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## **Patterning Peace-building and Reconciliation on the Conversion of Zacchaeus**

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### **Abstract**

The world is always searching for new models to deal with the complexity of peaceful co-existence and reconciliation. This article uses the conversion of Zacchaeus in the Gospel of Luke ( Lk. 19:1-10) to provide further insights on salvation, peace-building and reconciliation. A sociological interpretive methodological approach was used to anchor interpretation on the real problems facing people and society today. The exegesis of the text suggests that the salvation process initiated by Jesus is a model for peace-building and reconciliation. Such a framework should consider harmonising differences, removing inherent personal difficulties and affirming accountability. The extent to which Ghana's National Reconciliation approach reflects this framework and its implications for today's leaders are provided.

### **Introduction**

We live in a world full of conflicts, but there should be a place for peace and reconciliation. For Christians, peace and reconciliation and other subjects are at the core of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The Penguin English Dictionary defines peace as a "state of being calm or quiet, or harmony or agreement that exists between previously opposing groups (The Penguin Group, 2000). Dating back to the 1970s, as a way of restoring peace and harmony in many places, some nations of the world have tried to embark on reconciliation. The first one to be instituted was in Bangladesh in 1971. Its objective was to investigate war crimes. In 1974 a commission investigated disappearances from the reign of Idi Amin, the ousted president of Uganda. There have been other reconciliation commissions set up in countries such as Chile, El Salvador, Peru, Argentina, South Africa.

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In December 2001 the Parliament of Ghana enacted Act 611, which is also known as the National Reconciliation Commission Act. The President signed the Act on January 9, 2002, and the Commission was inaugurated on the 6th of May 2002. They were to recommend to the president measures to redress the victims of human rights abuses to prevent any such future occurrence. The Commission was to investigate cases since 1957 to January 6, 1993 (CDD Ghana, 2005). The work of the National Reconciliation Commission was necessary for the steady and long-term sustenance of political and economic development of the country. Concerning the National Reconciliation Commission Act of Ghana, this article seeks to discuss reconciliation and peace using Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus as a biblical case study that provides a model for peaceful co-existence and reconciliation.

### **Sociological and theological basis of peace and reconciliation**

The nature of human society makes it imperative that every well-meaning human society or institution must look for ways of promoting a peaceful existence without which the society cannot thrive. In our local setting very social power structure is set up with the view to maintain order and sanity and peace and reconciliation. The elders, family heads, the Chiefs, and elders, religious leaders are supposed to be agents of peace and reconciliation. At the national level, the religious leaders, the legal, professions, the police, community activists, are to preserve and promote peace and reconciliation among people, for example, the government of Ghana introduced the Ghana Reconciliation Commission to help deal with the problems of abuses of people's rights from 1957 to 2002. Also, in the recent electoral problems, the government set up the Ghana peace council to champion peace and unity against engaging in post-electoral war or violence (Vine, 1973). Peace and reconciliation are ideas that are almost present in every part of the Bible.

Reconciliation is present where there is estrangement or enmity and is to be overcome, and unity restored. Reconciliation as a Christian doctrine is attributed to Paul even though its ramifications are present in the mission, and ministry of Jesus. For example, his teachings and parables (Matt. 5; 24), the lost sheep, prodigal son, the lost man found Luke 19:10. The root idea of reconciliation (in Greek καταλλαγή) is a change of attitude or relationships

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(Elwell, 2001). Paul even applies it to the relationship between a man and his wife, to Jews and Gentiles (Eph. 2:14), and also to the alienated, divisive elements of a fragmented universe brought about sin, which is being brought back by Christ. (Eph. 1:10, Col. 1:20). Paul's illustration of the results of reconciliation is the removal of the dividing wall of estrangement, which was brought about by the mediating sacrificial work of Christ on the Cross. This led to peace with God and access to the presence of God (Rom. 5:1-2, Eph. 2:18). Since the message of Christianity is right relationship with God, reconciliation, peace and fellowship move together. The removal of sin between man and God, between man and man, and man and creation brings peace and fellowship and unity. Humans are the ones to be reconciled to God, through Christ (II Cor. 5:19, Eph. 1:10).

The incarnation of Christ is the divine act of reconciliation and peace. The ministry of Christ such as healing, teaching, or a fellowship is a continuous offer of reconciliation and peace to the sick, poor, sinful, outcasts, leper, insane, and the underprivileged in society (Nestle, 1993). Many people have sought to preserve and pursue peace through committees and groups and organisations and many channels. For example in South Africa, in 1990, the South African government under F. W. De Clerk had to abandon the Apartheid policy that the country had been operating for over three centuries, in the course of bringing peace and reconciliation between and among the South African people. Nelson Mandela later became the president. Thereafter, South Africa began the programme of working towards peace, unity and reconciliation. This reconciliation has been going on in other nations such as Brazil, Guatemala, Haiti, Rwanda, Sierra Leone and Liberia.

## **Method**

The interpretation of the story is based on social scientific criticism, a methodological approach that can be used to interpret the Bible using social and cultural perspectives. This approach or model of interpretation takes into consideration the social, cultural, geographical, economic, role, status, classes, political, education and legal values and norms that influence the text, from sender and recipient of the text in its setting. Social interpreters of the Bible try to use an ancient text to solve current social, economic and political problems (Bray, 1996). The sociological interpretation of the Bible believes that interpreters of scriptural must begin with the real problems

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which people are facing in the world today and look for answers from the Bible. Given this, the modern interpreter approaches the ancient text from their perspective, context and experience. In fact, this does not mean that historical, cultural and other matters are not considered. Jesus' meeting with Zacchaeus in the Gospel of Luke spells out some issues in the socio-economic, political and peaceful existence in the community in the time of Jesus, but nations today face similar issues. The story of Zacchaeus is, therefore, used to have an understanding of dealing with national peace and reconciliation issues. An exegesis of the text was made.

### **Zacchaeus' encounter with Jesus**

Luke's emphasis is about God's dealings with the world (Luke 19:1-10). This is seen in his tracing of the genealogy of Jesus through Adam (3:38). Luke had a theological purpose in mind when he wrote his gospel. The structure of the gospel places importance on the works of Jesus as a saviour, a disciple and one who fulfils his ministry in Jerusalem as prophesied by the Old Testament prophets. The structure of Luke's Gospel has an extended section which gives an account of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem (9:15-19:27). It is in this corpus that the story of Zacchaeus occurs. In the gospel of Matthew and Mark, the story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem immediately follows the healing of Bartimaeus. Jesus travelled on from Bethany through Jericho where he passed the night in the house of Zacchaeus (v.5). The Lukan source of this material is independent of the two synoptic gospels. The material is Aramaic as proved by the use of a number of Kai's (v.1-2). Zacchaeus in the Hebrew means "to be pure", showing that he is of Jewish origin. He must have been the head of all the tax-collectors stationed at one of the principal places of Jericho. The marketing of balsam at the strategic place of Jericho shows the connection of the place to the network of roads in the area (Hendrickson, 1978).

According to the narrative, Jesus entered the city of Jericho with a large crowd following him and some perhaps watching from the sides of the streets. There was a man called Zacchaeus; he was the chief tax-collector, a title which only occurs here in the whole of the New Testament. The present encounter of Zacchaeus with Jesus is an instance of a rich man seeking Jesus with the view of gaining admission into the Kingdom of God. In Palestine, tax collection was forbidden. This system was adopted throughout the Roman Empire. Different kinds of taxes grew in such numbers that both the

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rich and the poor felt the heavy burden (Matt. 22:17). They included poll tax, import and export taxes, crop tax (one-tenth of the grain crop and one-fifth of the wine, fruits and oil), an income tax of one percent (of a man's income per year), road tax, taxes on animals, salt, taxes on the sale of slaves, transfer of property and other taxes such as temple tax.

The Romans later introduced taxation through regular census (Luke 2:2). The Roman tax officer collected the revenue through the cheapest means possible. The tax-collector set the quota for the Roman government and this gave Zacchaeus the right to collect at an open-ended commission. Contracts were let for five year periods. The tax-collectors were known to cheat the payer and even the government. They were hated by their fellow Jews because they represented the foreign government which was the Roman government. In Rabbinical writings, they are described as robbers, and in the synoptic gospels, they are presented as sinners (Matt. 9:10; 11:19; Mark 2:15; Luke 5:30 and 17:34). Zacchaeus was a public officer who was very rich (a plutocrat). His financial situation and dealings of his work had resulted in the social outcry that had alienated him from his community. On the encounter with Jesus, Zacchaeus received a unmerited salvation, the same as Matthew, a tax-collector, who ended up becoming one of Jesus' disciples. The meeting with Jesus brought great relief to Zacchaeus and his fellow Jews. He had an intense desire to meet Jesus so when he saw that his stature could not help him to realise his mission, he decided to climb a sycamore tree to circumvent the presence of a large crowd following Jesus in the street of Jericho. He climbed heights that provide a better view of Jesus. To fulfil his great desire and need to see Jesus, he realises his limitation for the scripture says "He was a little man" (i.e. a man with a small stature. (Henry,1979). Anyone who genuinely wants to "see" Jesus (i.e. get a new birth) must defy all odds, and break through all difficulties and all entanglements to receive forgiveness, reconciliation, new birth, Holy Spirit, empowerment and all that Christian life and ministry is all about.

By climbing the tree in the city of Jericho, he made himself conspicuous to the Jews and Jesus despite his small stature (v4). The sycamore tree is a big tree; it has low spreading branches, often planted at roadsides, where they provide a favourable point for sightseeing. It grows big, and its wood is used for household carpentry jobs, its fruits are edible. By running ahead of the crowd, the impediment which attempted to block him from seeking Jesus was overcome. This shows the deliberate effort of Zacchaeus to meet the

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grace and salvation of God. (vv5-6) Jesus looked up and seeing him on the tree branch said to him "come down, I must stay at your house today". So, he came down quickly and received Jesus with joy. This reception is opposite to that of the young rich man of Luke 18:18-38 who left the presence of Jesus sorrowfully. Zacchaeus' reception of Jesus was an expression of his burning heart desire. It was a very relieving moment for him, being someone who has been rejected and branded as rich and wicked.

The call of Zacchaeus is an indication of the fore-knowledge of Christ. God is aware of the circumstance of the people in the world. God is aware of the social, political, economic and religious dimensions of every person, so he knew that of Zacchaeus the tax-collector. (v6) Zacchaeus' hasty reception of Jesus with joy was a mark of someone who was happy to be counted worthy among God's people just as Lydia was glad to receive the apostles Paul and Silas, preachers of the Gospel of Christ (Acts 18). God appointed Jesus Christ to be the mediator or reconciler of this sinful world to God. This means that reconciliation from the beginning to the end is of divine origin.

### **The Murmuring of Society**

Jesus' reception and acceptance of Zacchaeus sparked off remarks of great disapproval (v.7). The Jews did not accept Jesus was going to be the guest of Zacchaeus, a well-known sinner in the community. This is comparable to Jesus' reception of the woman with Alabaster oil (Matt. 14:2). Jesus dealt with the concept of sin or evil or impurity which brings hardships and difficulties so that those who suffer could enjoy life. Zacchaeus and his household received salvation from Christ. The conversion of Zacchaeus is like all those who will encounter Jesus. It brought peace and healing not only to him but also to his house and the entire community. Neither Jesus nor Zacchaeus submitted to the pressure of business and circumstances that obstructed their mission and desire. Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Behold, Lord half of my goods I give to the poor and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold". Zacchaeus made these remarks to Jesus when he received him as a guest of his house on that day. Jesus recognised Zacchaeus on account of his burning desire to see him.

By this statement, Zacchaeus bore a public proof of his conversion. The statement was addressed to Jesus primarily and secondly to the people in his house (both invitees and members of his household). Zacchaeus was aware

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that he had gotten wealth, direct or indirect by unlawful means. True penitence makes people see their sins and guilt before God, and, therefore, Zacchaeus said "if I have taken anything from anyone by false means, I restore it fourfold (Gaebelein, 1984). Jesus said to him "this day salvation has come to this house for he is also the son of Abraham." Zacchaeus had turned from sin to God, and now he is happy, saved from sin, and guilt and the power of injustice and greed. Now that Jesus has come into the house, he had now gotten the new birth when Jesus said: "salvation has come into his house". Zacchaeus, even though a Jew by birth, was deemed a sinner and heathen because of his association with the Roman Government.

However, now that he has been forgiven of all his sins he is the true son of Abraham. He becomes the true son of Abraham by his repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. For Jesus, Zacchaeus being his host is a divine appointment, because the visit brought salvation to him, his household and all those within the purview of his work. Jesus described his meeting with Zacchaeus as "finding the lost sheep" (v.10), for the son of man came to seek and save that which is lost. What has happened to him is a sign to the whole world that Jesus has come to save all men from sin; the reason why the world is lost. Jesus, the son of God, had come to seek and to save the lost. He came from heaven to earth to seek and to save the lost due to the fall in the Garden of Eden. The fourfold restitution by Zacchaeus, speaks of a person who has come to terms with his own sinful and notorious activities in the community before God. This kind of restitution is a mark of what can be called the radical grace obtained by Zacchaeus. Radical grace required a radical restitution which was more than that paid by thieves (Num. 5:6; Ex. 22:1).

### **Salvation and reconciliation**

In Luke 19:9, Jesus said to Zacchaeus "today salvation has come to this house; he is a son of Abraham". His salvation was not for him alone, but for all the people in his household and those he had defrauded over the years. It had personal, domestic, social and economic implications, for it changed the way he lived his life and did business. It changed people's perception about him. Such is the implication of the conversion experience of people who come to Jesus Christ. The salvation that came to the house of Zacchaeus was not only spiritual salvation but salvation in all dimensions of life. The word salvation could also be translated as "made well" or "made whole" (complete); it is *shalom* which means "peace" in Hebrew. His salvation

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brought peace and healing or wholeness to his community, and he was reconciled to his fellow Jews in every area of his life. The term "son of Abraham" shows his biological and spiritual parentage. Every Jew is a descendant of Abraham, a man of faith, a man who took a radical decision to obey God. Zacchaeus regained his place in the community.

Corruption threatens every effort of any good governance; it stifles sustainable development and fair business practice so people must fight this social canker (African Watch, 2012). The corrupt practices by Zacchaeus are not a good example that any individual or state official should emulate. To reduce poverty among the majority of the people and ensure that people trust the activities of both private and public institutions, churches and the leadership, in every area, must ensure that people's lives improve. The writer's experience in Ghana as a Counsellor for Ashanti and Eastern Region (Zone) during the period of Ghana's National Reconciliation was that the higher one's position in society, the greater the likelihood of being corrupted.

### **Framework for peace and reconciliation**

The conversion of Zacchaeus generates in the minds of many well-meaning followers of Christ the need to seek peace and forgiveness in the community. The reason is that without peaceful co-existence, peace is an illusion. Peace is stifled in any situation where there are disunity and conflict. Through the conversation of Zacchaeus, God was creating the new world order where justice, love, peace and wellbeing existed. The following thoughts emerge from the story of Zacchaeus.

- i. The process of salvation initiated by Jesus served as a model for overcoming differences, ending quarrels and finding ways of working together. Jesus' ministry was inclusive, and it brought to an end the differences between Jews and Gentiles.
- ii. The road to peace and reconciliation involves removing difficulties in the way of people, including oppressive laws. Loving one's neighbour is the key and loving God is above every other law.
- iii. Peace and reconciliation provide the basis for accountability. Zacchaeus took personal responsibility for his misdemeanours.
- iv. Beyond accountability, compensation was paid for the oppressed or the abused. The willingness to pay a four-fold compensation is an indication of how much Zacchaeus recognised his mistreatment of others. Anyone who has taken so much from the



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people and community must give back to the people and the community.

The themes harmony, personal freedom and personal accountability are self-evident and provide the building blocks for the model of peace and reconciliation inherent in Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus.

### **Application of the Peace-Reconciliation model and Implications**

The themes above are similar to aspects of the operational specifications of Ghana's National Reconciliation Commission where the approach aimed at peace building, forgiveness, reconciliation and accountability. The goal of the commission was to help reconcile the people of Ghana by finding out the truth about past human rights abuses and helping those who were hurt to deal with their pain and to move on with their lives. The Commission was to help those who participated in the abuses to come to terms with their experiences and to obtain forgiveness. The aim was to promote truth, accountability, forgiveness, peace and unity and also to prevent recurrence of such inhuman treatment. Zacchaeus' salvation translated into healing the wounds he inflicted on others through corruption. In terms of accountability, the individual or group of people must be willing to pay some form of compensation for the consequences of their actions or inactions. While harmony was achieved among opposing Ghanaians and offenders found freedom from revenge, accountability and restitution were woefully inadequate in Ghana's national reconciliation efforts.

The story of Zacchaeus in the Gospel of Luke is a challenge to the Ghanaian Church and Christians in Ghana. The mission of the church is the salvation of all people just as Jesus Christ came to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19: 9). The corrupt police officer, false prophet, politician, chief, landlord, market woman and man, and armed robbers are all walking Zacchaeuses in society. The church in Ghana is in the business of seeking and saving the lost Zacchaeuses. The church must, therefore, seek and receive the poor and the despised in society just as Jesus redeemed Zacchaeus. The church must not exploit or take advantage of the poor by making financial demands in the name of God. The church must defend and protect the people, and demand accountability.

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Being a Christian presupposes that the person has repented and become converted and has gone through a personal Zacchaeus experience. Jesus accepted the rich Zacchaeus into his company after he had repented of his sins. Zacchaeus redistributed his wealth and also declared that he would pay compensation for cheating his people. Personal accountability as demonstrated by Zacchaeus is a hallmark of genuine salvation and Christianity. A corrupt Christian, with sacred or secular calling in society, is a misnomer.

## Conclusion

Reconciliation and peace-building in human society depend on God and man. The story of Zacchaeus provides a framework for peace-building and reconciliation based on harmony, removal of roadblocks, accountability and redress.

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