

Biblical and Theological Understanding of Reparations: A Biblical Perspective

Dear Esteemed scholars, Professors, AACCC Members, Staff, and Guests, Today, I am honored to present on the essential theme of “the Biblical and Theological Understanding of Reparations.”

1. Introduction

The term or concept of “reparations” refers to making amends for wrongdoing in a broad sense. In recent years, some Christian writers and speakers have labeled reparations as a symbol of “cultural Marxism” and other so-called “godless ideologies” that threaten society and penetrate the church. These critics assert, in broad terms, that the **notion of reparations is itself an injustice and fundamentally unbiblical (Anyabwile, 2019).**

Conversely, the concept of reparations is deeply rooted in notions of justice, restoration, and community healing. Within the context of Christianity, both the Old and New Testaments offer insights into these themes and the theological implications of reparations. This presentation aims to articulate a biblical and theological understanding of reparations, highlighting how these concepts resonate within African contexts, particularly in the context of debates surrounding decolonization and reparations.

2. The Meaning and related Key words of Reparations

The crucial question is, “Can we find the issue of reparations in the Bible? The Bible emphasizes the importance of recalling past wrongs and repenting for them, both on a personal and societal level. Reparations can serve as a means to recognize historical harms and facilitate reconciliation. We will examine the significance of restitution as a means of justice within the Hebrew community, particularly as established in the Law of Moses. The Bible highlights the significance of both personal and communal accountability for wrongdoing, which leads to the idea of reparations. Although the term

"reparations" is not directly used, the scriptures present principles that endorse the notion of making amends for historical injustices, particularly towards those who have suffered harm.

Reparative justice, also known as reparation, generally refers to the act of making amends, fixing, or providing compensation for harm, neglect, or injury inflicted. An important related concept is **restitution**, which focuses on compensating and returning something to its appropriate owner. The concept is first introduced in a song penned by Moses shortly before his death, found in Deuteronomy 32:35: **"Vengeance is Mine, and retribution, In due time their foot will slip; For the day of their calamity is near, And the impending things are hastening upon them"** NASB). The idea presented in Deuteronomy 32:35 is echoed multiple times, including in Romans 12:19.

Various translations of this phrase use terms such as **vengeance, revenge, and retribution**, all of which relate to the concept of **paying back**. Consequently, **Romans 12:19 says, "Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord"** (NASB). This aligns with Paul's advice to Philemon in Philemon 1:18, which states, **"But if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account"** (NASB). Not only is God more equipped to handle justice, but it is also His divine responsibility. This notion is reiterated throughout the Bible (example: Deuteronomy 32:35; Psalm 94:1; Isaiah 34:8; Jeremiah 51:36; Nahum 1:2; Hebrews 10:30).

Moreover, God assures us with the promise, **"I will repay."** Furthermore, Romans 12:17-21 states, "Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honourable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine; I will repay, says the Lord' (ESV).

Based on the abovementioned meaning and key related words of reparations, let's discuss the biblical and theological understanding of the OT and the NT on reparations, respectively, as follows.

2.1. Old Testament Understanding of Reparations

The Old Testament, especially in Leviticus, underscores the necessity of restitution and compensation for wrongdoings, which includes returning what was unjustly taken or addressing further harm caused. The Old Testament addresses the concept of reparations using terminology that may serve as a replacement for the term itself. For instance, in Leviticus 6:1-5, if there are no immediate family members to receive restitution, the reparative payment is directed to the priest. This restitution is closely tied to an individual's purity and the overall harmony of the community, emerging as a central theme throughout the biblical narrative. By fostering peace and rectifying injustices, the Israelites demonstrate that reparations are not merely optional but rather a mandatory law and principle among the people of Israel. Anyabwile notes that "reparations as 'material and social repayment made as acknowledgement and restitution by an offending party to an aggrieved party for wrong(s) done in order to repair the injuries, losses and/or disadvantages caused by the wrong'" (cf. **Anyabwile**, 2019).

As indicated above, the Old Testament provides several key instances indicative of reparative justice. The story of the Israelites' enslavement in Egypt and their eventual freedom includes a provision for the Israelites to take goods from the Egyptians as a form of just repayment for their suffering. Central to this understanding are the themes of restitution and restoration, as seen in Exodus 22:1-4 (Exodus 21-22; Lev 5), where laws prescribe reparations for theft or loss of property. The principle of restoring what has been taken and acknowledging wrong exemplifies a foundational aspect of reparative justice in biblical texts.

Furthermore, the concept of the Jubilee year (Leviticus 25), which mandated the return of ancestral lands and the emancipation of enslaved individuals, is a powerful model for reparations. This year of liberation emphasizes the importance of **generational healing and the restoration of dignity**, echoing the modern calls for reparations in the context of colonialism and systemic injustice, furthermore, after enduring a time of hardship. This process of restitution was motivated by God and implemented by the leaders from both the oppressing and the oppressed groups (Louis, 2011).

Consequently, the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah illustrate the collaboration between divine and human efforts during the reconstruction process. **The narratives in Ezra and Nehemiah do not recount any miracles.** Instead, God influenced the hearts of Cyrus (Ezra 1:1) and inspired King Artaxerxes (Ezra 7:27-28; Nehemiah 2:4-6), yet these were merely ordinary people whom God utilized to achieve the significant task of restoring His people. The kings commanded the people to pay a form of just repayment to the Israelites. Central to this understanding are the themes of restitution and restoration.

This instance of making amends and restoring what was lost, by a longstanding legal mandate, serves as a model for addressing historical injustices that extends beyond the original generation involved. Here, what was restored was a vital element of religious identity—the Temple, which served as the cornerstone of the Israelite community and the center of their societal structure. By rebuilding the Temple, the nation itself was effectively reestablished. Although they were not yet politically independent (with ten tribes of Israel already dispersed), this segment of Israelite/Hebrew society had been reinstated, returned, and provided with the resources necessary for success (Louis, 2011; Coates, 2023; Lincicum, 2021).

Thus, we could explore several OT verses that illustrate how restitution serves as both a principle and a law for those who have a relationship with and respect for God. We observe that God himself implements restitution and employs others to carry it out as well. The **seriousness of debt repayment is evident**, and these examples illustrate the significant extreme pain caused when individuals are deprived of what is rightfully theirs. This pain experienced by the victim and the guilt felt by the oppressor can persist for years, even across generations. This reality compels us, as Christians, to reflect on our social, political, legal, and moral obligations to pursue justice; however, a significant question remains whether this pursuit should be achieved through reparations or in some other way. What does the NT teach? How does a Christian theology investigate it?

2.2. New Testament Understanding of Reparations

Does the New Testament conceptualize reparations in the same way as the Old Testament? In the New Testament, I could argue that the primary focus is on themes of **repentance, reconciliation, healing, and forgiveness**, rather than on restitution, compensation, justice, or fairness. Christ embodies a principle or law that appears to surpass the Mosaic Laws, presenting a seemingly eternal standard that insists on the rectification of wrongs and the repayment of debts. Restitution—defined as making amends, restoring harmony, ensuring safety, and providing compensation—is a key aspect of **Christ's redemptive sacrifice on the cross and paves the way for our reconciliation with God the Father**.

The parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) illustrates a process of restoration that includes recognition of wrong, repentance, and a joyful reception back into the community. This narrative reinforces the belief that **healing begins with acknowledgment of past wrongs, setting a theological foundation for reparative actions in this passage**. Similarly, the narrative of Zacchaeus, a controversial tax collector, illustrates the potential for mending relationships between divided communities through financial reparations.

Additionally, Jesus' teachings on forgiveness highlight the need for **reconciling relationships**, which is crucial in understanding the essence of reparations in the context of spiritual well-being rather than cash payment. In Matthew 5:23-24, **Jesus emphasizes that reconciliation should precede worship, reflecting the moral imperative for communities to address past grievances as part of their spiritual journey**.

Thus, **NT interprets reparations as a means of forgiveness and reconciliation** rather than simply the restitution of goods or cash, as illustrated in the narratives of Exodus, Ezra, and Nehemiah. Context is crucial in this understanding.

Throughout the Bible, the significance of redemption and reconciliation is underscored, both on individual and collective levels. Reparations, viewed as a process of remembrance, repentance, and healing, can serve as a pathway to mend broken

relationships. The teachings and actions of Jesus demonstrate a commitment to justice and liberation for the marginalized. His ministry and parables emphasize the importance of addressing injustice and supporting those who have suffered.

2.3. Theological Understanding of Reparations

Reparation is a theological principle intricately linked to the ideas of atonement and satisfaction, forming part of the profound mysteries of the Christian Faith. It teaches that humanity has fallen from an original state of justice at creation, and through the Incarnation, Passion, and Death of the Son of God, we have been redeemed. While God could have chosen to overlook humanity's offenses, in His wisdom, He deemed it necessary to require satisfaction for the wrongs inflicted by humankind. This necessity for making amends serves a greater purpose for human development. The suffering, Passion, and Death of Jesus Christ adequately provided this satisfaction to God. By willingly enduring His Passion and dying on the Cross, Jesus atoned for our disobedience and sin, making reparation for the offenses that God continually faces from His creations. Through Christ's merits, we are restored to grace, which allows us to unite our prayers, efforts, and struggles with those of Our Lord, as we seek to "fill up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ" (Colossians 1:24). Thus, we can offer some measure of reparation to God for the sins of the world, enhancing our relationship with Him as we strive to participate in His divine mission.

In a religious framework, particularly in Christianity, "reparation" denotes the act of compensating for an offense, especially a sin, against God. This involves recognizing one's wrongdoing and taking measures to rectify it, which may include prayer, sacrifice (in OT context), or acts of service. Reparation is closely associated with concepts such as atonement and satisfaction, emphasizing the importance of addressing the harm inflicted by sin.

3. Global Theological Trends and Debates

Globally, the theological discourse on reparations emphasizes justice, equity, and communal healing. Liberation theology, particularly, has shaped the dialogue around the

need for reparations, advocating for a theology of struggle that addresses the historical injustices experienced by marginalized communities. Scholars within this tradition argue that reparations are not merely financial transactions but profound acts of acknowledgment, restoration, and transformation that seek to rectify the dislocations caused by colonialism and oppression. For instance, "A Theology of Liberation and Reparations" by Herbert Daughtry is a compelling and thought-provoking exploration of the connections between religion, social justice, and the need for reparations for historical injustices. Through insightful analysis and a profound understanding of the historical and cultural influences that have shaped our society, Daughtry strongly advocates for the immediate need for reparations as a means to heal the scars of systemic oppression and achieve genuine liberation (Daughtry, 2023). Furthermore, Nkechi Taifa, a legal scholar connected to the group, presented a compelling case for reparations. She contended that the funds allocated to the Republic of New Afrika should be adequate to provide the new nation with a fair opportunity to address the challenges created by Americans due to its colonized status, emphasizing that the idea of reparations is inherently linked to self-determination and cannot be separated from it (Darity and Mullen, 2020; Taifa). Moreover, Olufemi O. Taiwo states that, equipped with reparations that include land cessions and financial transfers, along with the authority to engage directly with Indigenous peoples regarding land issues, the Republic of New Afrika would be positioned to carve out its political direction. This would grant it collective self-determination, allowing it to extend similar autonomy to its residents and communities (Taiwo, 2022). According to Taifa, the responsibility for financing this initiative should primarily fall on those who inherit the moral obligations tied to the historical wrongs that have shaped our current political landscape: the US federal government. Taifa called for the US government to cover the initial expenses of establishing the new nation and also urged it to reform its national policies to protect the self-determination of Black descendants of slavery who decide not to migrate.

In African contexts, liberation theology has resonated strongly, providing a vocabulary for articulating the grievances of historically oppressed peoples. It combines biblical narratives of liberation with contemporary struggles against social, political, and economic

injustices. This theological lens underscores the communal aspect of reparations, wherein justice is not only an individual undertaking but a collective journey toward healing and restoration.

3.1. African Theological Perspectives

In many African societies, concepts of community, kinship, and social responsibility shape the understanding of justice and notions of reparation. The African philosophical framework often prioritizes restorative justice over punishment measures, aligning with biblical principles of reconciliation and restoration. The African notion of Ubuntu—often summarized as "I am because we are"—emphasizes interconnectedness, community healing, and the intrinsic value of human relationships (Tutu, 1999). This perspective invites a holistic approach to reparations that encompasses economic, social, and spiritual dimensions (cf. Daughtry, 2023).

Furthermore, various African theologians advocate for reparations as an essential aspect of addressing historical injustices rooted in colonialism and apartheid systems. For instance, theologians like Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Matthew Michael emphasize the need for reparative justice that acknowledges the historical wrongs inflicted upon communities and advocates for restoration in the spirit of biblical justice (Oduyoye, 2001; Michael, 2003).

3.2. Application of Biblical and Theological Principles to Contemporary Reparations Movements

In contemporary discussions surrounding reparations, the biblical and theological principles articulated above offer a framework for understanding the moral imperatives behind such movements. The call for reparations within African contexts, especially as nations seek to heal from colonial pasts, reflects a desire for justice that goes beyond mere acknowledgment; it seeks concrete actions that restore dignity, uphold justice, and foster reconciliation.

The role of faith communities in advocating for reparations cannot be overstated. Churches and religious organizations have historically been at the forefront of social justice movements, and their involvement in promoting reparative justice can facilitate dialogue, awareness, and action. By drawing upon scriptural foundations and theological insights, these communities can engage in advocacy that resonates with both local and global audiences, calling for policies that address historical injustices.

3.3. Objections to Reparations

Some individuals of European descent feel that neither they nor their country should be held accountable for injustices committed in the past (Louis, 2011). Additionally, some struggle to recognize how they have gained from the enslavement of Black individuals, particularly those facing poverty and difficulties. Some Christians argue that Black Christians should forgive and move forward instead of seeking reparations, which they view as a source of division. There are also concerns about how a nation could effectively calculate and provide compensation based on the "40 acres and a mule" concept, as well as how it would determine the rightful descendants of those enslaved in the Americas, the Caribbean, and Britain. Lastly, some people doubt the claims of Black individuals regarding their ongoing experiences with racism and disenfranchisement, believing they are not victims of the historical impacts of slavery and colonialism (Louis, 2011). This balance is often overlooked, ignored, or even dismissed in Christian preaching across Africa. While it is indeed true that God is actively involved, He also relies on the dedicated efforts of individuals to fulfill His plans. In contemporary times, **there is a tendency to passively await miraculous interventions from God**. The Bible consistently advocates for justice and fairness, urging both leaders and individuals to confront inequality and oppression, thereby implying that those who have been wronged should receive compensation.

4. Conclusion

The intersection of biblical teachings and African theological insights reveals a profound understanding of reparations as a multifaceted endeavor that integrates moral, social,

and spiritual dimensions. It emphasizes the importance of collective responsibility and the need for communal healing, underscoring that reparations should not merely be seen as a transactional process but as part of a broader quest for justice and equity.

As societies work through the legacies of colonialism and systemic injustices, there is a pressing need to engage with these theological frameworks critically. The insights drawn from liberation theology and African philosophical thought can guide policymakers, faith leaders, and communities in addressing the complexities of reparations with sensitivity and depth. This involves not only acknowledging past injustices but also proactively fostering environments where marginalized voices are heard and valued.

In practice, this means creating reparative frameworks that address economic disparities through equitable resource distribution, ensuring access to education, healthcare, and social services, and restoring the dignity of communities that have long been marginalized. It also calls for initiating dialogues around historical narratives, promoting reconciliation processes that engage with the painful histories of colonial violence, and seeking ways to celebrate the resilience and contributions of affected communities.

Finally, the pursuit of reparations invokes a theological imperative—a call to embody the values of love, justice, and mercy as espoused in biblical texts. It challenges faith communities to not only advocate for reparative justice but also live out the principles of equity and compassion in their everyday practices. By fostering a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of humanity, as articulated in Ubuntu philosophy, faith-based organizations can lead efforts toward healing and restoration that resonate with the gospel's transformative message.

In conclusion, the integration of biblical and theological perspectives provides a rich tapestry for reimagining reparations, emphasizing that the journey toward justice is as vital as the destination itself. Through collective action grounded in faith and guided by a vision of restorative justice, communities can cultivate environments where true reconciliation and healing can flourish, ultimately paving the way for a more just and equitable future by following the example of our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ did not

seek reparation or repayment from the Jewish leaders who caused him suffering and ultimately crucifixion. Instead, he forgave them and embraced them as friends and companions. I believe we are called to forgive and reconcile with our debtors, as indicated in Matthew 6:14-15, which states: "For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions." (NASB).