



## The role of Matthew's ἀφίημι-λογία in the decisions of the General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) in post-apartheid South Africa

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### Abstract

This article investigates the use of the verb ἀφίημι in selected pericopae in the Gospel of Matthew and the decisions of the General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) on forgiveness in the post-apartheid South Africa. It argues that while forgiveness is an important topic in Matthew that is interwoven with a number of other important theological themes, it has been a neglected theme in the decisions taken by the General Synod of the DRC since 1994. Not only are there no explicit references to Matthew's understanding of forgiveness, but are neither of the two references to forgiveness in the Acta of six General Synod's references to asking forgiveness by the DRC for its active participation in apartheid. The article concludes with a number of suggestions on how Matthew's ethic of forgiveness can inform the South African reconciliation process without it being reduced to a timeless fixed formula.

### Keywords

*Forgiveness, Gospel of Matthew, post-apartheid, Dutch Reformed Church, Lord's Prayer*

## Introduction

The focus of the first section of the article is on the use of the verb ἀφίημι in four Matthean pericopae (6:9-15; 9:1-8; 12:22-32; 18:15-35) in order to investigate Matthew's ethics of forgiveness.<sup>1</sup> While a comprehensive

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1 The verb ἀφίημι occurs in 6:12, 14, 15; 9:2, 5, 6; 12:31, 32; 18:21, 27, 35 while the noun ἄφεσις only occurs once (26:28). That the noun ἄφεσις does not mean 'forgiveness' in the LXX in contrast to the verb ἀφίημι which is frequently used with the meaning of

understanding Matthew's ethics of forgiveness necessitates an analysis of his depiction of Jesus' teaching on forgiveness and his enactments thereof (e.g. healing the sick (9:6) and eating with those considered to be sinners (9:9-13)) the focus of the article is specifically on Matthew's explicit reference to forgiveness through the verb ἀφίημι. In the second section the use (or non-use) of Matthew's ethic of forgiveness by the General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) in the post-apartheid South Africa is investigated while a number of concluding remarks are made in the third section.<sup>2</sup> It is not the intention of this study to isolate a fixed formula for the attainment of forgiveness in the contemporary South African context according to Matthew's ethics, but rather to investigate the argumentation underlying Matthew's ethic of forgiveness in order to critically engage with the debate on forgiveness in post-apartheid South Africa. For this reason the arguments supporting the necessity of forgiveness, the language with which it is expressed and the theological themes with which it is interwoven will be identified and discussed.

## 5. The ἀφίημι-logia in Matthew

Forgiveness is an important motif for Matthew (Reimer 1996:268–271; Luz 2001:28–29; Carter 2004:84; Deins 2008:71) as is evident from the relative frequency with which it occurs in his Gospel and from the manner in which it is interwoven with his narration of Jesus' birth, ministry and death (cf. 1:18-25; 5:21-26; 6:7-15; 9:1-8; 12:22-37; 18:21-35; 26:26-30).

The first Gospel broadly follows the threefold τάξις of an ancient Greek βίος. It begins with a prologue (the προοίμιον) that gives an overview of the genealogy and birth of Jesus and the beginning of his ministry (1:1-2:23), which is followed by a long narration (the διήγησις) of his words and deeds (3:1-25:46), before it concludes with an epilogue (the ἐπίλογος) that describes his honourable death (26:1-28:20) (BurrIDGE 1997:514). The

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'forgive', may have contributed to Matthew's avoidance of the noun (Nolland 2005:1081-1082).

2 The focus on Matthew's use of forgiveness in this article is due to his treatment of the topic being one of the more extensive in the New Testament. For a comprehensive analysis of the Synod of the DRC's use of Scripture in reflecting on forgiveness a similar analysis will need to be undertaken of its use of all New Testament texts.

διήγησις is comprised of an introduction (3:1-4:16) and four parts of which three (4:17-11:1, 11:2-13:52 and 16:21-28:20) contain pericopae (6:9-15; 9:1-8; 12:22-32; 18:15-35) in which the verb ἀφίημι occurs.

### **The ἀφίημι-*logia* in the first part of Matthew's διήγησις (4:17-11:1)**

The verb ἀφίημι is used nine times (6:12 (x2), 6:14-15 (x4); 9:2-6 (x3)) with the meaning of forgiveness in the first part of Matthew's διήγησις (4:17-11:1). It occurs in Jesus' teaching about prayer (6:9-15) in the Sermon on the Mount and in the story of his healing a paralytic (9:1-8).

#### *Matt 6:9-15 (The Lord's Prayer)*

The *invocatio* (6:9a) of the Lord's Prayer (6:9-15) introduces two sets of petitions followed by an explanatory note on the principal underlying the fifth (6:14-15) (Betz 1995:415–416). The verb ἀφίημι occurs in the fifth petition (6:12) and the explanatory note thereon (6:14-15).

The fifth petition (6:12) is composed of two clauses that are joined to form a simile which links God's forgiveness of believers to their willingness to forgive others (Kennedy, 1984:58). The hypotactic conjunction ὥς which links them indicates that the petition in the main clause (6:12a) is qualified by the condition or rationale contained in the subordinate clause (6:12b) (Guelich 1982:294; Hultgren 1996:285). The petition for forgiveness from God is thus either qualified by the extent to which believers forgive others ('like'), or by the fact that they forgave others ('because' or 'since').<sup>3</sup> Stander (1987:241) argues that the subordinate clause should be understood as one of reason or cause since it does not state that believers are only forgiven to the extent that they forgive others. If this were the case no-one would receive forgiveness since the debt owed to God is much greater than the debt believers owe to each other (Hultgren 1996:288). The disciples are rather instructed to petition God to forgive their sins because they have already forgiven the sins of others. The focus thereof is thus not on doing the impossible (settling their debt with God), but on what is possible (the forgiveness of others).

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3 Grammatically the conjunction ὥς can indicate a subordinate clause of comparison ('like'), reason or cause ('because' or 'since') (Stander 1987:241).

The rationales for forgiveness in Matt 6:12b (ὥς), 6:14b (γάρ) and 6:15b (δέ) can be stated as three hypothetical *enthymemes*<sup>4</sup> that share the same unstated premise (Kennedy, 1984:59; Robbins, 1998:191-192). Their minor premise and conclusion are formulated positively in the first two (6:12, 14) and negatively in the third (6:15).

*Enthymeme* stated positively (6:12 & 6:14)

1. Major premise (unstated): Forgive, and God will forgive you.
2. Minor premise: We forgive everyone indebted to us (6:12 & 6:14).
3. Conclusion: God will forgive us (6:12 & 6:14).

*Enthymeme* stated negatively (6:15)

1. Major premise (unstated): If you do not forgive, God will not forgive you.
2. Minor premise: We do not forgive everyone indebted to us (6:15).
3. Conclusion: God will not forgive us (6:15).

The principle underlying the fifth petition is itself formulated as a quotation of holy law (Käsemann 1970:77; Guelich 1982:298; Hagner 1993:152) which presupposes the principle of retributive justice (Betz, 1995:416). According to this principle, the behaviour of believers described in the protasis is directly related to that of God as stated by the apodosis (Aune 1983:167–168, 238–239).<sup>5</sup> It is this principle, the *lex taliones*, that will be enforced with God's eschatological judgment (cf. the future tenses of ἀφίημι in 6:14–15 when referring to God's forgiveness) (Hagner 1993:150). In his final judgement God will forgive those who forgave others and withhold his forgiveness from those who did not. According to Matthew, this judgement of God must therefore determine the conduct of believers in the present as is clear from the first three petitions that emphasize the importance

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4 An *enthymeme* is an assertion that is expressible as a syllogism in which either the premise or conclusion is left unexpressed as it is presumed to be obvious from the overall context (Robbins, 1998:191-192).

5 Although the quotation does not satisfy all five of Käsemann's (1970:77) criteria for a quotation of holy law, it does comply with the crucial criterion (the principle of retributive justice) of Aune (1983:167-168; 238-239).

of living ‘on earth as in heaven’ (6:10c).<sup>6</sup> Matthew’s statement of holy law, while reversing the relationship between earth and heaven found in 6:10c (ὡς ἐν οὐρανῷ καὶ ἐπὶ γῆς), also emphasises their interrelatedness: what is done on earth in regard to forgiveness will determine God’s judgement who is in heaven (6:14b).

It is thus apparent that the argumentation underlying the Lord’s Prayer links the practice of the followers of Jesus and the judgement of God in regard to forgiveness. It uses eschatological language that refers to the final judgement and joins heaven and earth to each other as realms in which the will of God should be done. The relationship between heaven and earth is an important one for Matthew to which he refers eight times. In 5:18 and 24:35 οὐρανός refers to the created world whose days are numbered. In 6:10b, 16:19 and 18:18 heaven, inhabited by God and his angels, is the sphere of God’s ultimate authority and rule from where he effects his will and rule on earth (Guelich 1982:291). The emphasis in Matthew is on the dichotomy between heaven and earth as opposite poles of reality and on the authority of specific mediators to mediate between the two realms. In 6:10 it is asked of God himself to ensure that his will is done in both realms, while in 28:19d Jesus claims full authority in both. In 16:19 it is Peter who holds the key to the heavenly realm and in 18:18 it is the entire Matthean community (Syreeni 1990:3–4).

*Matt 9:1-8 (The healing of the paralysed man)*

In the section following the Sermon on the Mount (8:2-9:38) Matthew’s διήγησις focuses on the miracles Jesus performed for the marginalised of Israel. Through his miracles the kingdom of God was, according to Matthew, breaking into the earthly realm that was under the control of the Evil One. Storms, sickness, demons and sin were all succumbing to the power of Jesus.

Matthew 9:1-8 relates an episode in which Jesus specifically addresses both sin and sickness. Confronted with a paralyzed man brought to him (9:1-2a) Jesus responded with a *chreia* (Berger, 1984:85; Sanders & Davies, 1989:151-152) in which he forgives the paralytic his sins (9:2b).

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6 This links with 28:18 in which the resurrected Jesus states that he has authority over heaven and earth.

In the subsequent *narratio* (9:3) the scribes react to the words of Jesus by accusing him of blasphemy. Underlying the charge of blasphemy is the idea that Jesus had appropriated for himself the authority to forgive sin which in the Old Testament is the prerogative of God alone (Ex 43:6; Jonah 2:9; Ps 3:8 and 130:8; Isa 43:25; 44:22) (Goppelt 1981:132). If the passive ἀφίημι is understood as a *passivum divinum* it implies that Jesus had not himself forgiven the paralytic's sins, but had rather only announced God's forgiveness of his sins (Sanders 1985:273), and that the accusation of blasphemy was thus misplaced. The statement in 9:6, however, that the Son of Man had the authority to forgive sins makes this reading of 9:2 unlikely (Davies & Allison 1991:89, 91). Jesus, according to Matthew, had indeed appropriated the authority of God to forgive the paralytic his sins and therefore responds with an *a fortiori* argument of which the underlying logic is that if it is possible to do the seemingly more difficult action (the healing), the easier one (forgiveness) should also be possible. This argument presupposes the interconnectedness commonly assumed in the ancient world between sin and sickness (Gnilka 1986:326) and can be understood as a hypothetical *enthymeme* in which the ability to heal serves as the major premise (9:6b-7). Presented syllogistically (Vinson 1991: 119, 134) the argument is:

1. Major premise (provided by the audience): Miracles (healings) substantiate the authenticity of a person's claim.
2. Minor premise: Jesus healed the paralytic (9:6).
3. Conclusion: The claim of Jesus that he could forgive sins was substantiated (9:8).

The purpose of the healing of the paralytic by Jesus is to verify that he had been given the authority<sup>7</sup> by God as the Son of Man to forgive sins.<sup>8</sup> The

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7 The authority of Jesus is a very important motif in the Gospel of Matthew (cf. 10: 1; 21: 23-27; 28:18) (Hagner, 1993:233). In the previous major discourse, the crowd had marveled at the authority by which he had instructed them (7:29), now it is Jesus' authority to heal and forgive which surprises the crowd.

8 Son of man, Jesus' self-referential title, is probably an intertextual reference to Daniel 7: 13-14 (Gundry, 1982:164) and is used by him to describe the significance of his life and suffering (Hagner, 1993:293). After his humiliation and death Jesus would as the Son of Man, however, receive glory and honor from God and would sit in judgement over Israel (France, 1989:292).

term ‘on the earth’ (ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς) implies that Jesus had, before the advent of the eschaton, already the authority to forgive sins (Hagner 1993:233–234). The forgiveness of sins is therefore not only the final eschatological act of God. It is also a present reality through Jesus. The crowd responded to the healing of the paralytic with surprise and fear, and praise God because he has given the authority to forgive sins to all men. The phrase τὸν δόντα ἐξουσίαν τοιαύτην τοῖς ἀνθρώποις (9:8b) is unique to Matthew and reflects a subtle shift from Jesus to the post-Easter community, since the authority for which the people praise God is that which he had given to humans (note the plural form of ἄνθρωπος) and not only to Jesus (Davies & Allison, 1991:96). It is the specific authority of the followers of Jesus, and not humanity in general, that is in view here since the way Jesus uses the title Son of Man in 9:6 is in line with other occurrences in Matthew where it underlines the similarities between him and his disciples (Pamment 1983:117–118).<sup>9</sup> The reference to ‘the people’ (τοῖς ἀνθρώποις) in 9:8 is thus similar to Matthew’s reference to the disciples in 8:27 (οἱ δὲ ἄνθρωποι) in that he is not referring to people in general but rather to his followers (see also 10:1, 7–8; 16:19; 18:18) (Gundry 1967:165). The rhetoric of Jesus healing of the paralytic thus emphasizes the similarity between Jesus and the disciples regarding the authority to forgive sins.<sup>10</sup> Similarly it claims that Jesus shares in God’s since it explicitly states that Jesus had the authority to forgive sins on earth (9:6). The realms of heaven and earth are thus connected by Jesus as he enacts the will of God, who is in heaven, on earth.

### The ἀφίμυ-*logia* in the second part of Matthew’s διήγησις (4:17–11:1)

In the second part of Matthew’s διήγησις (11:2–12:50), which describes the escalating conflict between Jesus and the Jewish leadership (Hagner

9 Pamment (1983:118–129) identifies numerous similarities between Jesus and the disciples in the pericopae in which he is referred to as the Son of Man. Like the Son of Man his followers should also be prepared to be homeless (8:20), be persecuted (10:16–25) and even be willing to lay down their lives (16: 21–28). Because the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath his disciples can pick grain and eat on the Sabbath (12: 1–8) and like the glorified Son of Man everyone who followed him will be rewarded for what he or she did (16:27). The disciples, together with the Son of man, will also sit in judgement over the twelve tribes of Israel (19:28). In the same sense that the Son of man can heal and forgive sins on earth his followers can do the same (9: 6–8; 10: 1)

10 Unlike them it was, however, Jesus who accomplished the forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God (cf. 1:21, 23; 20:28 26:28).

1993:298; Davies & Allison 1997:68), the verb ἀφίημι occurs in a single pericope (12:22-37) in which the conflict between them reaches breaking point.

*Matt 12:31-32 (Blasphemy against the Spirit)*

Matthew 12:22-37, which relates the fierce conflict over the source of Jesus' authority to free a man from demon possession, is presented as a complete argument by Matthew (Mack & Robbins 1989:163-164).

The pericope begins with a brief *narratio* describing the events that led to the ensuing conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees. Jesus had healed a blind and deaf demon possessed man which resulted in the crowd asking if he was not the son of David (12:22-23). The Pharisees responded to their question by suggesting that he had rather accomplished the exorcism through the power of Beelzebub (12:24). On reading their thoughts, Jesus responded with three analogies to prove the implausibility of their claim. Underlying the analogies is the idea that the authority of Jesus is not derived from Satan, but rather from God (12:25-28). Jesus furthermore provides an alternative explanation for his action: he has bound the strong man and is plundering his house. Through him the kingdom of God has come near (12:28b). After making it clear that one is either with or against him, Jesus concludes his argument by laying a counter charge of blasphemy, for which there is no forgiveness, against the Pharisees in 12:31-32.

And so I tell you,

- (A) every kind of sin and slander can be forgiven
- (B) but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven (12:31)
- (A) Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven
- (B) but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come (12:32).

The meaning of the two verses, which are each comprised of an antithetical parallelism, are essentially the same (Gundry 1982:237; Mack & Robbins 1989:182-183). In each verse Jesus is presented as one who can speak prophetically on behalf of God in that he first announces which sins will be forgiven at the final judgement before announcing in the second part of

the antitheses that sins against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven by God. The formulation in 12:32b (οὔτε ἐν τούτῳ τῷ αἰῶνι οὔτε ἐν τῷ μέλλοντι) states that this will be the case in both the present age and the one to come.

The conflict in the passage is about the source of Jesus' authority to cast out demons. Underlying the charge of blasphemy by the Pharisees is the question of who may speak and act like God. The response of Jesus is to make it clear that he has the authority to do so. In doing so he combines what happens in the present age with the one to come (12:28 – ἄρα ἔφθασεν ἐφ' ὑμᾶς ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ). Matthew does not use the dichotomy of heaven and earth in this pericopae, but rather that of two kingdoms, the kingdom of God to whom Jesus is aligned (12:28) and that of Satan (9:2; 10:7-8) on which he is launching an attack (12:29), in order to substantiate his argument. Jesus is thus not acting with the power of Beelzebub as the Pharisees claim (12:24), but rather with that of God. In Jesus' counter charge (12:31-32) he is able to prophesize the outcome of God's final judgement since he knows which sins will be forgiven by him and which not. The same motif of pronouncing the final judgement of God in advance occurs in 6:14-15 and 18:35 and also underlies Jesus' pronouncement of judgement over the cities who had rejected him in 11:20-24.

### **The ἀφίημι-logia in the fourth part of Matthew's διήγησις (16:21-19:1)**

The fourth part of Matthew's διήγησις is comprised of a number of short narratives and discourses (16:21-17:27) followed by the fourth extended discourse (18:1-19:2) in Matthew. The verb ἀφίημι occurs in two pericopae of the fourth discourse. The first is a responsive *chreia* (18:21-22) while the second is comprised of an extended parable (18:23-34) and a short concluding statement (18:35) (Bailey & Vander Broek 1992:112; Neyrey 1998:50–51; Luz 2001:465).<sup>11</sup>

The section on forgiveness begins in 18:15-22 with the formulation of a community rule (Bornkamm 1970:94) on how to deal with conflict between community members (18:15-17) which is followed by a pronouncement of holy law (Käsemann 1970:104) that links the decisions of the community

11 According to Watson (1992:105) 18:21-22 can be understood as a *chreia* with humour, while Berger (1984:81) takes 18:21-35 as a *chreia*. The latter can, however, best be described as a parable.

on earth to God's in heaven (18:18). It asserts that what is decided by the community on earth will be upheld by God in heaven. God, who is again describes as being in heaven, will also grant whatever the community agrees on (18:19). Jesus, furthermore, promises to be present when the community gathers in his name (18:20).

Matthew 18:18 is an almost verbatim reiteration of Jesus' promise to Peter that he has the keys to the kingdom of God in 16:19. This could be a rendering of a Rabbinic saying that refers to the decision on if tenets of the Torah are applicable or not in a specific case. It is also possible that λύω ('to release') (18:18) refers to forgiveness and δέω ('to bind') to the refusal to forgive (Hagner 1995:532; Luomanen 1998:222). If the meaning of the two verbs have the same meaning in 16:19 and 18:19 it implies that Peter and the Matthean community both possess an authority that will be upheld by God at the last judgement. For Matthew the source of this authority is the presence of Jesus (18:20) in the present which is an important theme in his Gospel (cf. 1:23; 28:20).

The community rule on how to deal with community conflict is followed by a responsive *chreia* (18:21-22) about how personal forgiveness within the Matthean community should have no limits and a parable (18:23-34) which illustrates that community members should forgive each other since they had already been forgiven by God. The hypothetical *enthymeme* underlying the parable is the same as the one underlying 6:15 and can be stated as:

1. Major premise (unstated): God does not forgive those who do not forgive others.
2. Minor premise: Some do not forgive others who sin.
3. Conclusion: Therefore God will not forgive them

Matthew concludes his extended argument in 18:35 by expressly stating that God who is in heaven will with the final judgement (the verb ποιέω is in the future tense) not forgive those who do not forgive their brothers in the present. It again links God's forgiveness to that practiced by believers. Not only will their verdict be upheld by God at the eschatological judgement, as is made clear in 18:18-20, but will their willingness to forgive others also determine if they themselves will be forgiven by God (18:23-34, 35).

### The dynamics of the ἀφίημι-logia

The analysis of the four pericopae (6:9-15; 9:1-8; 12:22-32; 18:15-35) in which Matthew's ἀφίημι-logia occurs reveals the following:

(a) In Matthew's ἀφίημι-logia God's realm (heaven) and eschatological fulfilment (the final judgment) are linked with the realm (earth) and time of the ministry of Jesus and the Church. Matthew 6:9-10 explicitly links heaven and earth, while 6:12, 14-15 correlates the action of God in heaven (cf. 6:14 – ὁ πατήρ ὑμῶν ὁ οὐράνιος) with the conduct of believers on earth. In Matt 9:6 Jesus' healing of a paralytic serves as proof that the Son of Man already has the authority on earth to forgive sins. References to the power of Jesus to forgive sin in the present are linked to the coming age in 12:32 (12:33-37 also refers to the final judgement), while 18:15-20 states that what the church decide on earth the heavenly Father will condone in the future. The following parable (18:23-35) refers to the future judgement of the heavenly Father (18:35) that will reflect the practice of forgiveness by believers on earth. Matthew thus emphasises the interconnectedness of the authority and conduct of the church with the eschatological judgement by God. Jesus is presented as an authoritative teacher who can prophesize the correct outcome of the eschatological judgement of God. This theme is not confined to the motif of forgiveness. In 10:33 Jesus states that those who deny him in front of people will be denied by him before his father (who is described as being in heaven) and in 7:1-5 God's judgement is tied to the conduct of believers, since Jesus warns that he will judge people as they had judged others.

(b) The forgiveness of sins validates authority since the verb ἀφίημι occurs in a number of pericopae in which the Matthean community's partaking in the authority of Jesus plays an important part. In this regard Matthew follows Mark's linking of the forgiveness of sins to the motif of power and authority. Matt 9:8 states that the crowd was amazed that God had given such authority to men; 12:1-8 relates the controversy over Jesus as the Son of Man who is lord over the Sabbath (i.e. one who has authority over it) while 12:22-37 refers to sins that will be forgiven and those that will not in the context of the controversy over the source of Jesus' authority.

(c) According to Matthew, Jesus, Peter and the Church are the true mediators of God's forgiveness and not the priests or the temple. There is,

however, a difference between Jesus to whom all power in heaven and earth have been given (28:18) and the church whose authority is to be exercised on earth (cf. 16:19 and 28:18) but that will still need to be eschatologically validated by God. The important fact for Matthew is that God's forgiveness can in the present be mediated by other agents than by those associated with the temple.

(d) In general in Matthew the responsibility for seeking forgiveness is that of the offended (6:12, 14-15) or impartial party (9:1-8), but it can also be requested (18:26, 29) or initiated by the offending party (5:21-26).

(e) The unique manner in which Matthew has integrated his ethics of forgiveness with specific themes becomes apparent when it is compared to Luke's redaction of his ἀφίημι–logia. Unlike Matthew, who integrates his ἀφίημι–logia with the question of authority, Luke integrates his with two other aspects of the ministry and teaching of Jesus: the opposition to Jesus by his enemies, especially the Pharisees (5:17-26; 7:36-50 and 12:10), and his references to debt (7:40-43 and 16:1-9).

(f) Reconciliation is apparently not an important theme for Matthew since the verb διαλλάσσομαι ('become reconciled') only occurs in 5:24. This, however, illustrates the limits of a word study since Matthew does refer to peacemakers (5:9) as well as eating with undesirables (9:10-11) which embody the practice of reconciliation. Similarly, accepting the humiliation of being slapped and willingness to walk an extra mile (5:39-41) could also imply forgiveness. As is the case with reconciliation an extensive study of explicit and implicit references to forgiveness should thus be undertaken to get a full sense of Matthew's understanding of this important theme.

(g) While forgiveness is an important theme in Matthew, it could be argued that he has more references to the judgement of God than to his forgiveness (Buckley 1991:30). Forgiveness is thus not for Matthew the automatic outcome of all processes in which it is sought.

## 6. The South African debate on forgiveness

Since the first free democratic elections were held in 1994 both reconciliation and forgiveness have been important themes as South Africa attempts to

deal with its painful past in order to build a new future.<sup>12</sup> In this section I will focus on the manner in which specifically the *Dutch Reformed Church* (DRC) has participated in the debate on forgiveness through the decisions and declarations of its General Synod. The reason for focussing on the General Synod is that it has according to the church order of the DRC the sole authority to determine policy that affects the whole denomination (Anon 2013a:10).

### **The need for forgiveness – the role of the Dutch Reformed Church in Apartheid South Africa**

In order to understand the role of the Dutch Reformed Church in the pre-democratic South Africa it is necessary to take note off the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee (TRC).<sup>13</sup> In its findings the TRC categorised faith communities in two broad categories: those who served as agents of oppressions and those who were victims of oppression. The first category is further dived in acts of commission and legitimisation and those of omission (Tutu, 1998:65-75). The DRC is identified in the final rapport of the TRC as an agent of oppression that both commissioned and legitimised apartheid. In terms of the TRC rapport it is clear that the DRC's role in the commissioning and legitimisation of apartheid<sup>14</sup> necessitates that it should not only confess its transgressions, but also seek forgiveness. The question this section investigates is if it has done so through the decisions of its General Synod. It is important to note that the focus of this study is not on if the motive of forgiveness occurs in the agenda, discussions, devotions

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12 In the words of Bishop Desmond Tutu (1999:213) in his *No Future without Forgiveness*, true forgiveness deals with the past, all of the past, to make the future possible.

13 The TRC is based on the final clause of the Interim Constitution of 1993 and passed in Parliament as the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act, No 34 of 1995 (Meiring 1999:12-13).

14 The rapport states that "From the outset (sic), the Dutch Reformed Church provided theological and biblical sanction for apartheid, even though some of its theologians questioned this justification. It was only in 1986 that the Dutch Reformed Church's sanction of apartheid began to be officially questioned. The complicity of the Dutch Reformed Church in the policy of apartheid went beyond simple approval and legitimisation. The church actively promoted apartheid, not least because it served the Afrikaner interests with which it identified. The Dutch Reformed Church admitted that it 'often tended to put the interests of its people above the interests of other people.' It gave no examples of times or events when it did not put the interests of the Afrikaner community above those of others" (Tutu, 1998:66).

or rapports of the General Synod, but specifically if a decision was made thereon that was taken up in the *Acta* thereof (i.e. a formal and binding decision).<sup>15</sup>

The General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church has met on six occasions (1994, 1998, 2002, 2007, 2011, and 2013) since 1994. If the *Acta* of these meetings of the General Synod are analysed in order to ascertain if it explicitly addressed the question of forgiveness by taking a decision thereon by searching for the occurrence of the Afrikaans words for forgiveness ('vergifnis', 'vergiffenis') therein it becomes apparent that there is no reference to the motif in the *acta* of four synods (1994, 1998, 2002 and 2013). It does, however, occur in a letter from the Rev Mochube Lebone from the *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in Afrika* in 2007 (Anon 2007:180) and in a study on the ministry of deliverance of the 2011 Synod (Anon 2011:97) in which it is mentioned in brackets as a characteristic of Evangelical faithfulness along with love, grace and reconciliation. If it is taken into consideration that the 2007 letter is not a DRC document the only reference to the motif of forgiveness is a single one in brackets in a study on deliverance from demon possession. The General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church has thus not taken a single explicit decision on forgiveness in six meetings since 1994. The question thus arises why the DRC has not reflected more extensively on forgiveness. One possible answer is that it has not been deemed to be important. Another that it was dealt with in other acts and documents. It is, therefore, important to briefly survey both the documents and enactments pertaining to forgiveness involving the DRC in the period after 1994.

In terms of documents the policy document *Church and Society* (Afrikaans: *Kerk en Samelewing*)<sup>16</sup> is often mentioned as a key document in regard to the forgiveness and reconciliation process of the DRC since it not only denounced any Biblical support for apartheid, but also came out against

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15 The agenda of the 2013 General Synod (Anon, 2013b:249), for example, does refer to decisions made by the General Synod to ask forgiveness for the harm apartheid caused, but it does not specify which decisions it refers to.

16 There are two versions of *Church and Society*. The first was adopted by the General Synod of the DRC at its 1986 meeting and the second revised version at its 1990 meeting. The intention of the revision was not to change the direction of the document in regard to apartheid, but rather to clarify it (Strauss 2012:511-512).

the way in which the policy had functioned in Southern Africa (Strauss 2012:511). It does, however, not refer explicitly to forgiveness. When possible enactments and expressions of forgiveness are taken into consideration the confession by Prof Willie Jonker at the 1990 Rustenburg conference and the visit of President Nelson Mandela to the 1994 General Synod of the DRC are deemed the most significant by historians of the DRC (Gaum 2014).

In November 1990 a conference was organised at Rustenburg for South African church leaders (Toit *et al* 2002:104-105). During his presentation at the conference the DRC theologian Prof Willie Jonker, who was not one of the delegates of the DRC, but an invited speaker (Toit *et al* 2002:107) felt compelled to deviate from his prepared speech by reading the following handwritten note:

“I confess before you and before the Lord not only my own sin and guilt, and my personal responsibility for the political, social, economic and structural wrongs that have been done to many of you and the results of which you and our whole community are still suffering from, but vicariously I have also to do that in the name of the N.G.K. of which I am a member, and for the Afrikaner people as a whole.”

After Jonker’s presentation the Anglican Archbishop at the time, Desmond Tutu, asked for a minute to respond to Prof Jonker’s unexpected confession, during which he said that “When that confession is made, then those of us who have been wronged must say, ‘We forgive you,’ and together we must move to the reconstruction of our land” (Wren 1990). The next morning the moderator of the DRC, Prof Pieter Potgieter, affirmed that the official delegates of the DRC unambiguously identify with Jonker’s statement and that he had precisely reiterated the decision made by the General Synod of the DRC in Bloemfontein (Toit *et al* 2002:107). According to Bishop Tutu (1999:221) the representatives of the segregated churches that the DRC had established for black, Indian, and ‘Coloured’ members were, however, incensed with him and questioned the seriousness of the confession since they felt that the DRC was dragging its feet on the question of uniting with them and had refused to accept the ‘Belhar Confession,’ which the other churches in the DRC family had. This is an important remark as it relates forgiveness to the process of church unity and implies that the segregated

churches established by the DRC saw themselves as the ones who should be called on to forgive the DRC. The confession of Prof Jonker is thus not seen by all as a definitive declaration of forgiveness by the DRC.

The 1994 General Synod has been described as the Synod of Reconciliation. Not only did the Synod apologise to prominent DRC members Ben Marais and Beyers Naudé, who had been vilified for their protest against apartheid by the DRC, but President Nelson Mandela, then newly elected, also became the first South African president ever to address the General Synod (Strauss 2013:14–16). Not only was he warmly welcomed by the Synod singing a hymn asking God to bless him, but he responded by thanking the leadership of the DRC for the positive role they had played in the first democratic election and their commitment against racism. Having taken place just after the first democratic election the events of the 1994 Synod left an impression on many delegates of the DRC having broken with its apartheid past.

The reality that forgiveness is often enacted and embodied, rather than explicitly asked for and granted, and that the mediators thereof are not always the highest decision making bodies of the groups involved, should in the light of the Rustenburg Declaration and the actions of the 1994 General Synod warn against coming to the conclusion that the DRC has not considered forgiveness to be an important topic for reflection and action in the post-apartheid South Africa.<sup>17</sup> It must further be taken into consideration that forgiveness in regard to the DRC has been to a large extent been incorporated into the unity process<sup>18</sup> with URCSA. Since this still ongoing it can, however, be argued that this process has not yet been brought to a conclusion in South Africa.

### **Engaging with Matthew's ethics of forgiveness**

In reflecting on the DRC's participation in the ongoing reconciliation process in the post-apartheid South Africa in the light of Matthew's ethics of forgiveness it needs to be taken into consideration that Matthew

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17 While the Afrikaans Reformed Churches were widely identified with Afrikaner nationalism and held to be complicit in apartheid by the TRC only the Dutch Reformed Church made representations to the Commission (Tutu 1998:62).

18 It is notable that the Acta of the General Synod, contrary to its silence on forgiveness, refers numerous times to reconciliation.

wrote his Gospel for a community living in a different context. Matthew's community was confronting internal conflict, growing conflict with Judaism and the omnipresent oppression of the Roman Empire. It is clear that the contemporary South African context is drastically different and since Matthew is not directly addressing the relationship between different races living in a liberal democracy, economic groups within a capitalist economy or denominations in a predominant Christian country. Furthermore, the ethics of the New Testament cannot be approached in an anachronistic manner in regard to forgiveness since contemporary understanding of forgiveness differs from that of the first century.

The question thus arises if Matthew's ethic of forgiveness is of any relevance to the South African debate. The fact that the General Synod of the DRC has not only failed to reflect on Matthew's ethics in this regard, or even on forgiveness in general, suggests that a negative answer should be given. If the remark of Burridge (1997:359) on the use of the New Testament in contemporary ethics that it is better to look for what the New Testament says about key human moral experiences rather than modern 'problems' is followed it can, however, be argued that forgiveness and reconciliation as key human moral experiences can be carefully considered from Matthew's perspective. This is especially important for the DRC that belongs to a tradition that has always claimed to take the Bible seriously (De Gruchy 1979:370-371).

There is thus a need to engage with texts like the Gospel of Matthew in a hermeneutically responsible manner. The genre and narrative structure of Matthew and its original agonistic, group centred cultural context must be taken into consideration. The different ways of seeking forgiveness in the first century context thereof – sharing meals, giving an offering, exchanging gifts, public acknowledgment of another's honour – should not necessarily be duplicated in the South African context, but may serve as a stimulus to develop new practices through which forgiveness can be effected.<sup>19</sup> While it needs to be taken into consideration that there are contemporary dimensions of forgiveness which Matthew does not address

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19 The *Healing of Memory* workshops are good example of community based processes developed in response to the need of communities to be reconciled (Lapsley & Karakashian 2012:119-130).

(e.g. the forgiveness of outsiders who do not belong to his community), and that he does not always focus on reconciliation and forgiveness (cf. the relationship between Judaism and the Matthean community), reflecting on his Gospel can enrich the contemporary theological dialogue on forgiveness by affirming the following for consideration:

(a) Matthew identifies more than one mediating agent of forgiveness. God, Jesus, individuals like Peter and the faith community may all forgive sins (though not in an identical manner) in the first Gospel. In regard to the faith community forgiveness for Matthew is interpersonal in character (one individual forgiving another who had transgressed against him or her) and not just personal (one individual forgiving a group of individuals who had transgressed in a general manner over a period of time). This is an important difference between vertical and horizontal forgiveness in Matthew in that Jesus' soteriological work is described as being for the benefit of an unspecified many (cf. the reference to πολλῶν in 20:28; 26:28) in contrast to interpersonal forgiveness which focusses on a specific brother who had transgressed against another brother (18:15-22). This emphasis on interpersonal forgiveness challenges all believers to seek forgiveness from those they had personally transgressed against and not only to strive for a general forgiveness from the oppressed in South Africa pronounced by a civil institution like the TRC.<sup>20</sup>

(b) Matthew emphasises the multi-relational dimension of forgiveness. Forgiveness cannot be reduced to vertical forgiveness (i.e. since only God can forgive sins<sup>21</sup> it is unnecessary to also ask forgiveness of those who had been harmed). Against this reduction Matthew intentionally links interpersonal forgiveness to the forgiveness of God. While the order between God's forgiveness and that practices by believers is not fixed

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20 The foot washing by the former Minister of Law and Order (1986-1992), Adriaan Vlok, of Rev Frank Chikane's feet is a well published example of this. In 1989, a pair of Vlok's security policemen had laced Chikane's underpants with a potent insecticide in order to kill him. Only advanced medical treatment in the United States had saved his life. Seventeen years later after reading Matthew 5:23-24 Vlok decided to ask personally Chikane's forgiveness and to signal his remorse through the ritual of washing his feet (Fairbanks, 2014).

21 The remark of General Tienie Groenewald that he would only confess his guilt to God and not to Bishop Tutu or the TRC (Nothling-Slabbert 2005:777) is an example of this line of thinking.

(cf. 6:12, 14-15 and 18:23-35) their pairing is. To be forgiven by God thus does not free believers from the obligation to forgive others – but rather motivates it. A faith community can therefore not choose to seek only God's forgiveness and not that of those wronged by them (cf. 5:24 which speaks of seeking reconciliation with a brother before completing an offering to God).

(c) Matthew invites the church to reflect on the relationship between confession, forgiveness, reconciliation and restitution. It poses the question if the DRC has confessed its active participation in apartheid without explicitly asking for forgiveness from those who had been harmed. Or if both forgiveness and reconciliation have become synonymous with church unity and that forgiveness has thereby become a forgotten ethical imperative. In this regard the manner in which Matthew integrates the theme of forgiveness and their underlying arguments with other themes warns against the reflection on theological themes in isolation. It is, for example, important to not separate the theme of forgiveness from eschatology (especially judgement). If this is done the danger arises that the seeking of forgiveness will become a mere optional social-political process. In contrast Matthew's use of eschatological language stresses the importance of practicing interpersonal forgiveness. For him forgiveness is always done with the judgement of God in mind. It is an ultimate concern for him. Therefore the unification process between the DRC and URCSA should be informed by eschatology and not only social-political concerns.

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