

# **Problematizing Confession and Forgiveness in Prophetic Pentecostal Christianity: A Case Study of Rabboni Centre Ministries**

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## **Abstract**

During COVID lockdown the practice of confession was one of the aspects of the services at Rabboni Centre Ministries, a Prophetic Pentecostal Church, which changed significantly. People had to write their confessions and e-mail them to the church. These were then read out in the middle of various week-day services by a pastor who assured people that the Prophet and God forgave them. The Prophet and founder, Lesego Daniel proclaimed in January 2022 that people can only be set free through this public form of confession, thus making confession far more important in the church than it has ever been. Using discourse analysis this article examines the theological understanding of confessions expressed by followers in early 2023 and finds that they believed that their forgiveness was primarily dependent on the grace of the Prophet. Only some people believed that forgiveness from God was also necessary. Jesus Christ was not mentioned in any of the confessions and was not understood as the one who saves believers from sin and God's judgment. Confession and forgiveness were understood to be the central mechanism that allowed people to be restored to the Rabboni community and the Prophet. Using Bourdieu's notions of habitus, dispositions, and symbolic violence as a theoretical lens, this article argues that the church has established its own habitus in which the symbolic violence of dependence on the Prophet for forgiveness is understood as part of the disposition and power dynamics within the habitus of the church. By using this theoretical lens, the article aims to answer the question why believers conform to the teaching of the Prophet which makes them so dependent on him.

**Keywords:** Confession, forgiveness, Pentecostalism, Africa, prophets, Rabboni

## **Introduction**

Rabboni Centre Ministries (hereafter only Rabboni) has become a rapidly growing online international mega Prophetic Pentecostal Church (PPC). This article builds on an earlier work (Frahm-Arp 2021) where I argued that at Rabboni a new practice of confession emerged during COVID lockdown in South Africa from 26 March 2020 until 31 January 2022 when schools were reopened and small crowds of people were allowed to congregate for economic, learning, social, and religious reasons. During lockdown when churches were shut only 50 people or less could meet in a church building. The new form of confession practiced at Rabboni allowed people to develop a new sense of agency through self-reflection as they wrote down their confessions and e-mailed them to the church. These confessions were publicly read out, whereupon sinners were assured of their forgiveness and reunited into the community of believers. In this new form of confession people practiced a new type of agency as they took ownership of their personal behavior and no longer blamed their sinful actions on the work of the devil or evil spirits.

While believers expressed a sense of personal agency through the act of self-reflection and the writing down of confessions, as found in my earlier research of Rabboni (Frahm-Arp 2021), this article argues that two years later, in early 2023, the practice of confession and forgiveness has made followers believe that they are dependent on Prophet Lesego Daniel for their forgiveness. The article shows how in the lived theology of the followers, Jesus played no role in their understanding of confession and forgiveness. They understood that God's forgiveness of sins was dependent on the Prophet forgiving them. The Prophet determined what was considered sinful, who was forgiven, and who had access to the gift of being reunited with the Prophet and the church community. This article argues that in 2023 at Rabboni a 'theology' has emerged in which the Prophet became the agent of forgiveness. Through this symbolic violence the Prophet exercised a heightened degree of power over followers who felt dependent on him for the grace of forgiveness.

Since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century prophet style churches have rapidly grown in Africa. Authors have also highlighted the similarities or synergies between the PPC and African Traditional Religions (Kgatle 2023). Some scholars regard these churches as a positive development offering people healing and financial assistance (Amanze 2013:1-2; Quayesi-Amakye 2015:43-47). Much has been written about the PPC in Southern Africa and the abusive nature of these churches. The focus is primarily on the theological abuses (Kgatle 2017; Banda 2021:1-4 of 10), sexual abuses (Banda 2020; Kgatle & Frahm-Arp 2022), and financial abuses (Chitando 2013:95-100; Deke 2015; Kgatle 2022), often including the selling of holy objects where followers feel they need these objects for protection or healing (Amanze 2013; Banda 2019).

This article problematizes confessions in the PPC by using both a sociological and theological lens to explain how a particular form of abuse is taking place and why people willingly allow themselves to be abused and regard the teaching and practices in the church as normal and even holy. The article does this by examining the practice, theology, and understanding of confession and forgiveness through the case study of one PPC, Rabboni. It begins with a theological overview of the broad ecumenical, orthodox Christian understanding of confession and forgiveness and Rabboni's practice of confession. It then moves to give an overview of Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, dispositions, and symbolic violence. Having outlined the theological and theoretical lenses, a brief overview of the methodology used for data collection is discussed. Discourse analysis (DA) is used to analyze the written confessions that followers e-mailed to the church during January and February 2023. DA was also used to analyze the Prophet's teaching on, and performance of confession and forgiveness. Having set the framework in place, the next section explores the habitus and dispositions of Rabboni showing how people ontologically live out and express the teachings and world-meaning-making of the church. The final section of the article unpacks the symbolic violence of the theology practiced in this church which makes people feel dependent on Prophet Lesego Daniel and not on God for their forgiveness, acceptance into the church, and their relationship with God.

## **Understanding Confession and Forgiveness in Christian Theology**

In the Bible God is understood as the author of forgiveness, the one who forgives sin and who calls humankind to forgive one another. Forgiveness in the Old Testament is broadly understood as atonement, a washing away or purifying of the soul and person. This is done through various types of offerings or sacrifices (cf. e.g., Lev 4:1-5:13, 6:7, 7:7). God liberates people from sin and punishment (Ex 34:7) and puts away sins or throws sins into the deep (e.g., Ps 103:12). Particularly in the theology of the Psalms, prayers rather than sacrifices are the mechanism through which forgiveness is experienced. In the Old Testament when people repent of their sins either through sin offerings or verbal confessions in prayer, it is God who forgives them through a divine act that liberates people from sin and its consequences.

In the New Testament the death and resurrection events of Christ are explained as the key that liberates all humanity from the wages or penalties of sin, which is death and eternal damnation (Rm 6:23). In Paul's theology all who repent are assured of complete forgiveness through the one perfect sacrifice of Christ crucified. Forgiveness entails letting go, to be released from, or having something dismissed which is what God does when he forgives sins (McGarth 2017). In the Gospels Jesus is given the power and authority to forgive sins committed against God as he speaks in the Name of the Father (Mt 9:6; Mk 2:1-12; Lk 5:17-26). Central to the teaching of forgiveness is that as God forgives humanity so they should forgive one another (Mt 6:14-15). The resurrected Christ passes on the authority to forgive offenses against God to the church and its leaders who in the Name of the Father can forgive those who repent (Jn 20:23; Eph 4:32; Col 3:13). In the letter to the Hebrews and the Epistles of John the theology of forgiveness is further developed to be a sanctifying act that purifies an unholy person making them holy.

Confession, atonement, divine justice, and divine forgiveness have been the subject of heated theological debates, splits within Christianity, and the writing of countless books and articles. In the practice of the contemporary Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox Churches confession and forgiveness focus on divine forgiveness, person-to-person forgiveness, and self-forgiveness. During a Christian service a priest reminds or assures people that when they confess their sins and sincerely pray for forgiveness, God forgives them. This is visible in the liturgy of confession in the Catholic, Orthodox, and

Protestant Churches such as in the Anglican, Methodist, Lutheran, and Presbyterian Churches. How this is practiced, varies somewhat. In some Protestant traditions priests are understood to be guides who help people make their confession and bear witness to the forgiveness God offers them when, in the prayers of repentance, a priest asks God to forgive all who truly repent (McGarth 2017:381-400). In the Catholic tradition a priest may offer people absolution either during a service or when hearing individual confessions. Absolution is given to the sinner by a priest in the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit – not in the Name of the priest (McGarth 2017:381-400). In the Orthodox tradition, Louth (2013:66) explains that the priest reminds believers that like them, he too is a sinner, but in the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit the priest bears witness to the fact that their sins are forgiven through the saving work of Jesus Christ. When the priest gives absolution or assurance of forgiveness, this is an earthly ritual that expresses a divine and spiritual reality, the power and authority of which lie with God. Pentecostal Charismatic Churches at least in South Africa, mostly include a time of repentance at the beginning of their services in which people privately confess their sins to God (Frahm-Arp 2010:60-75).

In many prophetic-type Pentecostal Churches in Africa confession is often understood as a time where people confess to being filled with evil spirits and being involved in witchcraft. Confession is understood as a mechanism to expel witchcraft and evil spirits through exorcisms performed by a pastor (Pype 2011:280-282) or through confessing salvation (Karanja 2016:143-148). This is thus very different to the practices of Pentecostal Charismatic Churches and other Christian Churches outlined above. Before COVID confession was understood at Rabboni as the mechanism to address and expunge witchcraft and evil spirits (for more detail cf. Frahm-Arp 2021).

The theological lens that will be used in this article is the broadly ecumenical one expressed above, in which the acts of confession, either spoken or written, made by believers are understood to be forgiven by God without being dependent on the mediation or approval of a third party. The work of priests and pastors is to remind and reassure people that God is infinitely just and willing to forgive. A believer's forgiveness from God is not dependent on the forgiveness of a Christian leader. The reason for this is that Rabboni as an online church moved from understanding confession as a mechanism for the exorcism of witchcraft and evil spirits to a space in which sins of individuals are forgiven as expressed in most Christian theologies and prac-

tices. Having established the theological lens for this article, we now turn to explore Bourdieu's theory of habitus, dispositions, and symbolic violence. These concepts form the theoretical lens for this article.

## **Bourdieu's Theory of Habitus, Dispositions, and Fields**

Bourdieu argues that in society the social world which a group of people inhabit can be understood as a habitus which is shaped over time both by individuals in the group and the wider society in which the group functions. Within this habitus there are particular ideas, forms of knowledge, behaviors, tastes, and preferences which are valued above others, and these are referred to as the dispositions of the habitus. These dispositions are taught to those who join the group to inform them how these people think, feel, and act. A church group or organization can therefore be understood as a habitus with its own particular set of beliefs, acceptable actions, behavior, tastes, values, and preferences, in other words 'dispositions'. A habitus, with its particular dispositions, therefore, shapes how individuals are expected to respond to the world around them and make sense of what is happening to them (Longhofer & Winchester 2016:182-189). In turn individuals also shape the habitus that they form part of, as a habitus 'requires the active role of the social agent in the construction of the social reality' (Walther 2014:12). Bourdieu's concept of habitus is often unclear and nebulous (Rey 2007:2; Asimaki & Koustourakis 2014:121-123) particularly because he is offering a concept to help us understand social groups or worlds and the impact of different forms of capital, such as symbolic, cultural, and social capital, on these groups including the ways in which people navigate structure and agency in these worlds.

The concept of habitus and dispositions is an approach or theoretical framework to understand the mechanisms of power, domination, and cultural reproductions of social hierarchies as individuals navigate their way in various social groups with their particular practices and preferences (Asimaki & Koustourakis 2014:122). Bourdieu is essentially interested in power and the dynamic ways in which it is played out in social contexts. He argues that there are four types of capital: Economic, social, cultural, and symbolic and that different forms of capital can be exchanged to create more of one or other form of capital. Rey (2007:57-63) argues that spiritual capital is also a form of capital which Bourdieu does not always recognize sufficiently in his

work. In the context of this study understanding Rabboni as its own habitus with its own dispositions and forms of capital, is therefore a useful lens through which to understand how and why people accept particular forms of social and cultural power and join social hierarchies which limit their own power and agency.

Rabboni is a distinct habitus, which forms part of the PCC field. According to Bourdieu, a field is a

hierarchically structured social arena (market) in which actors compete for money, prestige, and power. Like competitive athletes, players in a field must have a sense of what is at stake, an investment in the outcome, a mastery of the strategies required for success, and above all, ‘a feel for the game’, a talent for innovation within continuously changing circumstances (Bourdieu 1990:66).

The PPCs follow a particular set of beliefs as prophets are regarded as having various forms of symbolic, spiritual, and cultural capital which they exercise in exchange for economic capital. Amongst these churches the prophets compete with one another for prestige and followers, and there is a deep vested interest in the outcome of the churches and success of the prophets both for the prophets and the followers. All these factors together make it clear that the PPCs are a field within their own right. With this theoretical lens in place, the article turns to explain how the data for this study were collected and analyzed.

## **Methodology**

The aim of this study was to examine how the followers of the Rabboni church understood confession and forgiveness at the beginning of 2023. Put differently the research question was, *What theology of confession and forgiveness did followers of Prophet Lesego Daniel express when they wrote their confessions?* The most relevant methodology was therefore to collect the written confessions of followers as they were displayed on the screen during services held on January 31, as well as February 2 and 17, 2023<sup>1</sup> and to

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<sup>1</sup> This time period was chosen because there were no religious or public holidays at this time. The time was a year after two important sermons on confession and

transcribe how the forgiveness for these sins was verbalized both through verbal and non-verbal language. Screenshots were made of the 33 confessions shown online during the services. The written confessions and the transcribed proclamations of forgiveness were then analyzed as written texts using DA. Gee has argued that DA is ‘the study of language-in-use; the study of language at use in the world, not just to say things, but to do things’ (Gee 2011:9). Although DA is often used for spoken language analysis while text analysis is used for written analysis, DA was used for these confessions because people wrote them knowing that someone would read them out to the community in an online service. In reading the texts it was also clear that they were written as people would speak. Most importantly these texts were written-spoken so that they would do something, i.e., change the spiritual reality of people from unforgiven people who were outside the community of faith, to people who were forgiven and restored to the fold.

It was also important that the teaching of the Prophet on confession be reviewed. The sermons, prayers, and other messages he gave between January 2022 and February 2023 were examined and the sections that particularly made reference to confession and/or forgiveness were transcribed and analyzed. During this time, he gave two sermons focused on confession and forgiveness. These sermons were delivered on January 12 and 25, 2022 and these were transcribed and analyzed using DA.

In doing this DA, particular focus was given to three sub-themes within DA: Critical discourse analysis (CDA) that explores ‘the role of discourse in the production and reproduction of power relations within social structures’ was used (Wooffitt 2005:138). Second, interactional sociolinguistics was also used as it examines the context in which speech-acts take place either in written or spoken format and regards these as being of particular importance, as Kramersch (1998:3) points out. She argues that language expresses and embodies cultural realities and that people from the same group or ‘speech community’ use ‘the same linguistic code’ through which they develop and express their cultural realities (Kramersch 1998:3). As Goffman (1981:2-6) argues, the focus here is to examine how culture, society, and language come together and continually reflect each other and give meaning.

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forgiveness were preached by the Prophet and therefore shows how much his teaching had become part of the followers’ understanding. Over three services 33 confessions were collected, giving enough data for DA.

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Ethnography of communication was the third sub-theme or group used as it examines how within a community beliefs, values, role-relationships, organizational structure, knowledge, and behavior are all transmitted to the group, organization, or society (Saville-Troike 1982:27).

In this study the focus is primarily on the functionalist perspective of DA and therefore it is far less concerned with grammar. The referential function of a language, in other words what realities people think they are inhabiting as and when words are spoken, is the main focus. Throughout pseudonyms are given to people, and where they were from is not revealed, but the link to each service where the confessions were aired on Rabboni Facebook is given. The following section explores Rabboni as a particular habitus with dispositions that determine how people should act and speak, and what they should believe.

### **Rabboni Centre Ministries as a Habitus with Particular Dispositions**

Rabboni was started in 2002 in Ga-Rankuwa, a peri-urban area outside Pretoria by Lesego Daniel. As a church it forms its own habitus and while it is part of the larger field of the PPCs it is not officially linked to other churches. The church gained media notoriety in 2007 when Prophet Daniel told people to eat grass and drink petrol as a way to demonstrate their faith in God (Resane 2017:1 of 17). On March 24, 2020 South Africa went into lockdown and overnight Rabboni moved their services online and broadcast seven-hour long services almost every day via their TV channel and their Facebook page. The church quickly grew in popularity and by the beginning of 2022 they were translating services into Portuguese, Spanish, and French as they attracted more and more followers from Francophone Africa, Latin America, and Europe.

One of the things that changed significantly during lockdown was the way in which confessions were understood, preached about, and practiced in the church and the importance that was placed on confession (Frahm-Arp 2021:1 of 8). Before lockdown, during the deliverance session in a service, Prophet Daniel identified the sins of some people and exorcised the evil spirits that were ‘making’ them sin. People did not reflect on their own sinful behavior or identify their sins: They rather felt convicted of a sin when the

Prophet prompted them. Personal confessions, where someone came up to the front of the church to make their confession publicly to the congregation and the Prophet, only took place irregularly at the very end of some Sunday services. During lockdown people were told to write down their confessions and e-mail them to the church (Frahm-Arp 2021:2 of 8). These were read out at weekday services usually in the middle of the service. No direct teaching was given to explain the change which occurred in the first few months of lockdown. The pastor who read out the confessions then assured people that ‘the Prophet and God’ forgave them of their sins. In the online environment people were told to take personal responsibility for their own sins by exercising self-agency and identifying what they had done wrong themselves and confessing these sins in the form of written e-mails to the church, rather than passively waiting for the Prophet to identify their sins (Frahm-Arp 2021:2 of 8).

Since the end of lockdown and the lifting of all restrictions of group gatherings in South Africa, Rabboni continued to be an exclusively online church. At the time the research was conducted for this article in early 2023 the church held no in-person services. Online services were held five times a week and were about seven hours long. These services created an online habitus in which a variety of different pastors and prophets from the church and Prophet Daniel all preached and practiced healing, miracles, and deliverance online. Prophet Daniel was present at most services and usually gave the sermon. He often prayed for people, interpreted dreams, and gave deliverance prophecies to people who raise their hands via Zoom or phoned in requesting prayer or deliverance. During services on a Tuesday and Friday roughly at the middle of the services, confessions were read out by one of the prophets and then people were assured that ‘Papa and God’ forgave them. To understand the significance of confessions and forgiveness at Rabboni we need to unpack how language is used to communicate dispositions within this habitus.

## **The Stylized Language in the Rabboni Habitus**

At Rabboni there was a particular language both in spoken words and in physical gestures. These stylized verbal and non-verbal languages highlight particular dispositions within this habitus, and echo Goffman’s findings that

through both verbal and non-verbal language including body language, tone, and pauses people experience a sense of validation and being seen and understood by others (Goffman 1981:2-3). An ethnography of communication indicates that the meaning of these different words and gestures were transmitted to the group via the leadership as they use the words in the context of sermons, prayers, and intercessions. Some keywords that were particular to the Rabboni lexicon are ‘offenses’, ‘locating’, ‘connections’, ‘Rabbonites’, ‘Papa’, ‘D/daddy’, ‘F/father’, and the phrase ‘To God be the Glory’ often shortened as TGBTG. The term ‘offenses’ refers to becoming upset and/or angry by the negative things someone has done or said at Rabboni and to the Prophet. ‘Locating’ means being found by someone or by God. The Prophet would often talk about God locating someone, which means that a person was seen by God or was found by God. The term ‘connections’ means the relationships that people have with other people which are not limited to LinkedIn or social media connections. A particularly common term was to have ‘wrong connections’ which means being friends with or in a relationship with someone who was not a follower of the Prophet. ‘Rabbonites’ refers to what the followers of the Prophet call themselves. The followers of the Prophet refer to him as ‘Papa’, ‘daddy’, and ‘F/father’. Most of the time, when they refer to ‘F/father’ they are not referring to God as many Christians would, but to the Prophet. Through these words the insider-verses-outsider disposition of the church is strengthened. Insiders could be identified as having particular knowledge which they express through the correct use of language within the context of the church.

As the church embraced the online space, they introduced Zoom to their services. This encouraged people to keep their cameras on, causing a new ‘sign’ language to emerge within the habitus. During the services the recording camera would focus on different people showing them praying, singing, or being delivered from evil spirits in their homes. Over time the church members developed different body gestures as their own online language. They had gestures to show a heart, to show they were giving each other virtual hugs, to symbolize that they saw each other and that they were receiving the infilling or anointing of the Holy Spirit as sent to them during services by the Prophet. In doing so the church developed a unique online habitus in which the dispositions of the Rabboni body-sign language and verbal language play an important part, particularly in creating a sense of unity, community, and being a part of, or in the group. One of the important dispo-

sitions or beliefs that emerged during lockdown was the practice of confession and the importance of forgiveness.

## **Not Everything can be Forgiven**

In January 2022 the Prophet developed his teaching on confession and forgiveness further in two sermons. He announced on January 12, 2022 that people should not get used to being forgiven. In his sermon he berated people for thinking that they could do anything they wanted to and would still be forgiven. He explained that God does not forgive everything, and they had to change their ‘mindset’ or understanding of God. He told followers to recognize that ‘God does not keep forgiving sins’ (Rabboni Centre Ministries 2023a). People were told that they must change their behavior and if they do sin, they must plead for their forgiveness (Rabboni Centre Ministries 2023a). Prophet Daniel made it clear that forgiveness was not guaranteed. The only thing that people could do was to recognize their sinful behavior and make a public confession, pleading for the forgiveness of their sins. The role of Christ as their liberator from sin was not mentioned. The Prophet implied that he would be the judge of their forgiveness (Rabboni Centre Ministries 2023a).

On January 25, 2022 Prophet Daniel said that people must confess their sins in order to be set free from the judgment of God: ‘Some people can only set themselves free through a confession’, he said (Rabboni Centre Ministries 2023b). He explained to them that if a believer leads someone astray, they can only be freed from that sin if they make a public written confession. Adultery, making ‘wrong connections’, spending time with non-Rabbonites, and expressing false emotions were given as the most common ways in which followers were leading other people astray, or being led astray themselves. The only way to come back to the church once they had sinned in any of these ways was to make a public confession. He explained that sins like these were not things that could be prayed away by a person on their own or prayed away in a deliverance session or through a prophecy (Rabboni Centre Ministries 2023a). There was no mention made of Christ’s saving work or that God’s forgiveness does not need to be mediated through a third party. Rather, a new theology of public confession with no guarantee of the outcome was taught as the new disposition or teaching of the church. Having outlined the

teaching of Prophet Daniel we now turn to examine how people expressed their understanding of this theology and teaching.

## **Online Confessions and Forgiveness within the Rabboni Habitus**

All the confessions that were studied in 2023 were highly stylized and followed a particular format and language. DA interactional sociolinguistics makes us aware of the significance of the format of, and context in which speech-acts take place, in other words understanding how language expresses and embodies cultural realities and ways of understanding the world (Kramsch 1998:2-3). The people making these confessions were all in contexts of vulnerability with a desperate sense of wanting to get their confession right so that they might be forgiven. They all began with a greeting to the Prophet and the church community, followed by the name of the person making the confession and where they lived. Everyone who wrote a confession appeared to be fully aware that confessions at Rabboni must be written in a particular way, with a particular salutation. In one confession a woman confessed to have a 'wrong connection' with someone and said she should have known that they were not real 'Rabbits' because their confession was not written correctly (Lebo, January 31, 2023). Thus, how confessions should be made was controlled both by the leadership of the church and by the members. This is typical of how a disposition or knowledge within a habitus permeates throughout the community until it becomes a normalized behavior, belief, or knowledge. Writing a confession correctly signals that a person is a committed follower of the Prophet and an insider of the habitus who knows the rules, language, and dispositions of the group.

In the body of the text the followers were all clear about what they were confessing and often labeled their confessions as '#1' and '#2'. Some people even gave the date when some sinful thought or behavior took place. The extract below shows how people were taught that they must be specific about their sins. This confession was written by a teenager living at home: 'The second one is about discriminate I didn't want to eat the food (vegetables) my mom had prepared for me. Papa please forgive me, help me and guide me for me to grow. TGBTG. Amen. The last confession is about me not being an obedient child to my mom' (Lerato, February 2, 2023).

There were generally two styles of confessions. Shorter confessions that were usually very specific or longer confessions which generally told a lengthy story about sinful behavior. Often but not always people also explained the negative consequences they had experienced because of their sinful behavior: 'My confession is about disobidans, I don't watch services as I should and because of that I have not been focused and my prayer life is poor' (Lerato, February 3, 2023).

The confessions all end with pleas to the Prophet to forgive them and sometimes they also ask God to forgive them. Often people told the Prophet how much they loved him and needed him. Simon wrote: 'Papa I surrender myself unto you and to my Master forgiven me. Forgive me father and restore me, without you I'm nothing. Please papa. Thank you Papa' (Simon, January 31, 2023).

DA ethnography of communication (Saville-Troike 1982) highlights the importance of tone in language and what we can learn from the way in which people make a request or ask a question. The pleading nature of these requests points to a deep power imbalance that followers feel. People have internalized the Prophet's teachings in January 2022 outlined above. They unquestioningly expressed their total dependence on the Prophet for forgiveness and that in their eyes he had the power to forgive them.

Most of the confessions were written in poor English with many grammatical errors, typos, and spelling mistakes. They all used the terminology of the church using words like 'offenses' and 'connections' in the way that was correct for the meaning in which this church gave these words during early 2023. On a few occasions confessions were sent to the church in a vernacular language and these were translated by one of the pastors into English and read out in English.

The key reason why people said they were making these confessions was so that 'Papa' would forgive them and that they could be restored to the Rabboni community of believers and feel connected to the Prophet. Many people wrote that they wanted to be forgiven so that 'Papa' would visit them in their dreams again. People also wanted to be forgiven so that they could be restored to the Rabboni family and have a better spiritual life in which they could be able to read the Bible, pray, meditate, and watch Rabboni TV. People often talked about having a 'low spiritual life' and wanting to change their character to become a better person and stop destructive behavior like getting drunk, being high, or beating women and children. Less than half the

confessions were asking for forgiveness so that people could get healed. None of the confessions asked for forgiveness so that they could experience financial blessings, although Rabboni preaches a gospel of wealth and health through miraculous prayer (Frahm-Arp 2010). Prosperity theology did not influence the theology or practice of confession-forgiveness.

### **Symbolic Violence of a ‘Theology’ of Confession and Forgiveness Dependent on the Leader**

In this section Bourdieuan ideas of symbolic violence are used to explain why people accept the teachings of the Prophet that rob them of agency and make them dependent on him and not on God for forgiveness. For Bourdieu, the field, habitus, and capital all work together to produce symbolic violence (Rey 2007:43). This is both the ontological and structural experience where the dominant people impose arbitrary forms and systems of meanings onto the dominated in such a way that they are ‘misrecognized’ by a group as being unarbitrary, unnatural, and even estranged from ‘the truth’. In these systems the dominant are usually the ones with particular understandings of ‘the truth’ or meaning-making, imposing it on the dominated on whom the violence is exercised (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992:14). Symbolic violence is the rules of the field and/or habitus which give shared systems of meaning to the whole production and reproduction of a social system of structural domination. Because these structures of symbolic violence range across a whole field, for example the PPCs, they appear as naturalized within a system of meaning or habitus, making it difficult for people to question these taken for granted ways of being in the field or habitus.

At Rabboni the form of symbolic violence that was played out in relationship to confession and forgiveness centered around the Prophet and the power that he held over followers. Using CDA to analyze the confessions people wrote, the uneven power relationships between the Prophet and the followers became even more apparent. Central amongst the confessions was people asking forgiveness for not obeying the Prophet. People did not talk about how they were not living by the teachings of Jesus Christ or disobeying the Ten Commandments. One of the most common ‘sins’ was having ‘wrong connections’, in other words interacting with people not approved of by the Prophet because they were not members of the church. Another cluster of

sins was not doing what the Prophet told them to do or not obeying/listening to the teachings of the Prophet. Gladys narrated: ‘Please daddy m asking for u forgiveness because I know the truth but I didn’t listen, please forgive me and the holy spirit to forgive me and restore me back to your glory’ (Gladys, January 31, 2023).

Taking offense when people criticized the Prophet was another common confession. Prophet Daniel taught his followers not to argue with people who do not believe in his teachings but rather to walk away. Sophie wrote a confession in which she spoke about fighting with family members who did not believe in the teachings of the Prophet. She ended by stating: ‘I’ll like to ask papa and God to forgive me because I know I should have controlled myself and kept quite I am so sorry papa’ (Sophie, February 17, 2023).

Many people confessed that they had not been diligent in their spiritual life, in other words that they were not able to watch services, meditate, pray, read Scripture, and fast. This was often linked to confessions of not watching Rabboni TV but rather watching other programs, listen to DVDs, or spending time on social media. Sipho wrote that he watched a lot of TV, and this meant that he was not praying and reading the Bible enough. He believed that this was the reason why he felt emotionally low and ‘in discomfort’: ‘Please forgive me my father and may the Holy Spirit forgive me for my foolishness. My God have mercy upon me and relieve me from this discomfort’ (Sipho, February 2, 2023).

All these sins centered around the relationship that followers had with the Prophet and how they did not immerse themselves in his world and follow his teachings unquestioningly. They did not primarily center around people’s relationship with God, although coming into a right relationship with God was also important to believers. The symbolic violence played out was the way in which the Prophet, through his teachings, made it appear ‘normal’ that everyone should obey him and live solely according to the normalized dispositions of his church, Rabboni. The power of the Prophet was captured in the overall understanding within the church that sins were the reason why blessings did not flow into the lives of followers, and not the fault of the Prophet’s lack of power. This was another form of symbolic violence in which the Prophet was exonerated from any blame or failure as only the believers and their lack of faith, disobedience, and insufficient dedication were the reasons for their suffering.

God as the loving Father who forgives sins and offers restorative justice to all is completely lacking in this theology. These extracts show that everyone asked the Prophet for forgiveness and then some asked the Holy Spirit or God for forgiveness as well. This points to people's belief that the forgiveness of the Prophet was essential, but they were then not sure of the role of God or the Holy Spirit in their forgiveness. In these otherwise highly stylized confessions, the role of the Trinity in their forgiveness was vague and unclear, while the role of the Prophet was very clear. None of the people writing a confession felt sure that they would be forgiven. They all felt at the mercy of the Prophet, not God.

Less common confessions were sins that would be recognized as sinful behavior in any Christian community. They can be listed as getting angry and even hitting a spouse, friend, or child. Lying to other people, to the Prophet and to God were also common confessions. Sexual sins were also a common theme and included sex outside of marriage, adultery, visiting prostitutes, and watching pornography. Less often smoking, taking drugs, and getting drunk were confessed as well as not paying their tithes to the church. For everyone who wrote a confession the moment of truth was hearing if their sin(s) would be forgiven by the Prophet and by God.

## **The Symbolic Violence of Absence**

There was a significant disconnect between the followers' pleading requests for forgiveness and the Prophet's blasé attitude to confession in online services. Once confessions were e-mailed to the church, they were read out by a pastor, not the Prophet, during one of the weekday services. After reading each confession the pastor simply stated: 'The Prophet and God forgive you'. The Prophet always came first and then God. This implies that because the Prophet forgives a follower, God will also forgive them. The Prophet never came onto the screen during the confession-forgiveness rituals. The services appeared to be stage-managed in such a way that the Prophet never directly engaged in questions of forgiveness in the online space. The Prophet's absence and apparent blasé attitude to confessions heightened the power dynamic and symbolic violence inherent in this practice. This is quite different from the Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant traditions where confessions are

made in prayers of repentance and a senior priest presides over this ritual, reassuring the congregation that God forgives them.

Through DA the symbolic violence of confession and forgiveness at Rabboni is foregrounded. It reveals how dependence on the Prophet for forgiveness was normalized while the Prophet's non-involvement during the reading of confessions and the absence of the Prophet's reassurance that followers are forgiven, heightened his Godlike status. Confession was an important way in which people expressed their faith in the Prophet, their love of the Prophet, and dependence on him. They regarded him as the one who needed to forgive them and whom they had wronged. This reinforced the centrality of the Prophet in the church and symbolically the violent power relationships in which followers understood themselves to be totally dependent on Prophet Daniel. There is a similarity in the finding from Banda who also found declines in human agency (Banda 2022).

The Prophet was the gatekeeper of the community. Only people who were deemed acceptable by the Prophet could become members. If people had strayed from the church or the Prophet's teaching their only way back to the Prophet and the community was through a public confession and the Prophet's forgiveness. Most people talked about wanting to be restored to the Prophet and felt bound to the Prophet. Many people talked about being lost without their connection to the Prophet as a central concern for them was not seeing the Prophet in their dreams. Mpho wrote: 'I lost my dreams, visions, am asking God and Papa to please forgive me and restore me I want to live for God at the moment am struggling with My Spirituality its dropping everyday. I want to live right, I want to deal with my character as Papa said to me last time that I should deal with character before I start to minister again' (Mpho, February 17, 2023).

The primary concern of everyone who wrote a confession was to be reunited with 'Papa' and to be accepted by him. For the followers the importance of the bounded nature of Rabboni as a closed community that only people who were behaving in the right way, according to the teaching of the church, could be a part of, was extremely high.

## **Conclusion**

Worthington, Rueger, Davis, and Wortham (2019) identify four elements that they argue can be regarded as an ecumenical understanding of forgiveness: Divine forgiveness, self-forgiveness, person-to-person forgiveness, and organization-societal forgiveness. At Rabboni the prophet-follower forgiveness was the central axis of people's understanding of forgiveness. People wrote their confessions so that these would be read out in public in order to assure them that they were forgiven by the Prophet and God.

The pleading tone and language used to beg the Prophet to forgive them was the way in which people expressed their sense of total dependence on the Prophet. This article showed that confession and forgiveness were acts of symbolic violence which deepened the dependence of the followers on the Prophet because they believe that he is the only one who can forgive them. The symbolic violence was further exacerbated as people expressed their belief, and the Prophet taught that confession was at times the only way that some people could be restored to the community and the Prophet. Using Bourdieu's theory of habitus, dispositions, and fields, the article indicated how this symbolic violence was normalized, accepted, and even promoted. The article argued that theologically the confession-forgiveness practice was a misrepresentation of the grace of God. By using a Bourdieuan theoretical lens of symbolic violence the article explained why people who were a part of this habitus accepted the dispositions of the church which normalized abusive behavior where people willingly reduce their agency and become dependent on the Prophet.

With this theology people are robbed of the Christian truth that their relationship with God is not mediated by anyone. They are falsely taught that their forgiveness is dependent on being forgiven by Prophet Daniel. During his sermons the Prophet preached about Jesus while the followers of Rabboni spoke about themselves as Christians who believe that Jesus Christ is their Lord and Savior. However, in the teaching and practice of confession-forgiveness Jesus is absent. In their confessions followers primarily ask 'Pa-pa' the Prophet, to forgive them and then sometimes they asked God or the Holy Spirit to forgive them as well. There is a total lack of understanding that forgiveness comes through the saving work of Christ crucified. In their confessions they express that their forgiveness is totally dependent on the Proph-

et. He is the one that needs to forgive them. In their theology and lived reality they feel totally dependent on him.

Further work needs to be done to understand how to break the dispositions that permeate the field of the PPCs. Only by changing these will we be able to change the practices of symbolic violence where abusive practices are normalized as the acceptable behavior of People of God.

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