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# The Role of Reconciliation Theology in Socio-Political Healing and Development

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Although most countries in the world today enjoy peace and security, about 1.5 billion people live in areas affected by government fragility, conflict or large-scale criminal violence. These countries typically have the highest poverty rates and many are seemingly trapped in endless cycles of violence and conflict.<sup>1</sup>

Burundi, a small land-locked nation in east Africa, has been one of those countries. Independent since 1962, after sixty-six years of colonization by Germany and Belgium, Burundi has three main ethnic groups: Hutus (about 85 percent, generally cultivators), Tutsis (14 percent, mostly cattle herders) and Twas (about 1 percent). Even though the Hutus and Tutsis share many things in common, including language, a number of cultural practices, traditional religious rites, history and territory,<sup>2</sup> they have engaged in heated power struggles

ever since Burundi's formation.

Burundi's political situation is bleak, delicate, deeply worrying and, as such, unacceptable to those who yearn for a positive change in the country's socio-political landscape. Social strife has produced dire consequences: extensive loss of life; destruction of property; children left as orphans; single-parent families; fear of investing in business development and infrastructure; physical, social, psychological and spiritual wounds; and the inability of social institutions to deliver essential services to citizens.

For example, during the controversial 2015 presidential election that resulted in a failed coup d'état, at least 1,200 people reportedly lost their lives and more than 425,000 were displaced and had to seek refuge in neighbouring Tanzania, Rwanda, Democratic Republic of Congo and Uganda.<sup>3</sup> The government estimated that the insurrection cost the country at least US \$32.7 million in property

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1 Christian Aid, 'Tackling Violence and Building Peace Global Strategy' (2016), [www.christianaid.ie/Images/TVBP\\_REPORT\\_tcm19-89720.pdf](http://www.christianaid.ie/Images/TVBP_REPORT_tcm19-89720.pdf).

2 David Niyonzima and Lon Fendall, *Unlocking Horns: Forgiveness and Reconciliation in Burundi* (Newberg, OR: Barclay Press, 2001).

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3 'Burundi's President Seeks "Unconstitutional" Third Term', France 24, 25 April 2015, [www.france24.com/en/20150425-burundi-president-nkurunziza-seeks-third-term](http://www.france24.com/en/20150425-burundi-president-nkurunziza-seeks-third-term).

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damage.

The government has made many attempts to restore peace, security and social order. These have included *Ubushingantahe*, a traditional institution of reconciliation; the Arusha Peace Mediation Process of 2000; amending the constitution in 2005 to enshrine an ethnically based power-sharing arrangement between the Hutu majority (60 percent) and Tutsi minority (40 percent; the amendment is silent regarding the Twa people); and establishment of a National Commission of Truth and Reconciliation. Nevertheless, Burundi is still prone to political violence in every electoral cycle, with the worst violence occurring around the 2015 presidential elections.

The lack of a sustainable model of reconciliation has helped to nurture the conditions of mistrust, insecurity, impoverishment, powerlessness and underdevelopment in Burundi. Moreover, the church, in my judgement, has been under-involved in peace-building and conflict resolution.

Like many other countries, Burundi's people need a sustainable model of peace-making and genuine forgiveness. I believe that the only truly viable model of reconciliation is based on Jesus Christ, who is our conciliator, Prince of Peace and the embodiment of love, truth, forgiveness and justice. It is God's concern for the human family to live in deep shalom. Accordingly, the church should be a leader in addressing social evils such as ethnic hatred, strife, retaliation, selfishness and other behaviours that impair the harmonious functioning of social institutions. However, the evangelical church in Burundi appears to be making little progress in advancing a viable path towards social healing

and reconstruction through negotiation, mediation, dialogue and conflict resolution.

Addressing Burundi's underlying and long-standing issues that hinder the process of realizing genuine and long-term social reconciliation is the key to a future of sustainable peace, forgiveness and development. In this paper, I attempt to present a pathway towards this goal. The troubled situation in Burundi has driven me to pursue this question: How can the evangelical church provide a new future of renewed hope for a victimized people living in desperate situations of civil strife, extreme poverty and underdevelopment through proclaiming the Christian gospel, which is practically rooted in the doctrine of atonement? Can the doctrine that Jesus yielded himself on the cross as a way of mending human beings' broken relationships with God, each other and our natural world be relevant to the socio-political tensions that are destabilizing individuals, families and communities in Burundi?

In the next section I will explain the concepts of reconciliation theology, healing and development as they relate to the situation of social strife. Then I will present four ways in which truths derived from Christ's atonement can be practically applied to social reconciliation. My observations are equally applicable to any location where social strife poses a barrier to human flourishing.

## **I. Conceptualizing Reconciliation Theology, Healing and Development**

Reconciliation is a central theme in the Bible and the central concept of

our Christian faith. The word is derived from the Greek *katallassō*, a composite term consisting of the prefix *kata* (to or for) and the verb *allassō* (transform, change or exchange). In this regard, reconciliation involves a transformation or change in a relationship between God and humans, or between people.<sup>4</sup>

The Greek *katallassō* is equivalent to the Hebrew *kaphar*, which is translated into English as 'atonement'.<sup>5</sup> Thus, in the New Testament, atonement is essentially an act of reconciliation that takes place through Christ's death. This conception is explicit in two notable Pauline passages, Romans 5:10–11 and 2 Corinthians 5:18–20. The root idea is a change of attitude or relationship.

From a practical perspective, reconciliation can be conceptualized as a process in which relations are rebuilt to restore a state of harmonious existence, peaceful living, solidarity and mutual cooperation. African scholar Lutiniko Pedro describes reconciliation as 'a state in which two separated individuals, tribes, communities, nations and/or religions come together and accept each other, in order to work together, and to endeavour to solve their differences, bound together by a common motive and by mutually accepted principles'.<sup>6</sup>

In a similar vein, Brounéus conceptualizes reconciliation as 'a soci-

etal process that involves mutual acknowledgment of past suffering and the changing of destructive attitudes and behaviour into constructive relationships toward sustainable peace'.<sup>7</sup> The need for reconciliation is given in the fact of alienation or estrangement. Humans must be put right with God because they have a broken relationship with him.<sup>8</sup>

Although the theological concept of reconciliation derives from Jesus Christ (e.g. Mt 5:24) and the apostle Paul, the idea is present wherever estrangement or enmity is overcome by the restoration of true love, forgiveness, justice, social unity and peace. Building right relationships is at the heart of all religions. However, reconciliation as the central concept in Christianity seeks to restore socio-spiritual harmony by making acceptance, forgiveness and fellowship possible for all, as a result of exchange of enmity for friendship, in both vertical and horizontal relationships.<sup>9</sup> Sin, the ultimate root of our broken vertical and horizontal relationships, has far-reaching ramifications and has resulted in enmity in our relationship with God as well as with ourselves, with one another and with the environment.<sup>10</sup> Vertical reconciliation is

4 Itumeleng J. Mosala, 'The Meaning of Reconciliation', *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 59 (June 1987): 23.

5 Mosala, 'Meaning of Reconciliation', 24.

6 Lutiniko L. M. Pedro, 'The Ministry of Reconciliation: A Comparative Study of the Role of the Churches in Promoting Reconciliation in South Africa and Angola' (PhD dissertation, University of Pretoria, 2007), 5.

7 Karen Brounéus, *Reconciliation: Theory and Practice for Development Cooperation* (Stockholm: Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, 2003), 13.

8 James Denney, *The Christian Doctrine of Reconciliation* (Shropshire, England: Quinta Press, 2012), 12.

9 R. E. O. White, 'Reconciliation', in Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 917.

10 Bruce Milne, *Know the Truth: A Handbook of Christian Belief* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity, 1982), 106–8.

viewed as the recipe for horizontal reconciliation.

The church has a unique role to play in public reconciliation, and that role is urgently needed in Burundi. From 1993 to 2005, the country went through a tumultuous period of social and political unrest that culminated in civil war and genocide. The aftermath of this tragic history has included perennial cycles of ethno-political confrontation at every election period. Such conflict is partly responsible for the conditions of poverty and underdevelopment observed in Burundian society. Thus, reconciliation is an imperative task for the evangelical church in Burundi.

An effective theology of reconciliation could enable the church to realize its mediatorial, moral and spiritual mandate in all its fulness. Therefore, reconciliation theology provides an avenue for the church to re-evaluate itself with regard to its mission as God's custodian for genuine reconciliation, peace, social order and sustainable development. Through the biblical vision of reconciliation, there is a possibility of new hope of social unity, healing of a wounded and victimized population, freedom and solidarity with all those who are struggling to overcome their despair.

By 'reconciliation theology' I mean Christian reflection on the socio-political realities surrounding cycles of conflict and violence, for the purpose of designing an alternative response rooted in a biblical vision and capable of enhancing the process of peace-making, forgiveness, justice distribution, healing and development. Basically, this is a corrective discourse that seeks to create life; promote fairness in distribution of material goods, human rights, oppor-

tunities and services; redress wrong deeds and ensure people's quick recovery and restoration; consolidate human solidarity and mutual cooperation; strengthen the bonds of social unity, love, sharing and fellowship; create an environment of free interaction, dialogue, forgiveness, friendship and good neighbourliness; and, above all, enhance social transformation.

In this reconciliation theology, 'healing' means restoring conditions of social, economic, political, cultural, environmental and spiritual health as a means of promoting the full development of individuals, families and communities. It involves restoring wounded bodies, minds and souls to their original physical, emotional and spiritual health as intended by God at the time of creation. In a nutshell, therefore, reconciliation should be viewed as a long-term program for social, economic, political, judicial, cultural and spiritual healing.

The term 'development' refers to the process of coming to realize the full potential of human life in a context of a peaceful, loving, forgiving, just and truth-telling society. As such, reconciliation is development in the sense that it endeavours to rescue, liberate and restore individuals, families and communities to their original identity by removing all that degrades, enslaves, dehumanizes and robs them of their inherent humanity.<sup>11</sup>

Evangelical Christians recognize that social and political violence is pervasive, brutalizing and corrupting and, as such, impedes the process of

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<sup>11</sup> Bryant L. Myers, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), 177, 180.

development. Therefore, the evangelical church can never ignore the challenges posed by socio-political tensions if it is going to be faithful to its roots. The doctrine of atonement is central to the process of searching for a renewed life and restoring broken relationships.

Consequently, reconciliation theology seeks to transform conflict situations by changing the structures and institutions that keep injustice, selfishness, hatred, resentment and mistrust entrenched in a society, thereby preventing the achievement of sustainable peace, healing and just sharing of the country's resources. This is an endeavour to create and nurture a conducive and viable environment where all citizens can live in peace and harmony with their neighbours and enjoy to the fullest the benefits arising from fair distribution of material goods, human rights, opportunities and other essential services. The concept of reconciliation is central to any human development initiative.

## II. Principles of Atonement and Their Application to Socio-Political Conflict

Throughout the Old Testament, God has demonstrated concern for his ultimate purpose of salvation, which is to reconcile all people of the earth, irrespective of their social, ethnic, racial or geographic backgrounds. The prophetic literature contains extensive promises of reconciliation of the nations to God and each other (Is 2:1–54; Mic 4:1–3). The prophets denounced the social, economic, political and religious elites who failed to live up the demands of the covenant and failed to practice justice and mer-

cy on behalf of the victims of oppression such as the alien (a minority), the poor, the fatherless and the widows (Amos 2:6–7; 3:9–10; 4:1–3; 5:7–12; 8:4–8).

Daniel Groody writes, 'God pays particular attention to those in the community whose dignity is diminished, denied, or damaged or those who, when they are no longer deemed useful, are rejected and discarded or those who are dehumanized and depersonalized in their society.'<sup>12</sup> By the power of God's Spirit, the prophets provided an expanded understanding of God's intention to save and reconcile people for himself from among all the nations of the earth through the work of the coming Messiah (Is 9:7). This implies that the quest for active compassion, acceptance, tolerance, love, fellowship, forgiveness and reconciliation in the midst of a wounded and victimized population should always remain a priority for the evangelical church.

Both the Old and New Testaments teach that in his eternal plan, God designed atonement as the only means by which sinful humankind would be reconciled to him. Therefore, reconciliation theology, which is central in the teachings of the apostle Paul, is rooted in the OT concept of covenant and atonement. The shedding of covenant blood and the reconciliatory sacrificial rituals of the OT are embodied in the incarnation, life, work, death and resurrection of Christ for the reconciliation of sinful humanity.<sup>13</sup> Romans

<sup>12</sup> Daniel G. Groody, *Globalization, Spirituality, and Justice: Navigating a Path to Peace* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2007).

<sup>13</sup> Joseph O. Omolo, *Reconciliation in African Context* (Nairobi: Uzima Publishing, 2008), 8–11.

5:6–10 states this clearly: ‘When we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. ... God demonstrates his own love in this: While we were still sinners Christ died for us. ... When we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son. ... Having been reconciled, we shall be saved through his life.’

Clearly, reconciliation has its biblical foundation in the atonement of Christ. Jesus’ death is the supreme act by which men have been reconciled to God, with the view to help humans restore a peaceful relationship with God, each other, their community and their environment (Rom 5:10–11; Col 1:20–22; Eph 2:16).

In his atoning work of reconciliation, Jesus suffered violence on the cross. If our faith has the story of a violent crucifixion at its heart, then the church must face up to violence and look for ways to understand it, confront it and transform it, not just into the absence of violence but into a healing and redeeming of it. By relying on the meaning of the atonement, the evangelical church has the tools to transform situations of socio-political tension with a view to restoring peace, promoting healing of wounded victims and enhancing development initiatives. Below, I discuss four biblical principles of atonement and their application.

### 1. Substitution

The principle of substitution is anchored in the fact that the death of Christ sought to exchange our sinful nature for Christ’s righteousness. Christ changed our state of enmity with God to that of friendship and fellowship with him (Is 53:5; 1 Pet 2:24; Heb 9:28). Since he has replaced our

old nature with his new nature on the inside, or our condemnation and iniquities with his righteousness, we are forgiven and are not accountable for our sins at all. Through the forgiveness of our sins, our debt has been paid by the atoning blood of Christ.

Once sin has been forgiven, it should be remembered no more (Heb 8:12; 10:16–18). In this regard, Harold Kushner’s description of forgiveness is worth noting: ‘To be forgiven is to feel the weight of the past lifted from our shoulders, to feel the stain of past wrongdoing washed away. To be forgiven is to feel free to step into the future unburdened by the precedent of who we have been and what we have done in previous times.’<sup>14</sup> Those who put their trust and confidence in Christ’s atoning work are not victims of eternal condemnation; instead, they are the beneficiaries of the eternal life made possible through the power of the atoning blood (Jn 3:17–18).

Through atonement, God is reaching out to every human being in his fullness. He sent his only begotten Son so that the sinners would be justified. Through justification, God acquitted sinners of judgement. This acquitting took place not because human beings were innocent, but because when they were still sinners, the truly innocent Jesus Christ was himself made sin for the sake of redeeming sinners (2 Cor 5:21).

By an act of love, Christ died for sinners (Rom 5:8). Love is a strong tool for transforming a society enmeshed in socio-political strife. Paulo Freire described what true love entails and

<sup>14</sup> Harold S. Kushner, cited in Niyonzima and Fendall, *Unlocking Horns*, 121.



what it can do for individuals, families, communities and societies:

Because love is an act of courage, not fear, love is commitment to others. No matter where the oppressed are found, the act of love is commitment to their cause—the cause of liberation. And this commitment, because it is loving, is dialogical. As an act of bravery, love cannot be sentimental; as an act of freedom, it must not serve as a pretext for manipulation. It must generate other acts of freedom; otherwise, it is not love. Only by abolishing the situation of oppression is it possible to restore the love which that situation made impossible. If I do not love the world—if I do not love life—if I do not love people—I cannot enter into dialogue.<sup>15</sup>

In a similar manner, Jaccaci and Gault view love as ‘the unitive power and presence common to all religious and spiritual beliefs that gives them their deepest potential to heal, nurture, and to glorify with joy the human soul and spirit’.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, God is love (1 Jn 4:8, 11, 16) and as such every beauty has its origin in God’s love; everything is shaped by it, everything is directed towards it. Love is God’s greatest gift to humanity; it is his promise and our hope.<sup>17</sup>

Jesus has given us power and ability to live for him who died for us. As the mediator, he has reunited us with our creator, God the Father. Moreover, through the atonement believers have received the gift of the Holy Spirit, a spiritual power that can effect transformation in believers’ lives.

The doctrine of atonement transforms those without merit into beings of tremendous value in God’s eyes. It expresses victory over the forces of sin and evil (Mt 20:28; Mk 10:45; Heb 9:12). Through Jesus’ vicarious death, all the forces of darkness including ethnicity, hatred, bitterness, selfishness, enmity, resentment, hostility, greed, oppression, injustice, discrimination, retaliation, intolerance, carnality, unforgiving hearts and any other form of malice have all been blotted out by an act of divine mercy (2 Cor 5:21; Gal 3:13; Rom 5:8).

The Holy Spirit and the doctrine of atonement empower believers to overcome evil with good, defeat negative thoughts and resist the devil before he causes us to commit social sin. In this case, Christ has provided an effective example of how to tackle conditions of civil strife. Rather than taking revenge against their offenders, offended believers should take a bold step of exchanging the physical, emotional and spiritual pain inflicted on them for unconditional forgiveness and love. Likewise, these believers should attempt to dissuade non-believers from becoming involved in acts of retaliation; those who want justice to be served should seek retribution in a court of law. Forgiveness as an act and a process is the foundation of the doctrine of atonement.

<sup>15</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1993), 70–71.

<sup>16</sup> August T. Jaccaci and Susan B. Gault, cited by Richard J. Spady and Richard S. Kirby, *The Leadership of Civilization Building: Administrative and Civilization Theory, Symbolic Dialogue, and Citizen Skills for the 21st Century* (Seattle, WA: Forum Foundation, 2002).

<sup>17</sup> Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, *Papal Encyclical on Integral Human Development in*

*Charity and Truth* (Vatican, 2009).



Forgiveness, love, truth and justice are the fundamental pillars of genuine reconciliation and peace-making. For believers, forgiveness is not an option but a necessary action regardless of the cost.

Someone has said that 'bitterness is like swallowing poison and expecting your enemy to die'. Consequently, those who hold to bitterness die a slow death while making their enemies happy. Thus, forgiveness is an act and a process of self-healing; it does us a favour rather than just minimizing our physical, emotional or spiritual pain.<sup>18</sup> Through the act of forgiveness, we are able to release our pain into the Lord's capable and loving hands.

Paul Tillich writes that 'genuine forgiveness is participation, reunion, overcoming the powers of estrangement. And only because this is so, does forgiveness make love possible. We cannot love unless we have accepted forgiveness, and the deeper our experience of forgiveness is, the greater is our love.'<sup>19</sup> Even though forgiveness is an act of loss, it liberates the victim from his or her condition of physical, emotional or spiritual pain.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, genuine forgiveness can often cause the offender to repent and abandon his or her sin permanently. It seeks to restore the offenders into the fellowship of society. As such, to the same extent that a forgiving Jesus represented us on the cross, he now

wants us to represent him.

The doctrine of atonement is the foundation of social and spiritual unity. Through baptism, all believers form one garment and one pilgrim people on a journey, the end of which is the *eschaton*. Creation in all its dimensions is held within the sphere of God's pervasive love, a love characterized by relationship and expressed in the vision of the Trinity as a model of intimate interaction, mutual respect and sharing without domination, discrimination or inequality. The atonement demonstrates God's universal love for all humankind regardless of their ethnic, political, racial and socio-economic affiliation or geographical origin.

The Trinity provides the basis for consolidating the bonds of social unity, solidarity and collaboration among individuals, families and communities. The reconciliation pillars of forgiveness, love, justice and truth-telling provide the framework for promoting peace and harmonious living through social values of renewed fellowship, communal sharing and holistic relationships. Thus, in Christ there is no Hutu, Tutsi, Twa or social classes; all human races including created things are reconciled and united in Christ (Rom 10:12; Col 3:11). God wants to see sustainable peace and genuine reconciliation achieved in all his creation and in particular strife-ridden societies.

## 2. Participation

Although God is the author of reconciliation, Christ is the conciliator and the church is God's ambassador for reconciliation and peace-making. Consequently, the atonement gives Christians a spiritual platform that

<sup>18</sup> Erwin W. Lutzer, *When You Have Been Wronged* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2007), 130.

<sup>19</sup> Paul Tillich, cited in Niyonzima and Fendall, *Unlocking Horns*, 89.

<sup>20</sup> Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), cited in Niyonzima and Fendall, *Unlocking Horns*, xix.

allows for their participation in the death and resurrection of Christ. Here, participation means that the sinner has to die before he or she can regain new life as a new person in Christ (1 Pet 2:24).

Whereas the giving of life is God's prerogative in the OT (Gen 2:7; 1 Sam 2:6), in the NT Jesus claimed to be the life-giver (Jn 5:21; 11:25), and proved it by rising from the dead (1 Cor 15:45; Rom 1:4). Christ's resurrection makes our salvation possible and paves way for the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Through faithful administration of the sacraments of communion and baptism, the believers in Burundi demonstrate their participation in the atoning blood of Christ (1 Cor 10:16; 11:25) and they die and live again in him (Rom 6:4, 11). Consequently, this implies their participation in the mission of reconciliation and peace-making. Baptism unites a believer with Jesus Christ in his or her death to sin and resurrection to new life.

Within a context of social and political violence, the benefits of the resurrection of Christ must not be limited to personal joy, peace, worship, hope and victory (1 Pet 1:8; Rom 4:24; Jn 20:28; Lk 24:52; 1 Cor 15:20; Mt 28:18). The strength of the church resides in its coming together to tackle all forces of darkness that hinder individuals, families and communities from attaining the condition of shalom intended by God at the beginning.

God has tasked the universal church in general, and the evangelical denominations representing him in a country like Burundi in particular, with the responsibility of rebuilding relationships among those in conflict. Reconciliation is all God's work

through Jesus, the Prince of Peace and the embodiment of forgiveness, love, justice and truth. As a result, only through God's grace can the church fulfil God's work of healing the physical, emotional and spiritual wounds inflicted on victims of violence. To accomplish this task of reconciliation and peace-making effectively, the church needs to be deeply immersed in Christ from whom it has received the ministry of reconciliation (Gal 3:28–29).

Genuine reconciliation begins with God and flows into the Christian community, where believers are empowered to infuse the principles and values of reconciliation into social structures and systems. This process recognizes the two dimensions of reconciliation, vertically with God and horizontally with fellow human beings. Vertical reconciliation is the recipe for horizontal reconciliation. Consequently, the evangelical church cannot be indifferent and isolated in the face of glaring socio-political tensions enveloping a country. Reconciliation is at the heart of God's salvific activities. True agents of reconciliation have had their worldviews, beliefs, attitudes, values and character transformed by the power of atonement so as to conform to God's will, purpose and Kingdom vision.

Through atonement, the dividing walls of hostility, be they ethnic, social, judicial, economic, political, cultural or spiritual barriers, have been destroyed by Christ (Eph 2:14–16). This is an affirmation of God's solidarity with us and with all creation; as such, no ethnic, social or political conflict, nothing done by us or to us, not even death itself can break God's bond of unity with us (Eph 1:9–10). Reconciliation theology should guide

the church to point out the social sins and evils that have contributed to the destabilization of peace, security and socio-political stability, to show how these detrimental factors have caused wounds in society by damaging the common good, and to propose a proper way to address such social sins and evils.

When we embrace the biblical vision of reconciliation, broken relationships are restored in all the dimensions distorted by sin. Walter Brueggemann writes, 'The gospel is the news that distorted patterns of power have been broken; the reception of the gospel is the embrace of radically transformed patterns of social relationships.'<sup>21</sup>

Above all, the church must recover its prophetic voice by speaking on behalf of the helpless victims of violence and conflict and by functioning as the moral and spiritual conscience of society. Believers need, without fear or seeking favour, to function as spokespersons exposing and condemning the perpetrators of social, economic, political and judicial crimes that incite unrest. Such people who inflict pain on others should be told what God expects of them, which includes making them understand their need to repent so that they are reconciled with God. In its function as salt and light in society, the church should be bold in persuading others to live in accordance with the ethical, moral and spiritual standards outlined in Scripture. By fulfilling the demands of the Great Commission, the church will infuse these biblical and divine

principles into the lives of individuals, families, communities and societal institutions.

Practical ways by which the church can participate in peace-making, reconciliation and social reconstruction include the following:

- Strengthening the ministry of prayer (Ps 140:1–3; 1 Sam 30:6; 2 Kings 19:14–16; Jam 5:16; 1 Tim 2:1–2), ecumenical bonds, and believers' participation in the sacraments;
- Influencing the government to embrace the ideals of mediation, negotiation and conflict transformation and to design contextually relevant methods and strategies of transitional justice;
- Creating a platform where the offender and the offended come together to exchange apologies and affirm forgiveness, love and abandonment of revenge (Mt 5:43–44; Rom 12:17–21; 2 Cor 2:5–11);
- Strengthening the valuable ministry of pastoral counseling, as this empowers victims and speeds up the process of healing from the inner wounds inflicted by trauma;
- Creating and nurturing a culture of communication and honest dialogue around the real drivers of the vicious cycles of socio-political unrest in society;
- Responding promptly and decisively to early warning signs of an impending social, political or ethnic conflict without hesitating or ignoring those signs;
- Engaging in deep evangelization by preaching holistic

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<sup>21</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism: Living in a Three-Storeyed Universe* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1993), 34.

- sermons attuned to the actual socio-cultural context;
- Encouraging church members to participate in promoting a culture of democratic principles and values in societal structures;
  - Strengthening the church's co-operation with other agents of reconciliation, peace-making, and social reconstruction, including other religious groups, civil society organizations and individuals with specialized skills or roles; and
  - Providing holistic education to church leaders. Besides studying Bible and theology, they should be equipped with knowledge and skills in such areas as development, entrepreneurship, peace-building, counselling, conflict transformation, mediation, negotiation, communication, and education on good citizenship and patriotism.

Christians agree broadly with the principles highlighted above. Every Christian desires to live in a just, peaceful and flourishing society. However, Christians will not always agree on how practically to address situations of social strife. Hence, it is necessary for believers to engage in open and candid conversations from a biblical-theological perspective, with the goal of reaching consensus where possible on how to tackle socio-political challenges. Above all, Christians should strive to create and nurture a society grounded in the principles, values and ideals taught and exemplified by Jesus, who did not separate religion from socio-political life.

Throughout history, the common people have turned to the church in

time of need. Indeed, a dehumanizing situation of social strife calls for Christians' participation in social reconciliation. Christians should imitate Christ by alleviating human suffering and advocating for the restoration of human dignity. Thus, believers share in Christ's death and resurrection not just as individuals but as a community. In this respect, the church is called to participate in Christ's sacrificial death, which brings forth the love of resurrection and new life.

### 3. Social Transformation

This principle is grounded in a holistic view of the doctrine of atonement. Jesus, as the life-giver, is the source of abundant life. Jesus came so that believers may have life and have it in abundance here on earth (Jn 10:10). Atonement is the foundation of holistic or social transformation, because it includes the cultivation of principles and values that can bring forth positive change in society.

Fredrick Amolo states, 'Social transformation embraces the act and process of improving society's material condition as well as restoring broken relationships within social structures in a bid to promote peaceful co-existence.'<sup>22</sup> Bryant Myers reminds us that 'God's goal is to restore us and God's creation to our original identity and purpose, as children reflecting God's image, and to our original vocation as productive stewards, living together in just and peaceful

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<sup>22</sup> Fredrick Amolo, 'The Impact of an Essential African Christian Theological Reconciliation Schema in Peace-Building', in Rodney L. Reed, ed., *African Contextual Realities* (Carlisle and Cumbria, UK: Langham Global Library, 2018), 119.

relationships.’<sup>23</sup>

Reconciliation theology endeavours to respond to societal needs, both materially and non-materially. It should aim at liberating people from all forms of captivity, including physical, social, mental, emotional and spiritual enslavement. This way of understanding reconciliation is affirmed in Jesus’ statement of mission (Lk 4:18–19, quoted from Is 61:1–2): ‘The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.’

In a similar vein, Leonardo Boff acknowledges the liberative task of the gospel:

The gospel is nothing less but the proclamation of the reign of God: the full and total liberation of all creation, cosmic and human, from all its iniquities, and the integral accomplishment of God’s design in the insertion of all things into His own divine life. Concretely, then, the reign of God translates into community of life with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in a universal communion of brothers and sisters in solidarity with one another in the use of the ‘fruit of the earth and the work of the human hands’.<sup>24</sup>

At the heart of Jesus’ ministry, he

had great concern for those suffering from various forms of bondage and oppression, including economic oppression (poverty), physical oppression (diseases and disabilities), political oppression (injustice and oppressive rule) and demonic oppression (various forms of occult practices). Clearly, reconciliation is more than the absence of conflict and violence; it embraces harmony, health, wholeness and well-being in all relationships.

The idea of liberation reminds us that through Jesus’ atoning work, God the Father suffered in solidarity with suffering humanity. As such, God understands our suffering and delights in seeing it ended (1 Pet 2:21; 1 Jn 2:6). Through Jesus’ experience of a violent death, the human family has been healed: ‘He was pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we have been healed’ (Is 53:5).

Christ’s atoning work seeks to address our social problems as they emerge in our lives and in different contexts. When wars, conflicts, violence, destructive competition, incompatible interests and ecological disasters rob people of the freedom to pursue their ordered ends, we become unable to satisfy our fundamental human needs. These detrimental factors cause disharmony, suffering and pain.<sup>25</sup> Development cannot take

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<sup>23</sup> Bryant L. Myers, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), 82.

<sup>24</sup> Leonardo Boff, *When Theology Listens to the Poor*, trans. Robert R. Barr (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 36.

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<sup>25</sup> Stan Chu Ilo, *The Church and Development in Africa: Aid and Development from the Perspective of Catholic Social Ethics* (Nairobi: Paulines, 2011), 119–20; Isabel Phiri et al., eds., *The Role of Christianity in Development Peace and Reconstruction* (Nairobi: AACC, 1996).

place if people cannot work together because of ethnic differences, intolerance, ancient prejudices, and inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic differences.<sup>26</sup> Political, economic, religious and cultural divisions can stymie sustainable development. For that reason, the evangelical church should confront truthfully and honestly the disagreements among individuals, families, communities and parishioners. Learning to live and work together demands a new way of seeing each other and understanding human relationships.

Peace is not the mere absence or avoidance of war and conflict, but the positive realization of the dignity of the whole human family. Peace is wholeness, integrity, and tranquility of order, the effect of love and righteousness. The vision of peace-building and reconciliation is to create a more humane society, promote equality and justice, preserve human rights, foster solidarity and unity of human community, and create a non-violent and orderly society, all of which culminate in authentic human development.<sup>27</sup> At the heart of peace-making and reconciliation is the intentional rebuilding of relationships at every level of society, dedicated to non-violent transformation of conflict, the pursuit of social justice and the creation of cultures of sustainable peace. Reconciliation is not complete without restitution. In the Burundian context, this includes restoring seized land and other properties to their rightful owners.

A condition of socio-political conflict cannot be transformed without addressing demands for the respect of fair distribution of material goods, opportunities, services and human rights and the quest for equality, justice and the common good. Reconciliation denotes the holistic rebuilding of relationships.<sup>28</sup> It is a multidimensional concept that involves liberating victims from physical as well as emotional and spiritual pain.<sup>29</sup>

The power and promises resident in the atonement, when fully embraced, permeate all societal institutions to effect positive change in them. Through the atonement every chain of darkness has been broken, including social, economic, political, cultural and judicial maladies. Reconciliation is inevitably bound up with social empowerment.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, the evangelical church should rely on the doctrine of atonement as it endeavours to transform these social systems and structures with the goal of creating and nurturing a more humane society that is committed to the principles and values of human development.

#### 4. Inspiration for New Life

The atonement is a source of inspiration for the church, as believers are empowered morally and spiritually to create a new society that lives in accordance with the life of Christ, and in

<sup>26</sup> Ilo, *The Church and Development in Africa*, 257.

<sup>27</sup> Ilo, *The Church and Development in Africa*, 118.

<sup>28</sup> Jesse N. K. Mugambi, *Christian Theology and Social Reconstruction* (Nairobi: Acton, 2003).

<sup>29</sup> Maake Masango, 'Reconciliation: A Way of Life for the World', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 26, no. 1 (2005): 134.

<sup>30</sup> Mugambi, *Christian Theology and Social Reconstruction*.



a new life with him (Rom 6:4). Atone-ment therefore makes it possible for new life to spring forth. Christ's death inspires the believers to live a life with God—a life characterized by changes in attitudes and relationships (Phil 2:5–8).

When believers have received the benefits of Christ's death, something new should be seen in their lives, because the old is gone and they are re-created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness (2 Cor 5:17; Eph 4:23). Believers are called to 'not conform any longer to the patterns of this world' with its behaviours and customs that are usually selfish and often corrupting. God wants believers to be transformed by the renewal of their minds so that they can live to honour and obey him (Rom 12:2).

Through deep evangelization and contextualization of the gospel message, people are more likely to be confronted by the life-changing nature of the gospel,<sup>31</sup> thereby allowing Christ to transform their attitudes and behaviour so that they can live in loving, kindly, compassionate and merciful ways towards those around them. On the basis of living a renewed life, believers should joyfully give themselves as living sacrifices for God's service (Rom 12:1–2). The Holy Spirit provides the power to renew, re-educate and redirect believers' minds so as to enable them to pursue fruitful methods and strategies of rebuilding relationships and healing those victims whose minds and spirits have been broken (Rom 8:5).

Believers are required to put on a

new role, head in a new direction and have the new way of thinking that the Holy Spirit gives. Because they live for Jesus who gives new meaning to their lives, they should express love in the face of enmity, forgiveness in the face of resentment, dialogue in the face of discord, justice in the face of injustice, hope in the face of despair, healing in the face of pain, respect for law in the face of a culture of impunity, walking in the light in the face of darkness, and truth-telling in the face of falsehood. This new order was introduced by God, who reconciled us to himself through Jesus Christ (2 Cor 5:18). The biblical concept of eternal life excludes a person's former miserable, mortal and disorderly life; eternal life is God's life embodied in Christ, given to all believers now as a guarantee that they will live forever. It calls us towards a perfect relationship between God, human beings and the rest of the creation.

New life is characterized by a focus not only on eternal life with all its treasures, but also on here-and-now right living in society. As children of the light, believers should act in such a way as to reflect their true faith and allegiance to Jesus the Lord. Their position in God's Kingdom requires them to live above reproach morally, and in so doing they exhibit God's goodness to others. True reconciliation and peace-building presuppose righteousness in the sight of God and the right living of the Christian faith. This right living is displayed in such actions as making peace with everyone; being considerate towards others; showing true humility; obeying the civil law; freedom from deceitful personal interests and desires; continuous renewal of the heart; imitating God by loving and forgiving each

31 Darrel D. Whiteman, 'Contextualization: The Theory, the Gap, the Challenge', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 21, no. 1 (1997): 3.



other; being kind and compassionate to one another; living under the guidance of the Holy Spirit; getting rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, brawling, slander and every form of malice; praying and interceding for authorities; and desisting from improper language, especially derogatory or inciting statements (Eph 4:29–32).

In this way, the church can become a new zone where people can seek and find fresh hope, experience the refreshing reality of solidarity, hear and follow the evangelical call for change in their conduct, and receive the fresh and boundless historical possibilities of abundant life, even in the midst of uncertainties and brokenness. At the grass-roots level, the church can inspire the living out of this new, transformed and non-violent Christian life in the family, which is the most basic institution of society.

Through the doctrine of atonement, a new future is possible for Burundi or any nation plagued by socio-political conflict. God has demonstrated his great love and forgiveness by restoring just and peaceful relationships through the atoning work accomplished by Jesus Christ.

### III. Conclusion

Evangelical believers have a divine mandate to respond positively to God's call by becoming partners with him in restoring peace and order in their society. Reconciliation, peace, healing and development are essential components that should be secured for all victims of violence, as all are among the family of 'God-imagers'. Tackling the state of despair and pain for the purpose of creating a new and better society is an integral part of God's will for believers.

Atonement should never be conceived as an abstract concept, but as a real and transformative practical concept capable of bringing about reconciliation, healing and development in human society. Peace is what the gospel of Jesus is all about; being peace-makers therefore distinguishes us as recipients of that Good News (Mt 5:9; 2 Thess 3:16; Col 3:15). Since most Burundians are Christians, they have already been washed by the blood of Jesus. As such, they should be working to put an end to the shedding of innocent human blood in their country.

The vicious cycles of social and political unrest find their real solution in the power of the atonement to mend broken vertical and horizontal relationships. There is no need for endless violence when the Lamb of peace has shed his blood for our forgiveness, reconciliation, righteous living and oneness. Indeed, the love of God the Father covers us all and it cleanses us from all unrighteousness. In him there are no poor, no non-poor, no Hutus, no Tutsis, no Twas, no white, no black, no vulnerable, no invulnerable. We are one.

The ministry that God has given to believers encompasses peace-building and peace-making through the spiritual model of reconciliation. Since God has offered forgiveness to us, those victimized by violence need to forgive those who have hurt them. God has reconciled with us, and he expects these victims of violence to reconcile with their enemies. Christians can lead the way in enabling members of society to consolidate their spiritual, intellectual and physical resources so as to solve their differences and social problems.

Despite the challenges of socio-

political tensions, optimism and hope are possible when the church begins to assume its moral and spiritual mandate of functioning as a renewed community of forgiven people of God. The church in Burundi continues to demonstrate that there is life beyond a social strife. This church is rekindling people's hopes in numerous ways, including the following:

- influencing the government to develop a policy framework for enhancing peace, security, and fairness in distribution of opportunities and development outcomes;
- providing social assistance to orphans, widows, disabled and internally displaced people;
- promoting the principles and practices of social unity, cohesion, mutuality, stewardship, inclusivity, solidarity, collaboration, cooperation, good governance and spiritual healing through Christian education and evangelism;
- creating and nurturing of kingdom principles, values and ideals in the life of individuals, families, society and the nation at large;

- influencing the government to take the path of dialogue towards individuals or groups having dissenting political ideologies;
- providing guidance in issues of ethical, moral and spiritual concern; and
- encouraging Christians to infiltrate into key positions in government so as to exemplify Christian principles, values and practices in their service as a way of minimizing the possibility of breeding social strife.

When the church becomes faithful to its mission of reconciliation and peace-making, its people and the surrounding society will be poised to experience God's abundant blessings—economically, politically, psychologically and spiritually. True children of God are committed to the process of tackling violence and building peace (Mt 5:9). The church urgently needs to deepen its understanding of the key drivers of vicious cycles of socio-political unrest so that it can take appropriate actions in solidarity with and in support of peace-building efforts in Burundi and around the world.