A Christian Theological Critique of uBuntu in Swaziland

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Abstract

This article hopes to open a biblical discussion on the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*[2]. The discourse critiques the current Swazi praxis—both from a traditional and postmodern perspective; gives a better understanding of *uBuntu* (especially in its rural context where patriarchalism and the Ancestral cult are so conspicuous); provides a biblical evaluation, and considers whether *Ubuntu* could be defended as a universal philosophy. Having reviewed the Swazi praxis, the article considers Paul's statement in Romans 2:14–15 regarding God's law being written on the hearts of all mankind. The paper argues that the statement refers to the so-called Golden Rule (Matt 22:37–39), which appears to have been prevalent throughout the primordial cultures. The research concludes that *Ubuntu* is only viable within a community that upholds the principle of sacrificial brotherly love as advanced by Christ Jesus.

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[1] The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

[2] It will be shown that the traditional praxis of *uBuntu* is vastly different from the philosophy currently being espoused by academics of all persuasions. Hence, this author has adopted Praeg's different emphasis in spelling to denote the traditional Swazi praxis as *uBuntu* and the more currently academically embraced philosophy as *Ubuntu* (2014:96–120).

1. Introduction

Much has been written about the potential of the worldview of *uBuntu* to bring about change to the individualistic and hedonistic view of the Western world. Some advocates believe that this would empower Africans to take back their self-image—lost through the ravages of colonialism. While many academics are proclaiming the worldview's ethical correctness, there is little biblical commentary on *uBuntu* itself. One of the African countries in which traditional *uBuntu* is still practised is the Kingdom of Swaziland. There are a number of reasons for this, but for brevity this author will focus on only two. Firstly, the traditional Swazi way of life has been actively safeguarded by King Sobhuza II and his successor, King Mswati III. Secondly, the vast majority of Swazis can trace their ancestry back to fifteen Nguni clans with a common language—*siSwati*. Thus, this close-knit society is uniquely appropriate to study the impact of both the praxis of *uBuntu* in Southern Africa and to consider whether the traditional praxis could be construed as the philosophy of *Ubuntu* currently promoted by many academics. In doing so, this study will:

1. Review the traditional Swazi praxis of *uBuntu.*
2. Consider the impact that modernity is having on the society in living out their understanding of *uBuntu.*
3. Biblically critique *uBuntu* with special reference to that society. In so doing, both the negative and positive aspects will be highlighted with a hope of coming to a definition of *uBuntu* which could be embraced as a biblically-based philosophy.
4. Arrive at a more powerful dynamic for its expression in both rural and city contexts after considering the origin of a purified *Ubuntu.*

2. The Praxis of *uBuntu* in Swaziland

Before considering whether *uBuntu* can be extended to a philosophy, it is important that we briefly consider what it stands for; its origins; and those aspects that underpin the praxis while undermining its wider school of thought.

The African philosophy of *Ubuntu* recognises that all persons have an element of divinity, and therefore should be recognised, respected and valued (Munyaka and Mothlabi 2009:66). The Swazi greeting, *sawubona* translated directly means 'I see you'. Within the *Buntfu* (or as it is more commonly known across the Globe—*Ubuntu*) philosophy it takes on a deeper meaning, and is translated as: 'I acknowledge your humanity' (Ibid; Curle 2012:80).

Writing in *African Religions and Philosophies*, Mbiti (1969:108–109), the doyen of writers on African Traditional Religion, sets out his understanding of *Ubuntu*:

> Only in terms of other people does the individual become conscious of his being, his own duties, his privileges and responsibilities towards himself and towards other people. When he suffers, he does not suffer alone but with the corporate group; when he rejoices, he rejoices not alone but with his kinsmen, his neighbours and his relatives whether dead or living. When he gets married, he is not alone, so also the children belong to the corporate body of kinsmen[3], even if they bear only the Father's name. What happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and what happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say, 'I am, because we are, and because we are, I am.' This is the cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man.

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[3] Giving rise to the saying, 'It takes a village to raise a child.'

In Southern Africa, the concept is defined in SiSwati, IsiZulu and IsiXhosa as *umuntu ngumuntu ngebantu* - a person is a person through other persons (Schutte 1993:46). Outside its Southern African context, *uBuntu* is known as African communalism or African humanism (More 2006:156).

When compared to the Western individualistic worldview, the African view is social—not personal. Central to the philosophy is the understanding that each one of us is part of a community, and that no single person can function on his own (Rosa 2005:¶8). Mnyandu (1997:81) takes our understanding further as he expresses the belief that, 'Ubuntu is not merely positive human qualities, but the very human essence itself, which lures and enables human beings to become *abantu* or humanised beings, living in daily self-expressive works of love and efforts to create harmonious relationships in the community and the world beyond.'

It is for this reason that marriage, childbearing, divorce and death are seen from a communal viewpoint. Those who do not marry are seen as breaking the continuity between the past and the future (Kunhiyop 2008:68). By not marrying and bearing children, a young person 'offends' the ancestors, whose existence is dependent on being remembered (Mutwa 1998:625). This reference to 'the ancestors' brings up a critical facet of the Swazi culture—its Patriarchalistic overtones. Social ranking is not acquired through personal effort *(Lizinga)* but through birth right *(Sigaba[4]).*

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[4] When someone's name is mentioned in a traditional meeting, the question will be asked, 'Ungubani yena?' ('Who is s/he?') The response is always linked to his lineage and ancestry, not her/his accomplishments).The same phrase is used when it is

2.1. The *Sigaba* ranking

God is at the apex of the pyramid, but he has delegated authority to his messengers—the ancestors or 'living dead' (Mbiti 1991:69). Hierarchically, their Majesties, the King and *iNgwenyama,* [5] together with his mother—*Ndlovukati* [6] (Kasanene 1993b:94), come immediately below the ancestors (van Schalkwyk 2006:34). Below them are the Princes of the realm: *Lingunqa*, the Chief; *Tikhulu* and the Headmen, *Tindvuna.* The list is continued by Kéba M'baye (1974:143,145): elders who act as sages and judges in the community; adult males (35–40 years[7]); young men; women[8] and children (Turaki 1997:57; Stewart 2005:205; Morgan and Wieranga 2005:261; and Keevy 2014:67 Kuper 1986:3, 18–20, 28–42, 61–62; Manci 2005:67; Curle 2009:70). To this, Broodryk adds the office of a witchdoctor[9] (*sangoma*) (1997:97). This structure defines traditional life in

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believed a person has overstepped his authoritative boundary. In this instance, the saying means, 'Who does s/he think she/he is?' (Langa 2015).

[5] The two titles are used to show that Mswati III is not only king from a conventional English understanding, but is also Head of State in terms of Swazi law and custom. The term *iNgwenyama* is the term that describes a lion when referring to a human—especially His Majesty.

[6] *Ndlovukati* is the term used to describe Her Majesty the Queen Mother. Using the symbol of a female elephant, the term signifies the latent power that she holds. In Swazi law and custom, she has a moderating role to play in the exercise of His Majesty's use of power.

[7] The age of maturity varies from culture to culture. Hence, when a man reaches the age of 35, he can no longer be a member of the ANC Youth League. In Swaziland, males are considered to have reached their maturity when they reach the approximate age of 40 (Curle 2012:86).

[8] In traditional African societies, women are classified as children who fall under the protection and care of their father until the day of their marriage when they become the property of their husbands (Keevy 2014. 67; Curle 2013: 4; Broodryk 1997: 24; Idowu 1975: 77).

[9] In Curle's 2012 study of the hierarchy in Swaziland, he confirmed the hierarchy but classified *sangomas* alongside the chiefs and princes of the realm (313–314).

Swaziland. Cripples, albinos,[10] and homosexuals were added to the very end of the list. (Curle 2012: 313–314). For their part, babies up to the age of about four months are not recognised as children (Marwick 1966:146; Kuper 1947:76; Kuper 1986:52; Oluikpe 1997:36; Curle 2012: 79) and even then only have the potential to achieve humanity.[11]

2.2. The customs that govern the Swazi *uBuntu* praxis and ensure its longevity

Within the Swazi culture, becoming human only happens when one reaches adulthood. Mutwa helps our understanding—children come into this world without a soul or *ena,* it 'only builds up slowly (out) of the memories and thoughts and the experiences as it grows up into a man or a woman' (1998:568–569). It should be noted that even though the child is without a soul, it has the potential to achieve the status of ancestor, and thus the foetus is sacred and should not be aborted.

The upward humanisation process from the time that one is a new-born babe has other barriers: one must first be male (preferably firstborn); have reached maturity; be seen to perform good deeds, be attentive to his responsibilities within the hierarchy and society in general. In so doing the man would be recognised as an elder; and finally, if good enough, become one of the ancestors.

Thus, it can be said that humanisation within Swazi tradition, is very much based on a system of works within the community in comparison

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[10] In times long past, women were the midwives. If the child was crippled or an albino, that child 'wouldn't make it'. If questioned about the child they would say '*kuphume Silwane'* (an animal appeared) (Maphanga and Maphanga:2015).
[11] This is why they are referred to as '*umuntf(u)wana'* (the diminutive of '*umuntfu*'—a person) which means 'small, incomplete, or kind of, a person' (Langa 2015).

to the Western view that every individual is human regardless of their status.

The position of the ancestors has a significant impact on the life of every traditional Swazi. Because this role is such an intricate subject, discussion of it is best left to a further study. Suffice to say that they are revered in a manner that many would argue is 'worship'. Swazis believe that their ancestors dwell in the family's kraal[12] where they must ritually pass through on their way to be buried.[13] Praeg (2014:38) comments that:

> The *living-dead* are inseparably part of the land an individual hails
> from. If community in Africa is understood to include both the
> living and the living-dead, land refers to both a geographical space
> where this extended notion of the living community is physically
> located, as well as to a metaphysical locale where the interface
> between the living and the living-dead occurs. Land is the locale for
> the continuity from the visible to the invisible, from the living to
> the living-dead. As a result, 'burial is important[14] not just because
> it is a key moment in the cycle of life but also because it makes
> manifest and keeps alive the concrete link between the world of the
> living and the dead' (Chabal 2009:20).

Like most Africans south of the Sahara, Swazis believe that not only do the *living-dead* give wisdom and protection (Mbigi 1997:52) but they are the final arbiters in matters of law. Chukwuemeka Ebo states 'Since not only the living but also ancestral spirits punish an offender, African

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[12] The 'kraal' or cattle byre is located just outside the family's homestead, which consists of a number of houses.

[13] Royalty have a burial ground in caves in the Mdzimba Mountain (Masango 2008:32).

[14] Mndende comments that 'adherents of African traditional religion … invoke *amathambo alele ukuthula* (the bones that are sleeping peacefully)' indicating that cremation is not an acceptable method of burial (2013:80).

law has a spiritual dimension that has to be attended to before a matter can finally be set to rest' (1995:39). This belief in the power of the ancestors' oversight is so extensive that Ebo comments: 'The spirits of the ancestors'… authority is so overwhelming as to make enforcement by means of a body of officials such as police unnecessary' (1995:39).

Thus, the homestead, and the kraal in particular, are extremely precious to the family in a manner that no Westerner would understand. It is there where the headman of the village, the head of a family, or the eldest aunt (Langa 2015) will take instructions from the living-dead. Were the family to be physically removed from this prime source of guidance and protection, they would be shunned by community and spiritually lost, without hope of ever becoming an ancestor (only an 'evil spirit' (Alola 2007:26) that would continue to torment the living) since they would never have been honoured in death.

Continuing with the 'deference to hierarchy', we turn now to the role of *iNgwenyama*.[15] Princes of the realm and His Majesty's appointed Chiefs. Swazi kings are endowed with mystical powers and are believed to be representatives of ancestors—the departed kings (Masango 2008:6). Thus, while it is true that 'a King is a King by his people' (King Mswati III 1972: 325), the authority of the King (in Council[16]) is final and binding within the Kingdom.

As His Majesty has '*Umlomo longacali'manga* (the mouth that can utter no lie)' (Langa 2015), it would take a brave (or foolish) person to

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[15] The dual title of His Majesty reveals a political technicality brought about by British Colonialism—Mswati III is both King within the understanding of the British and *iNgwenyama* as the traditional head of the Swazi State according to Swazi law and custom.

[16] The authority of their Majesties and the manner in which it is curbed is too intricate to describe within this article, and will be dealt with in a separate study.

question his authority, or that of his appointed agents—the chiefs. Should a child[17] be the person in question, then the father will be required to chastise the child[18] (Curle 2012:92). Those who do question established authority, or their father, are brought before their village council and effectively tried by the village elders (Curle 2012:82).

A person brought before the village council might also be someone who 'fails to live in a way that adds value, and can be referred to as a predator[19] (or having lost their humanity)' (Vilakati, Shcurink, and Viljoen 2013:18). Thus persons seen to rise up in the community (Boon 2007:124–125), or who are not prepared to share their resources with those around them, will be considered to be animals—having lost their humanity (Gade 2013:67–68) and dragged before the council. Should someone suddenly acquire material wealth, 'it is deemed to be the result of magic and dealt with accordingly' (Broodryk 1997:11). If found guilty, the person will be shamed, or 'regarded as a non-person or outcast. As an outcast, the offender loses not only his or her status in the community, but also his or her ability to participate in communal activities until the offence is purged and his or her status is restored' (Ebo 1995:39).

While the ultimate penalty over the centuries has been death, losing one's right to live in the presence of one's ancestors is an equally pernicious sentence. For this to happen, all the Chief needs do is to

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[17] In the eyes of the community, even a man who has not reached the age of maturity (see footnote 6 above) is subject to his father's authority and discipline.

[18] The father of that child bears the consequences of the crime of the child. '*Umshayele tinyoni*', meaning, the child has shot down a bird for his father (In siSwati, if a boy goes bird hunting, he comes home and prepares that meat for his father, who may or more often, may not, share it with him. So, in the same way, if the son commits a crime, the father 'eats' it, like he would a bird the boy shot down for him (Langa 2015).

[19] *Silwane, translated* literally an animal. (Langa 2015) The equivalent isiZulu word is being currently used alongside *Mkwerekwere* to describe a foreigner.

remove one's right to live within the boundaries of his chiefdom, causing the person to become homeless.

Because communities are kinship based, there is a definite distinction between 'insiders' and 'outsiders'. Keevy comments, 'In contrast with ubuntu's loving and caring atmosphere that prevails in the brotherhood, "anything outside the kinship is labelled 'outside world'"' (Turaki 1997:63; 2014:75). Turaki believes that because this insider/outsider relationship exists, it follows that: 'Outsiders and strangers do not belong. For this reason they are not entitled to the following: (1) equal treatment; (2) ownership; (3) affinity, loyalty, and obligation; (4) community rights and protection; and (5) they are not people, they are outside of the commonwealth, they are strangers' (1997:61).[20]

Coertze (2001:14) identified three examples of how this 'insider factor' impacts on relationships with other people:

1. Only those who speak an Nguni dialect can be referred to as human.[21]
2. Interdependence is actualised 'through a process of enculturation within the extended family (which) ensured that the members of (the) new generation accept the preferred conduct and the duties expected of them.'
3. The peer groups that developed ensured that 'the individual could not only call on support, but was through the pressure of

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[20] It is from this 'outsider' viewpoint that allows the Nguni peoples group to moralise their xenophobia (Mnyaka 2003:158).

[21] Thus, to traditional Ngunis, Shangaans, Malawians, Congolese, Nigerians, Whites, Indians and Chinese fall outside the definition of humanity and within their understanding of an animal. The current test in South Africa for determining whether a person is an 'insider' with humanity, is to request the person to use the correct word for an elbow. Langa (2015) considers the pronunciation of the word *indololwane* so difficult as to make the identification of a foreigner a simple exercise.

the co-members compelled to confirm and perform according to the example and expectation of the majority.'

Because of the historical intermarriage between the clans of Swaziland and KwaZulu, 'insiders' are largely limited to those who are fluent in either of these dialects of the Nguni language. Shangaans from Mozambique are still treated with some disdain (Curle 2012:94) even though their ancestors are also both Nguni (Matsebula 1988:9; Oluikpe 1997:18–19; Curle 2012:73).

It can be ascertained from the above that: *firstly*, individuals are ranked according to their birth right; *secondly* they come into this world as things and must earn their humanity in a 'processional personhood' (Menkiti 1984:173) through works; *thirdly*, they come to live their lives in the intense fear of the possible actions of the ancestors who control their daily lives; *fourthly,* they are conditioned to maintain the status quo in a patriarchalistic system devoid of upward criticism; *fifthly*, they are not to compete to be in a level into which they were not born. And having learnt to accept their social position, they must strive to ensure that others do the same[22] and *sixthly*, they are indoctrinated to believe that only 'insiders' have value and are entitled to *uBuntu.* All these six aspects inherent in the Swazi praxis of *uBuntu,* while culturally the norm, are outside of a biblical understanding of Christianity.

Juxtaposed to these negative realities is the overarching principle demonstrated in the non-negotiable right of a stranger to be welcomed into a home and given food. This is spelt out in the greeting that the stranger will call out to the home:

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[22] If a person goes beyond their status of birth, it is common to hear the word '*Utikhandza ancono/ Ucabanga kutsi uncono ngoba...*' ('He thinks he is better than us because...' then the status he has acquired is attached to the statement (Langa 2015).

Ehe eKhaya!!'	Hello the home!
Sisu semhambi asingakanani singange ngingila ye nyoni	The stomach of a stranger can be compared to the gizzard of a bird—it doesn't need much.

Once the stranger has issued the request, there can be no denial. Even if the household is poor, the *uBuntu* response is obligatory. If there is no food in the home, the women of the house will send a child to a neighbour with the request *Make wenana …* The *wenana* is a request for the neighbour to pay forward for a future act of kindness that will be reciprocated.

Thus, even though *uBuntu* could be described as 'collectivist[23] in orientation—expressing the value of collaboration, cooperation and community' (Bolden 2014:3) two questions still remain:

1. One must determine what assets *uBuntu* cultured societies require to be shared. In a rural Swazi society, productive assets include land, livestock (cattle and goats) and wives[24]. If a third party intrudes on any one of these three, blood could be shed.[25]

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[23] And socialist (Langa 2015).

[24] Considering one's wife to be a productive asset, while apparently sexist, is nevertheless culturally accurate. The status of women in Swaziland is so wide a subject that it needs to be the subject of much wider research.

[25] 'A man from Mayabuleni Village in the Tsolo, Eastern Cape was assaulted by twenty three people, after being accused of stealing cattle. He died as a result of the assault. A nine minute video clip has emerged of the fatal assault. David Tsali's hands and feet were bound, and his head covered with a plastic bag, whilst he was repeatedly sjambokked by different villagers… Events leading up to the assault have David being summoned by village elders and other men from the village, to be questioned on cattle theft. Initially he was questioned then released. Later that day he was called back and

> On the other hand, the communal understanding allows the produce flowing from those assets to be used and shared freely.[26]

2. What happens when there is no land, and resources are few or when it is difficult for people to access those resources - even if they are available? It is this author's opinion that where productive assets—like land, taxi routes, or jobs (the productive assets) are concerned, individuals no longer feel compelled to act according to the requirements of *Ubuntu*—'living in daily self-expressive works of love and efforts to create harmonious relationships in the community and the world beyond' (Mnyandu 1997:81).

The events that took place throughout South Africa in 2008 and later in early 2015 indicate that this lack of access to / protection of productive assets is leading to xenophobia (Human Sciences Research Council 2008; Crush 2008) with its accompanying violence and death.

3. The Changes that Modernity is Bringing to *Ubuntu*

Even though, 'more than any other leader in Africa, Mswati's father, Sobhuza II, managed to safeguard his nation from oblivion by staying

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asked to bring a sheep to be examined if it was stolen. David expressed that he knew nothing of stolen cattle. He was then tied up, his head covered and the beatings began' (Geneva 2015:¶1).

[26] As the produce is a blessing from the Ancestors to the particular individual, permission must first be asked and given regardless of the cost to oneself. Should the owner refuse, word will be spread that that person has no *nfo* (humanity) and is *kwalisa* (stingy). An example given by Langa (2015) was that of a vehicle owned by his parents during the 80s. It was the only vehicle in the village. Thus, although owned by Langa's father, it became communal property; used by everyone disregarding personal ownership and how much it cost.

true to the Swazi culture' (Zevenbergen 2010:24), it cannot be said that the Swazi traditions have remained as they were a century ago. Western culture is significantly impacting the traditional life and through this, the *uBuntu* worldview. Yet, while Swaziland is in a state of transition towards a Westernised way of life, because of the patriarchal structure at work in the rural areas, it will take some time for there to be any real change. The urban situation, however, is somewhat different (Ibid). Much of the adjustment is attributed to a change in the determination of wealth:

- From cattle to paper (backed firstly by gold and then by a governmental promise to meet the payment); essentially—from living reality to the intangible (Curle 2012:116);
- From community land held in trust to 'a commodity to be sold and bought' (Kaoma 2013:95).

This shedding of the rural understanding of *uBuntu* has brought about a hole in the minds of urbanites who look for something of moral value to hold on to as they strive to live out their existence away from kith and kin. The vacuum, caused largely through the migratory labour practices masterminded by Cecil John Rhodes (*Reader's Digest* 1995:206; Curle 2009:48), stripped away the traditional checks and balances (Curle 2012:112). In its place came the sex and shopping (Schnell 2010:5) hunger imported from the West (Curle 2012:63).

From the time a person is a child, through the formative years and, certainly in business, every person is compelled to deliver the goods in a currency-determined economy; driven by a lust for things—'baubles, bangles and bright shiny beads' (Wright and Forrest 1953:¶1). In this Western philosophy, personal value is tied to beauty in women, and the

wealth of men. In their own ways each brings power and prestige to the individual.

Once it was morally incomprehensible for a girl of fifteen to be coerced into premarital sex—now, apparently, it is an established norm. Sadly, no matter what politicians such as Thabo Mbeki[27] and Hillary Clinton[28] say and write, the spirit of *Ubuntu* as it once was, is no more. Instead it is being replaced by one which states: 'I AM'. As Masango puts it, 'That spirit of living together is slipping away' (2006:941) (Curle 2012).

Not only is the philosophy metamorphosing, but it appears to be doing so in different directions. There are those in the cities who do not understand the philosophy at all, having adopted the Western independent, consumeristic way of life. Others are melding Western culture with *Ubuntu.* Some, like Tutu, would have the philosophy retain its positive qualities and adopt a forgiving, transforming Christian discipline. Yet others are more extreme in their concept of what penalties they believe should be imposed on transgressors.

Many of those who write on *Ubuntuism* highlight its benefits and nation-building qualities (Nolte-Schamm 2006:380; Rosa 2005: ¶19). Others, like Masango, conclude their writings with a call for a return to its value systems (2006:943).Unfortunately they omit practical ways to overcome the problems that the philosophy is currently experiencing. Some, like Gordon, would strip *uBuntu* of its religion, stating that 'It is a calling for a society to rise to a standard beyond those imposed on it'

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[27] Thabo Mbeki's speech on the renaissance of Africa [Mbeki 1998] is now famous. Unfortunately, it holds little credence at a grassroots level where people are fighting for survival.
[28] Hillary Clinton authored the book '*It takes a village to raise a child'* [1996 Simon & Schuster. New York, USA. In it she quotes the African proverb that is the very essence of *Ubuntu.*

(2014:21). Those who advocate interpreting *uBuntu* as humanism ignore its underlying praxis, i.e. choosing to focus only on the positive aspects and denying the religious pillars that support it.

4. A Biblical Evaluation of *uBuntu*

Much has been written on the positive aspects of *uBuntu*, but there is very little theological reflection on the negative aspects that ensure the Swazi understanding of *uBuntu's* longevity: (1) the determination of status by means of birth right; (2) processional personhood achieved through works; (3) intense fear of the ancestors; (4) unquestioning acceptance of the patriarchal status quo; (5) blind acceptance of one's social status; and (6) only 'insiders' deserve *uBuntu*.

4.1. Status determined by birth

The fact that women, cripples, albinos and homosexuals are considered to be less than equal to the Swazi male is disconcerting and, to this author's mind, biblically not acceptable. (However, because of the size and intricacy of the debate, the subject will be left to a separate study.)

It is conceded that the Swazi culture is similar in nature to that in existence during the reign of King David, the Jewish culture of 900 BC. However, the writings of the scribes in 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 Kings should be seen more as a record of the history of the Jewish nation during the time that David was king, and not as underscoring any biblical truth. Such writings should, therefore, not be interpreted as justification for the continuation of a particular cultural trait. For they also record David's significant failings including murder and adultery which, while culturally normal for a king, are ungodly.

Patriarchalism in the bible does not make it biblical, only cultural. Paul gives us a better understanding of biblical ranking in Galatians 3:26–29 where race, status, and gender play no part: for all are equal in the sight of God.

4.2. Processional personhood

The procession from having the 'potential to be a human' as a foetus, through maturing into humanity, to a possible future as an Ancestor is somewhat demanding, and in some ways exclusive. According to the 24th meeting of the IMBISA Standing Committee, to become an Ancestor, one should meet the following standards:

> (to have) died a good death after having faithfully practised and transmitted to his descendants the laws left to him by his ancestors;—who contributed to the continuation of the line by leaving many descendants;—who was a peacemaker, a link, that fostered communion between the living and the dead, through sacrifices and prayers;—A person who is the first-born is a candidate 'par excellence' to become an ancestor because he is able to maintain the chain of the generation in a long genealogy. The right of the first-born is thus an inalienable right (1996).

Thus, 'the status of an ancestor is reserved for those who lived a morally good and an exemplary life within the community' (Allies 2007:50), but also have *sigaba* (inherited hierarchical) status. Effectively, becoming an ancestor is based on works. Pawson (Kindle Locations 2012:13309–13312) comments:

> Most religions of the world are about salvation by works. You must pray, you must fast, you must give alms and so on, and then, at the end of it all, you will get right with God. You save yourself by your own efforts. Do-it-yourself religion appeals to people because it leaves them with their pride, for they feel that they have achieved

salvation. It is self-righteousness, and that is something that God hates. He would rather deal with sin than self-righteousness.

As Paul quoting from Psalm 14:1–3 comments, 'There is no one righteous, not even one' (Rom 3:10). The downside of this truth is that our works alone cannot save us from the wrath of a righteous God. More than anything else, a Christian's own understanding of his position in Christ will either cripple him or make him 'more than (a) conqueror' (Rom 8:37). CS Lewis spells out the Christian's standing:

> The Christian is in a different position from other people who are trying to be good. They hope, by being good, to please God if there is one; or—if they think there is not—at least they hope to deserve approval from good men. But the Christian thinks any good he does comes from the Christ-life inside him. He does not think God will love us because we are good, but that God will make us good because He loves us; just as the roof of a greenhouse does not attract the sun because it is bright, but becomes bright because the sun shines on it (1958 Book ii:64).

One must therefore reject this aspect of the praxis of uBuntu as unbiblical.

4.3. Fear of the ancestors

As already stated, this subject is sufficiently large to warrant its own study. However, there are two fundamental issues which have an impact on this article.

Firstly, the role of the ancestors acting as intermediaries. As intermediaries, ancestors answer prayers and petitions directly. This is contrary to the New Testament. To Turaki, Jesus Christ is the one and only mediator. If ancestors become spirits, then Turaki argues that such

communications involve speaking to familiar spirits (effectively idolatry), as they take the place of Christ who is the only mediator between God and mankind (1999:254). From the following, it will be shown that believers are instructed to get their direction directly from the Spirit of Christ, who indwells them.

- Jesus engendered his disciples to wait in Jerusalem to receive the Holy Spirit who would empower them to be his witnesses throughout the known world (Acts 1:1–7) having already advised them that the Holy Spirit would lead them into all truth (John 14:16–25; 16:12);
- Jesus told his disciples that they were no longer servants but friends (John 15:15);
- Paul classed believers as co-heirs with Christ Jesus (Rom 8:17) already seated in heavenly places (Eph 2:6);

Secondly, ancestors bring fear to the hearts and minds of traditional Africans. (Gehman 2005:229). But fear of anything other than losing our position in Christ is unbiblical:

- John gives us this hope that perfect faith drives out all fear (1 John 4:18);
- Immanuel (God with us) calls us his friends (John 15:15);
- Paul calls himself, and us, co-heirs with Christ (Rom 8:17), and not slaves that we must live in fear; but,
- Children of the most-high God are privileged to call Father 'Daddy' (Rom 8:15).

This status is not achieved through any self-worth, but through the indwelling Spirit of Christ.

These two aspects alone of the ancestral cult lead this author to resist this aspect of the worldview.

4.4. Unquestioning acceptance of the patriarchal *status quo*

Jesus was no stranger to patriarchal rule. Life in Judea in the year AD 32 was not dissimilar from life currently in Swaziland. For example, a wife's legal status was similar to that of a child (Num 30:16); a father could sell his daughter as a servant (Exod 21:7; De Vaux 1961:27); the rape of a virgin was not considered an offence punishable by death. Only on discovery, would the man be required to marry the girl and pay her father fifty shekels (Deut 22:28–29; De Vaux 1961:26). (The purpose of the punishment was not the revenge of the rape, but to recompense the loss that the father had experienced, as he would not be able to extract a bride-price for the girl.) Suspected adultery by a woman was subjected to a holy curse to establish whether she was guilty of unfaithfulness. There was no corresponding treatment for suspected unfaithfulness by men (Num 5:11–31).

Notwithstanding Jesus' opposition to the pharisaical leaders of the day, he nevertheless submitted to the Roman authorities. Like most Swazis, the Jews hated paying taxes. Therefore, the Pharisees laid plans to trap Jesus by asking a question that put him in an awkward position, and which would question his loyalty as a Jew in a society dominated by Romans. Yet Jesus answered in a way that submitted to God as well as Caesar: 'So give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's' (Matt 22:21; Mark 12:17). Paul, also no stranger to patriarchy, instructed the believers to subject themselves to the governing authorities (Rom 13:1–6).Thus, believers are exhorted to obey those in authority over them. Yet, there are occasions when this general exhortation does not apply. The Bible gives a number of examples where men had to choose to obey God rather than men. For brevity, we

will consider only three: 1 Kings 18:16–18; Daniel 3:4–29 and Daniel 6:1–26. The first example pertains to Elijah's confrontation with King Ahab and the prophets of Baal. To fully understand the confrontation in 1 Kings 18, one must read 1 Kings 16:29–34. Ahab set up an altar to Baal and sacrificed two of his sons. This brought about God's warning in 1 Kings 17.1 that there would be no rain in the land until God released Elijah to allow it. During the three years, Ahab did not repent, which brought about the confrontation on Mount Carmel. This confrontation was yet a further opportunity for Ahab to atone for his sins—which he did not. The second example tells the story of Meshach, Shadrach and Abednego refusing to worship an idol; the third example relates how Daniel refused to bow down and worship the King. Within these verses, we see two areas where believers are called on to challenge those in authority over them. *Firstly,* in a prophetic situation, where God wishes one to declare his word of warning or judgement, and *secondly,* where obedience to God's law takes precedence over man's law. With the exception of a prophet declaring God's word, those who choose to disobey should do so in a submissive manner and bear the consequences of their actions.[29]

Thus, while obedience in most cases is necessary, it cannot and should not be blind. In all cases, the will of God and his law, supersedes the law of humans, making this aspect of the praxis questionable from a biblical perspective.

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[29] A good example of both of these occurred when the 1981 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa declared that the policy of Apartheid was heretical and chose to declare to the Nationalist Government that that law on mixed marriages was against God's will (prophecy). The Assembly cautioned its marriage officers that while they might agree to perform the ceremony (disobedience), they would nevertheless have to bear the consequences of contravening the law of the land (submission). It also instructed its ministers to counsel the couple of the probable results of such an action: 'Although the church would recognise their marriage as valid before God, the state was unlikely to do so. Any children would in law be illegitimate, and the wife would have no proprietary rights)' (Horrell 1982:48).

4.5. Blind acceptance of one's social status

If one accepts one's position in Christ, then social strata (along with all their trappings) disappear. Together with Paul, we can adopt a position that declares to the world that as a Christian one is not racist, classist or sexist, 'for (we) are all one in Christ Jesus. If (we) belong to Christ, then (we) are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise' (Gal 3:26–29).

In an Empire where race, class and gender were largely institutionalised, Galatians 3 revolutionises one's understanding of social status. Each of the polar opposites [or couplets] in Galatians 3 (i.e. Jews/Greeks, slaves/free, males/females) are designed to convey the idea of totality or universality. Whether one reads Galatians 3 from a typical egalitarian viewpoint or the hierarchical structure proposed by Cottrell (1994:283), the result is the same—the couplets capture three fundamental ways of viewing the realities of human existence during New Testament times (Koranteng-Pipim 2001:¶52). What neither understanding highlights is the eschatological theology underpinning Paul's argument.

For Paul, the cosmic Lordship of Christ encompassed both heaven and earth. To him, 'they were not two realms set over against each other … but rather one structure of created reality (the cosmos of heaven and earth) and human response to that structure involving two ethical directions' (Lincoln 1981:192; Horton 2002:126). Dunn comments: 'The Believer's whole life as a Believer is lived in the overlap of the ages, within the eschatological tension between Adam and Christ, between death and life' (1998:496). This time of tension between the 'already' and the 'not yet' expressively explains the duality of the situation faced by believers today.

It is both logical and reasonable to posit that relationships between two individuals in an 'already-not yet' eschatological biblical understanding are not subject to race/class or gender status. While this may be true, we also need to take cognisance of the fact that living in the reality of the 'now' brings with it human needs and cultural realities. To facilitate the provision of these needs and dealing with such realities, individuals may be required to forgo their 'position' of equality in the 'already-not yet' understanding for a greater good. It must be stressed that this does not imply a laying down of human rights, but only the meeting of Christian obligations. Consider the advice that Paul gives to the Corinthian church in 1 Corinthans 7:17–22, where he calls on believers to accept their position, no matter how low, for they are all called as slaves to Christ.

Being a disciple of Christ meant that all other issues were insignificant. Yet, in his letter to Philemon, Paul recommends that Philemon release Onesimus from being a slave (Phlm 1:8–16). To Paul, relationships between believers nullified hierarchical positions, resulting in a worldview where those in authority do not have the 'right' to order their subjects to do anything; in turn, the subjects do not have the 'right' to demand equality in their relationships. Both have the obligation to submit to one another and to 'be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave (them)' (Eph 4:32). As each person submits to the other (Eph 5:21), each of them is empowered (Curle 2012:197–201). This is real *uBuntu*. Social status whether in a racial, class or gender connotation can have no place in a believer's life for believers have 'been bought with a price' (1 Cor 7:23).

Therefore, social status as a determining factor of who should be loved and accepted, should be omitted from any valid biblical understanding of uBuntu.

4.6. Only 'insiders' deserve *uBuntu*

The praxis of *uBuntu* does require one to live in community where the focus is not on self but on the community. As Tutu puts it (1999:31):

> Ubuntu is very difficult to render into a western language. It speaks of the very essence of being human. When we want to give high praise to someone we say, '*Yu, unobuntu*'; 'Hey, so-and-so has ubuntu'. Then you are generous, you are hospitable, you are friendly and caring and compassionate. You share what you have. It is to say, 'My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours.' We belong in a bundle of life. We say, 'A person is a person through other persons.' It is not, 'I think therefore I am.' It says rather: 'I am human because I belong. I participate, I share.' A person with Ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed, or treated as if they were less than who they are.

Unfortunately, too often community stops at the boundary of the clan, the Swazi Kingdom, or at best, the Nguni people (Coertze 2001:114). Not only do these limits exist racially, but they are abruptly and often violently raised up against non-heterosexual relationships. In the hierarchy of Swazi kinships, homosexuals 'have to look upwards to see the bottom of the pot' (Langa 2011). Across the border, in South Africa, no woman is safe from violence, and corrective rape of lesbians is a serious issue[30] (Martin, Kelly, Turquet, and Ross 2009:5). To explain the different standards applied to 'insiders', Mbennah reduces the standard of love required by *Ubuntu* to a philosophy that is 'natural and

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[30] There are an estimated 500,000 rapes, thousands of murders and countless beatings (Africa Check 2014) carried out every year.

man-centred, and to that extent, is not the same as Biblical love' (1988:12). *Ubuntu* only requires one to be 'treated, respected, appreciated or helped to the extent that that person lives within the ubuntu expectations of the community' (Ibid). In Matthew 5:43–47 Christ commented that even pagans achieve that level of love, and argued that it was not the degree demanded by the Father. When an expert on the law questioned Jesus on the second great commandment, Christ answered with 'The parable of the Good Samaritan' (Luke 10:25–37). In it, he exposed the deep racism that Jewish people held towards Samaritans. Eamonn Bredin gives us the following insights:

> The historical setting is a Jewish audience. There are the two temple functionaries embodying a whole social and religious order. There are the Samaritans hated, loathed and despised by all. Jews despised their next-door neighbors as wretched, half-breed outcasts who had sold out on both their religion and their culture. To them the Samaritans were the scum of the earth. Orthodox Jews would have no dealing with Samaritans (John 4:9), they would cross and recross the Jordan rather than enter that province; some Rabbis believed that to accept any help from them would delay the redemption of Israel (1990:36).

Yet Jesus speaks to his Jewish audience and asks them *firstly*, to identify with the man who was beaten and robbed; *secondly* to feel disgust towards the priests of the day and *thirdly*, to accept help from a man they despised. Hereby, Jesus declared the level of love that God requires from humans. In so doing, Jesus widened the scope of the commandment to be all inclusive, rather than restricting it to kinfolks. This author agrees with Rudman's summation that a neighbour is inclusive regardless whether she or he is a woman or a man, a Christian or a Muslim, of Afro-Caribbean or Anglo-Saxon origin, a member of this or that class. There can be no limits placed on the boundaries of neighbourhood (1997:268).

Therefore the 'insider' aspect of the praxis must also be biblically rejected as too narrow.

5. Should the Praxis of *uBuntu* as Practised in Rural Swaziland be Recognised as a Philosophy to be Valued by a Wider Audience?

Since none of the six negative aspects hold up to biblical scrutiny, they cannot and should not be considered if the praxis is to be transferred into any philosophy. Yet Johan Cilliers (2008:1) claims the following:

> The concept of Ubuntu has become well known all over the world as being typical of African and specifically South African culture... It has been described as a way of life, a universal truth, an expression of human dignity, an underpinning of the concept of an open society, African Humanism, trust, helpfulness, respect, sharing, caring, community, unselfishness, etc. In short it means: humanity, or humanness. It stems from the belief that one is a human being through others.

Positive words that were delivered at the eighth international conference of Societas Homiletica, held in Copenhagen, Denmark between 19 and 25 July 2008. However, within the same paper, Cilliers went on to argue that:

> South Africa is presently going through such a movement from Ubu-ntu into 'Into[31]', in which people often treat one another not as human beings, but as things… This phenomenon of treating fellow

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[31] Interestingly, one of the insults used to degrade a person would be to say to them, '*Lentfo le*', meaning 'This thing' What the person receiving the insult (and those in earshot) would immediately understand would be that he is not considered a person

human beings as 'Into' is of course nothing new: under apartheid different forms of dehumanizing-into-Into were practised and indeed officially legitimized. But certain phenomena in present-day South Africa could also be viewed from this perspective: the alarming crime statistics, with some accounts of unspeakable brutality, and an average of 25,000 people being murdered per annum; the stigmatization flowing from HIV and AIDS; the reality of poverty, in which poor, homeless people are often still treated as less than human. It seems as if Ubuntu is being shattered and fragmented by, and into, 'Into' (2008:7–8).

The single greatest problem is the erosion of one of its essential pillars, its checks and balances. While skewed by the negative issues addressed above, the *uBuntu* practised within rural Swaziland does have a system of oversight and support that ensures its longevity. This ordered system is not available on the mines, the farms nor in the megacities of South Africa. In the place of legitimate authority and peer-pressured structures, warlords are rising up and taking authority over the society in which they live (Curle 2009:128).

Therefore, it is difficult to believe that the system currently prevailing in its rural environs could endure the rigours of cosmopolitan life, not only in the hostels and squatter camps, where survival out of limited resources is the goal, but also in the wealthier suburbs, where the current inculcation of Southern Africans by the Western sex-and-shopping consumerist society takes centre stage.

(*uMuntu)*, but a thing'. As such he should not deserve the treatment afforded to and reserved for '*uMuntu*' (Langa 2015).

6. Moving from *uBuntu* to *Ubuntu*

6.1. The metamorphosis of *uBuntu*

How then does one move from the rural praxis of *uBuntu* where the cultural perspectives of patriarchalism, the ancestral cult and kith and kin dominate to a wider philosophy where people 'live, act and behave in the way that fosters harmony in the society and the universe around them' (Ntibagirirwa 2009:306, i). Michael Battle posits that 'African epistemology begins with community and moves to individuality, whereas Western epistemology moves from individuality to community' (2009:135). Because of the influence that each has on the other, in Southern Africa the two worldviews are moving towards each other. Even though the philosophy is metamorphosing, it appears to be doing so in different directions. There are those in the cities who do not understand the philosophy at all, having adopted the Western independent, consumeristic way of life. Others are melding Western culture with *uBuntu.* Many of those who write on *Ubuntuism* focus on its benefits and nation-building qualities (Nolte-Schamm 2006:380; Rosa 2005: ¶19). Others, like Masango, conclude their writings with a call for a return to its *uBuntu* value systems (2006:943). Praeg identifies *Ubuntu* with 'power' or, more specifically, 'the taking back of power', as if restoring the worldview would somehow be a panacea to all the evil that mankind do to their fellow man. Unfortunately, the cosmopolitan and sinful nature of this world leaves scant room for 'returning to neverland'.[32]

Some, like Tutu, would claim that the philosophy retains its positive qualities, and adopt a forgiving, transforming Christian discipline.

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[32] Neverland, the fantasy world of Peter Pan, created by Scottish novelist and playwright JM Barrie.

Unfortunately they omit practical ways to overcome the problems that the philosophy is currently experiencing (Curle 2009:128).

6.2. Is God's original 'golden rule' for man inherent in Ubuntu?

The question that needs to be answered is where does a biblical viewpoint of Christianity stand in the midst of this? Does one blindly accept that the Western view necessarily reflects a biblical reflection of the truth, or do both *uBuntu* and the Western view miss the mark? How is it then, that Christians, like Desmond Tutu, validate the *Ubuntu* philosophy? Battle (2009:139) answers the question in this way:

> Ubuntu can be understood as the very thing that God in Christ was up to—reconciling a wayward creation to itself and its Creator. As a people of faith, how do we become the loving and reconciling gaze of God toward a disoriented world? The key to a Christian practice of Ubuntu is embodied in the liturgies of confession and forgiveness, both individual and corporate.

But what does this reconciliation between creation and Creator through Christ achieve for humankind? Until the advent of Christ Jesus, people were operating 'under the conviction that if they could just get *better*— more moral, more disciplined, more spiritual, more kind, more holy and righteous or whatever religious jargon they had picked up along the way—then they would be *in or accepted* or embraced or validated or affirmed by God' (Webb 2013:134–135), or the ancestors or each other. Unfortunately, as Webb points out, this is still a current belief throughout the world. But God does not 'operate on a point or merit system, (for) that is not the Gospel' (Ibid).

Before the coming of the Methodist missionaries who first brought the gospel to Swaziland in 1844 (Reformiert 2002:¶2), neither Christianity

nor the Bible had been heard of. How then did this typically Christian philosophy come to be practised by this primordial people group?

In his Romans theological masterpiece, Paul made this declaration in Romans 2:14–15):

> Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them.

Jesus had already spelt out that the entire law and the prophets hang on the commandments to love God with your entire being and your neighbour as yourself (Matt 22: 37–39; Mark 12:29–30; Luke 10:27). It follows that inherent in Paul's declaration is the concept that all humans have God's two laws of love imprinted in their hearts from the time that they are born. If this is true, we should be able to find the love for God and the love for our neighbour throughout the ancient world, where it would have developed independently of any other culture (Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance n.d:¶1).

CS Lewis (1958:19) made the comment: 'If anyone will take the trouble to compare the moral teaching of, say, the ancient Egyptians, Babylonians, Hindus, Chinese, Greeks and Romans, what will really strike him will be how very like they are to each other and to our own.'

The inference of this is that, alongside the nation of Israel, the primordial cultures in the continents of Asia, Europe, North America, South America, Australasia and Africa grew up with an inbuilt desire to love each person within their community to live out a spirit of

'community, mutual support, sharing, interconnectedness and respect for one another' (Keevy 2014:64), for want of a better description, a spirit of *uBuntu.*

7. Conclusion

In each of these continents are cultures that have adapted the so-called Golden Rule to their own cultural particularities, not least of which is patriarchalism and exclusivism. Whether the culture hails from the west, the east, or here in Africa, the principle of brotherly love has been moulded to fit the prevailing culture. Regarding *Ubuntu,* academics tend to agree that to move from the praxis of *uBuntu* to the philosophy of *Ubuntu*, the negative aspects need to be cut away (Gordon 2014:21; Keevy 2009:19–58; Prinsloo 2013:9, 82–87; Gade 2012:484–503). Praeg refers to it as 'circumcision' (Praeg 2014b:114).

Another word that has relevance to students of the Bible is 'pruning'. In Romans (11:11–22), Paul compares wild olive trees to their cultivated counterparts. The wild olives represent the Gentiles, while the cultivated trees are symbolic of the Jewish nation. At first glance, it would appear that Paul would have us believe that the trees have little in common; one is wild, and the other cultivated. But within the allegory, there is a similarity; they both have similar fruits. To be an olive tree, the tree must produce olives. The difference between the fruit of the wild and the cultivated tree is determined by taste, amount of flesh surrounding the pit and the amount of oil that is produced. The process of cultivation minimises the deficits found in the wild olive. The Bible tells us little about the cultivation of olive trees, except to say that some branches are broken off to make way for new life to be grafted in. Jules Janick, professor in the science of horticulture, informs us that 'Moderate pruning is performed to shape (olive) trees and to remove unfruitful wood' (2005:278). In John 15, we find a similar

process of pruning, where Jesus enlightens us about the cultivation of vines:

> I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

Jesus could have used a different allegory that would have had much meaning: 'I am the true olive, The Root of Jesse, you are the olive branches … you will bear much fruit.' Paul speaks of another fruit in Chapter 5 of his epistle to the Galatians, the fruit of the Spirit. Surely, this is the true spirit of *Ubuntu*. This is *Ubuntu* that is neither coerced by patriarchal pressure, nor indoctrinated by circumstance. Rather, it flows through the Spirit of God who indwells us (John 7:37–39; 1 Cor 3:16; Rom 5:5; Eph 3:20; Gal 4:6; Titus 3:5) causing us to do good works. It is not from striving to do good deeds in our own strength (and in so doing please God), for in God's eyes such works evidence only our own self-righteousness (Psa 14:1–3; 53:1–3; Ecc 7:20; Rom 3:9–20) and are seen as used menstrual rags that are fit only for burning (Isa 64:6).

Perhaps the best way to illustrate practically this true spirit of *uBuntu* is to refer to Acts 4:32–37 where the disciples shared everything that they had, not only the produce, but also their productive assets. A more current example can be found in what happens on a daily basis in Shiselweni province, Swaziland. More than one thousand Christian men and women who belong to Shiselweni Home Based Care (SHBC) from

villages within this poorest region of Swaziland volunteer to go out from their homes, without any hope of payment, to become the hands and feet of Jesus as they care for over 4,500 neighbours who are suffering from HIV/AIDS (SHBC 2015).

There are many definitions of *Ubuntu.* All of them point to the humanity required from the individual and the recognition of the other person's being. Few refer to the voluntary nature of that humanity and recognition, nor do they expand the horizons to include not only one's produce, but one's productive assets; even one's life. For *uBuntu* to be *Ubuntu*, the freewill offering of that love for one's fellow man or woman is paramount—'This is how we know what love is. Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters' (1 John 3:16).

It is this author's belief that it is only within the widespread kinship system of the church that the spirit of *Ubuntu* has any hope of survival. Even so, the Church is not perfect and is in need of pruning in those areas where it does not hold up Immanuel (God with us) as its criterion. Fortunately for the church and the world at large, the Gardener is at work, cutting off the branches that do not bear fruit.

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