offences is real. In calling us to bless those who curse us and forgiving those who persecute us God is calling us to experience, albeit in limited measure the pain, the Father went through on the Cross as God the Son was being crucified for our sins. We also experience the pain that Jesus Christ went through as he died for our sins. In forgiving those who persecute us and blessing those who curse us we experience the pain and price that God experiences when he forgives us our sins. We experience what it means to be redemptive rather than be vindictive. God experiences this pain in order to win us - in order to redeem us.

### **6.3. Willingness to Confront Evil**

Cultivating a spirit of forgiveness in the Christian life does not equate to weakness and the nurturing of evil. In forgiving the sinner God never weakly condones evil-doing; on the contrary the repented sinners are commanded to go their way and sin no more (John 8: 53). Volf (1996: 123) has pointed out, “Forgiveness is no mere discharge of a victim’s angry resentment and no mere assuaging of a perpetrator’s remorseful anguish, one that demands no change of the perpetrator and no righting of wrongs”<sup>24</sup>. The Apostle Paul teaches that in forgiving one another evil-doing must be confronted and nipped in the bud (see for example Gal 6: 1-5). The Truth and Reconciliation

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<sup>24</sup> However, Volf (1996: 123) goes on contradict himself by saying “every act of forgiveness enthrone justice; it draws attention to its violation precisely by offering to forego its claims”. A simple observation does show that it is possible to be granted the claims of justice and yet remain bitter toward the wrongdoer.

Committee of South Africa insisted that evil be brought in the open and condemned in exchange for forgiveness and reconciliation. This means that forgiveness is not sweeping wrongdoing under the carpet. Forgiveness is not an act of cowardice or resignation, rather it is a deliberate decision that acknowledges and confronts wrongdoing.

#### **6.4. Allowing the Vengeance of God to take its course**

In forgiving those who have offended them, Christians pass on the responsibility of vindication of their pain to God. The assurance of their forgiveness is also the assurance that God will deal with those who have wronged them. As we have pointed out, in commanding Christians to promote peace and forgiveness Christ does not mean that the aching of the victimised does not matter. We must be reminded that God is just and he will not let the guilty go unpunished (Ex 34:7). The commandment to forgive our persecutors and to be conduits of peace does not intend to let the persecutors get away with murder. Rather, in the act of forgiving and blessing the persecutors the Christian victims transfer the role of vindication to God. It is for this reason that Paul says:

never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay" says the Lord. But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink, for in so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good (Romans 12: 19-20).

### **7. The Holy Communion as the Symbol of God's Assurance of Salvation**

The Holy Communion is a ritual meal instituted by the Lord Jesus to continually remind the Christians of his death on the cross for their sins and to reconcile them to God. The Holy Communion as a symbol of the new covenant is a symbol of the irrevocability of salvation and reconciliation to God. It is a testimony of God's commitment to save his people and to have them reconciled to him. It is a testimony that God has decisively dealt with their sin. As Volf (1996: 129) expresses it, "When God sets out to embrace the enemy, the result is the cross". What happened on the cross of Calvary?

On the cross the dancing circle of self-giving and mutually indwelling divine persons opens up for the enemy; in the agony of the passion the movement stops for a brief moment and a fissure appears so that sinful humanity can join in (John 17: 21). We, the others - we, the enemies - are embraced by the divine

persons who love us with the same love with which they love each other and therefore make space for us within their own eternal embrace (Volf 1996: 129).

In the Holy Communion is celebrated God's "making-space-for-us-and-inviting-us-in" (Volf 1996: 129). It is not only a symbol of reconciliation to God; it is essentially a symbol of the end of our *enemyhood*. At the same time, the Holy Communion calls on us to 'make-space-for-wrongdoers-and-inviting-them-in'. The Holy Communion challenges the recipients of grace to be agents of grace. Enacted in the observation of the Holy Communion is that in being "embraced by God, we must make space for others in ourselves and invite them in - *even our enemies*" (Volf 1996: 129, emphasis added). Thus the Holy Communion is both a ritual of assurance and embrace. As a ritual of assurance it assures believers of God's commitment to their salvation. As a meal of embrace it calls them to do everything as far as it depends on them to make space for their enemies.

### **Conclusion**

In this essay we have attempted to demonstrate how the assurance of Christian salvation calls on Christians to practice a Christian life filled with readiness to forgive. It is important to affirm that forgiveness is not only a serious issue, but it remains difficult and continues to suffer many misunderstandings. God is always ready to forgive the repenting sinner. The God, who has forgiven all our sins, saved us and reconciled us to himself by the work of Christ on cross is affirmative in his demand that Christians be magnanimous with forgiveness to those who wrong them. Just as it was necessary for him to forgive us our sins before reconciling us to himself, Christians too cannot be reconciled to one another in the absence of forgiveness. God insists on forgiveness because it "is and has always been God's intention that we should live in friendship and harmony" (Tutu 1999: 263). As has been highlighted in this essay, not only must we forgive because we have been forgiven our sins. Moreover, we must be forgiving in order to heal broken relationships and broken hearts and to avoid being ruled by bitter feelings. Forgiveness, just as it is necessary for a future with God, is absolutely necessary to the future of human fellowship. Tutu (1999) has best summed this for us: "There is no future without forgiveness". In the absence of forgiveness dreaming of a future where we will walk together in happiness is indeed nothing but a mere dream.

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