

**Undoing Closure:  
Responsible use of the Bible in  
Christian ethical decision making**

**by**

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## Introduction

### 1. A question asked

What is being aimed for is the responsible use of the Bible in Christian ethical decision making and particularly for responsible use of the Bible as a source for moral norms in the sanctioning or not by the Church of same-sex civil unions, with specific reference to the use of Romans 1: 26-27, as an example, and a concluding reference to responsible use of the Bible in the debate on same-sex civil unions in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa. Referring to the use of the Bible in relation to the issue of same-sex civil unions, it is clear that the Bible is being used in different ways and therefore the different conclusions drawn.

Although some are saying that homosexual orientation is on the same level, or just as sinful, as homosexual behaviour, and therefore such people are to be excluded from the life of the Church, for we are only dealing with sexually perverted people, it would seem that there is, in general, agreement on homosexual orientation. That is, there is agreement that those with such a sexual orientation can participate, in one way or the other, in the life of the Church. The disagreement is rather about homosexual behaviour as such. In other words, it is being said, on the one hand, that as long as 'they' are not practising homosexuals, then it would be in order for 'them' to participate in the life of the Church. One's homosexual orientation can then be dealt with as an orientation which is, out of the 'expected ordinary,' but under control, just as one would control one's alcoholism or other such 'sinful' tendencies. Thus it is said, that homosexual persons, no less than heterosexual persons, are people of sacred worth. The sexual act as such is the problem and the relationship or context within which it happens plays no part in determining it's wrongness or not. In this way the conclusion is then drawn that the Bible condemns same-sex civil unions. On the other hand, there are those who say that homosexual behaviour

or the sexual act as such, within a relationship which is usually defined as loving and faithful, is not a problem at all. The quality or context of the relationship is thus the defining factor and not the sexual act as such. In this way the Bible condemns same-sex behaviour only under certain conditions and the conclusion is then drawn that the Bible does not condemn same-sex civil unions.

This leads us to a first question: (Q1) **What is the morally right thing to do for a Church official and/or marriage officer of the Christian faith, when asked by a same-sex couple to have their lawful civil union blessed or to officiate at such a union?**<sup>1</sup> Both approaches, those for and those against the sanctioning of such civil unions by the Church, use the Bible as a source for moral norms in their ethical decision making.

## 2. The use of the Bible and knowledge

On the one side, to put it in a simplistic way, "... are those who insist on interpreting the biblical text in its natural ... sense; on the other, those who flatly deny that any such objective interpretation is possible and who therefore see the text as a reflection of its original environment and in dialectic interaction with the contemporary interpreter." (Montgomery, J 1995: 15) Or to put it differently: On the one hand there are those who maintain "...that the scriptural text can be objectively known, that it has a clear, perspicuous meaning, and that that meaning can be discovered if the text is allowed to interpret itself, without the adulteration of the interpreter's personal prejudices," (Montgomery, J 1995: 16) and on the other hand those who maintain that the "... text and interpreter are locked together in such a way that a purely objective, "presuppositionless" understanding of the text is out of the question." (Montgomery, J 1995: 16) Christians thus, "(h)ave a lot to say about ...Scripture in ethics. Even less

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<sup>1</sup> At present the Constitution of South Africa does not allow for same-sex marriages, "... alhoewel die Wet op Burgerlike Verbintenisse, 17 van 2007, artikel 8 (6) voorsiening maak dat gay verbintenisse ook wettig kan wees waar al die regsimplikasies van 'n huwelik geld." (De Villiers, G 2007: 125)

surprising is the lack of agreement among them.” (Spohn, W 1984: 1) The difficulty is such that it has been observed that “... it is clear that a generalized theory or method of interpretation is not going to provide an answer.” (Fowl, S & Jones, L 1991: 16) One gets the impression that there are various legitimate readings, dependant on the arguments used to support them. In the light of the plurality of our methodologies regarding the relation between the Bible and Christian ethics or between Christian ethics and our exegetical work, we can ask whether “... we (do) not succumb to a share of illusion when we are determined to control the understanding at any price by imposing on it rules and a sure and certain method, which is above all sure of itself?” (Grondin, J 2003: 18)

“As a generalized statement, one could say that there are two approaches to hermeneutics. There are those who, ... seek and espouse a methodology with which to begin the interpretative process. Others, ... have a more ontologically-orientated bias ...” (Selby, R 2006: 136) Not that an ontologically bias rules out method, but method itself must be open to correction. What have been said thus far leads us to say, about biblical interpretation: “(T)here are questions about what and how we know, about the ontological status of the ‘objects’ of our knowledge and the relationship between the two.” (Selby, R 2006: 3) One can also ask: “Can hermeneutic theory do justice both to the recognition of the historicity of interpretation and to the experience of truth in understanding?” (Selby, R 2006: 136)

### 3. Movement in hermeneutics

In answering the question, (Q1), in order to get to the ‘what ought to be done,’ the Christian as moral agent includes in his or her ethical decision making, and draws, knowingly or unknowingly, from the hermeneutical history or authority of a tradition, that is, from work which had been underway for some time. One such tradition, and within this tradition there are different approaches or

methods, is that the interpreter seeks to methodically work out the relation between the past text and the interpreter in a totally objective way, mostly the historical–critical, in which the author’s or final redactor’s intent or message, becomes the criterium for meaning and application follows once such an original intent had been uncovered. Another tradition, which may be called the literary tradition, again within which we find many different approaches, seeks rather to find meaning in the text itself, in its final form, even ignoring the author’s intent. And sometimes interpreters make use of approaches to be found in both traditions for interpreters will “... often utilize insights from “the other side” when they prove illuminating.” (McKenzie, S & Haynes, S 1999: 7)

“Sometimes interpretation simply denotes the whole range of historical–textual and literary methods employed in biblical studies ...” (Thiselton, A 1980: 10) These methods are necessary for it is acknowledged that “... a text was conditioned by a given historical context,” (Thiselton, A 1980: 11) and still speaking to us today from that past historical context. Hermeneutics, one can say, is about the application of that which comes to us from the past or the application of that which has become universal to a specific, new, context. The Christian thus engages in rules for understanding biblical texts and their application for today. It is thus assumed that “... understanding of an ancient text could be achieved by the observance of hermeneutical rules.” (Thiselton, A 1980: 11) In this sense, eventually, as indicated above, the historical–critical method with its focus on “(a) text means what its author intends it to mean, not what a reader wants it to mean,” (Bauman, M 1995: 3) became the preferred way of many interpreters, because it would make for an ‘objective’ reading, free from the prejudices of the interpreter. This focus is a consequence of the Age of Enlightenment, or Modernity, which, in its hermeneutics, turned to a separation between subject and object.

But a major shift in the rules for hermeneutics has taken place, namely the recognition that the “... interpreter, no less than the text, stands in a given

historical context and tradition.” (Thiselton, A 1980: 11) This has led to ‘new dimensions’ in hermeneutics, or new rules or guiding principles for interpretation. One can say that if a text is to be understood what must happen is “... an engagement between two sets of horizons, ..., namely those of the ancient text and those of the ... reader or hearer,” (Thiselton, A 1980: 15) where both the biblical authors or witness and the reader or hearer’s horizon consists of “... already granted meanings and intentions.” (Thiselton, A 1980: 16) These already granted meanings and intentions are known as prejudices. In other words, prejudices constitute the link between past text and interpreter. Method can only serve an instrumentalist function once the epistemological and ontological questions about understanding have been answered and when the meaning of a text can be regarded as “... an independently existing work of art whose own ontology, and truth–claim, is to be respected.” (Selby, R 2006: 136) In order to get to the ‘what ought to be done’ the Christian as moral agent brings to biblical interpretation his or her own ‘way of being in the world’ or historical situatedness, and from within this framework formulates his or her questions asked of the text and answers given.

Hermeneutics, in order to understand the bringing together of two horizons and the application of biblical material for today, has also set itself up as universal in nature, for we are always understanding in one way or the other and all understanding is interpretation. Hermeneutics has also set itself up as a meta–critique, for we can ask: What are the criteria for hermeneutical understanding? In other words, the discussion now turns to a critique of the criteria the interpreter uses, or a critique of the interpreter’s interpretative rules for his or her approach to the relation between the Bible and ethics and his or her exegetical work. But in interpretation or understanding, if prejudices constitute, more than conscious judgments, the historical reality of the interpreter and if prejudice is the link between past text and interpreter, we are then confronted with a second question: (Q2) **What are the criteria for determining what is justifiable in one’s prejudices and what is not?** The shift in hermeneutics has shown that



there is no interpretation without prior understanding, for we cannot ignore “... the fact that all understanding necessarily (ontologically) proceeds from an anticipation of meaning.” (Grondin, J 2003: 80) The agreement reached between text and interpreter is effectuated precisely on the basis of prejudice. Whether one’s prejudices are valid or not will only become clear as they come ‘face to face’ with the prejudices of the text. “... a prejudice, as a prejudgment, is neither positive nor negative until the final judgment is rendered.” (Schmidt, L 2006: 100) Prejudices includes everything one knows “knowingly or unknowingly.” “They include the meaning of words, our preferences, the facts we accept, our values and aesthetic judgments, our judgments concerning human nature and the divine and so on.” (Schmidt, L 2006: 100)

To speak about hermeneutics or the art of interpretation, thus begins with the notion that “(T)he .... interpreter, no less than the text, stands in a given historical context and tradition,” (Thiselton, A 1980: 11) and that hermeneutics cannot be reduced to a set of rules. It must show us what understanding is. In this sense hermeneutics is not about questioning the role of critical historical method or any other method as such, but about the observation that “... (B)iblical criticism can take us only part of the way towards understanding the ancient text.” (Thiselton, A 1980: 11) The main task of hermeneutics is to justify and work out the implications of the fusion of two horizons, that is, that interpretation is done within a horizon of already granted meanings and intentions of both the past and the interpreter. Our questions put to the text always presuppose something in order to bring what is being questioned out into the open. To ask and answer questions is to engage in dialogue. The text as historical text poses a question to the interpreter because it effects the interpreter. To answer the question posed by the text we will have to ask the question to which the text is the answer to. But the interpreter goes beyond the “... historical horizon of the question to which the text was an answer since she cannot ignore what she knows and the author did not know.” (Schmidt, L 2006: 113)

Our question is thus a reconstructed question, which merges with the question that the text puts to us. This is the basis of the hermeneutical experience and our approaches to the relation between the Bible and ethics or between our ethical decision making and our exegetical work, cannot escape this because we are always already embedded in our historical situation from which we have inherited our prejudices which constitutes our horizon and from which we expand the horizon of the text into our own. In this process prejudices are legitimized and the answers to original questions are discovered. Hermeneutics, in justifying and working out the implications of the merging of two horizons, thus needs to work out how our prejudices are to be described and its implications for an ethics of Biblical interpretation.

#### 4. Hermeneutics and responsible moral action

This further development in hermeneutics includes the notion that hermeneutics has moved, from methodologies, to what would count as a fundamental attitude, which includes a shift toward responsible moral acts in which both principles and the context in which ethical decision making is taking place in, is taken seriously. In other words, moral assessment is about ‘practical wisdom’ in which we rely on principles but our decisions are always shaped by the realities of the concrete situation. It is different from other kinds of reasoning, that is, different from “... mathematical rationality (formal logic) and from a technical pragmatic reasoning (like that used in engineering).” (Miller, B 1995: 227) Only people can act ethically or not. In this sense texts are neutral. Until recently “Consideration of “the person I am” gave way to judgments which were either deontological (what is my duty, what are the rules that apply?) or teleological (what are the likely consequences of my proposed action?)” (Richardson, N 1994: 90)

Not only do we make ethical choices in an active sense, our critical judgments, but also, because we are historically situated, in a passive sense. Although the

principles by which we make ethical decisions are never left behind, a focus on character will stress the development of ‘good’ people which in turn will lead to the good of society. In other words, the development of the moral self and thus the ability to correctly processing moral decisions is seen as of utmost importance. In this sense then, moral decisions made, more than anything else, makes us aware of what we have already become, or confirming what we have become without realizing it. To put it in yet another way: what confronts us as ethical problems, and how we relate to a specific ethical problem is an outcome of the kind of person one is. The Christian, as moral agent, engages in his or her ethical decision making, from within his or her prejudices, for all understanding proceed ‘ontologically’ from one’s horizon of meaning, in terms of the kind of person he or she is or has become, in a moral sense.

As a Christian the moral agent is accountable to God, others and self. His or her ethical decision making happens in complex real-life situations, within a hierarchy and plurality of values and within this there is an ongoing dialogue of what is ‘right’ with others. In this sense, both the principles and consequences of one’s actions become all important. As a moral agent, one chooses, as a fundamental starting point, between principled convictions or intentions and responsibility which takes seriously the context in which one’s ethical decision making happens and the consequences of one’s ethical decision making. Not that principled convictions are without responsibility or responsibility without principled convictions but as a starting point one takes a fundamental attitude. This distinction, between responsibility and principled convictions as fundamental starting points, is crucial for Christian ethical decision making.

As opposed to an ethic of conviction which ‘strives to keep the flame of one’s convictions burning,’ regardless of the consequences and the different value spheres in which ethical decision making occurs, regardless of dialogue with

other value systems, a ‘downplay’ of the means employed to reach a certain goal, in other words, a disregard for the ‘hierarchical and pluralistic’ nature in which ethical decision making occurs, an ethics of responsibility takes seriously all of these as well as the chances of success within the context of a plurality of values which are often in conflict with one another.

Asking questions about character is to ask about the vocation of the Christian as ethical decision maker, for who we have become, in a moral sense, will determine whether we can exercise our vocation within society or not. The vocation of the Christian as ethical decision maker can only be had from within an ethic of responsibility, for one’s vocation can never be separated from the ‘institutional settings’ in which one finds oneself. But responsibility is not a new normative ethics, but rather a meta-ethic for we can ask: ‘How should responsibility qualify Christian ethics?’ In general, it would seem, that responsibility in Christian ethics, implies, “The ability to adapt, to show flexibility and to be thoughtful in ethical decisions ...,” (Villa–Vicencio, C 1994: 75) and the belief that “... ethics is more than the application of ethical rules in some bookish or casuistic manner. At the same time it acknowledges ... that ethical principles are formative, though not prescriptive, elements in decision–making.” (Villa – Vicencio, C 1994: 75)

## 5. Understanding and Performance

As a meta–critique, hermeneutics is asking questions about the fundamental basis of understanding, for hermeneutics is not just about rules for correct interpretation but must serve the understanding. Hermeneutics thus offers the interpreter new paradigms of what constitutes understanding. One such paradigm is that in Biblical interpretation there is always elements of both ‘conservatism’ and ‘relativism.’ It is conservative in that the interpreter always stand within the authority of a given tradition, and it leads to relativity in that “(e)ach application is right (or wrong) precisely for the given situation.” (Smith,

C 1991: 194) What has survived in the traditions has survived precisely because it has value for us today but tradition only speaks to us in its applications.

The distance between ancient texts and today is not something which is to be avoided but that which makes understanding possible. The tradition in which we stand is always the interpretation of that tradition within concrete situations. It has its validity only in its applications. The texts only exist in their application. Understanding is application. In other words, following Hans–George Gadamer, we understand differently, if we understand at all. We are thus moving from hermeneutics as based solely on methodological justified knowledge, and objective readings, for instance as in uncovering the author’s intent and then applying its original validity to today, toward understanding as that which is ‘integration.’ Not that we leave behind reconstruction, and methodology in our interpretation, for we cannot complete the task without these, but the locus for truth in biblical interpretation is found elsewhere.

“Better understanding should refer to a better understanding of the subject matter under discussion.” (Schmidt, L 2006: 97) And we are to “ ... develop anticipations that are conformable to the thing ...” (Grondin, J 2003: 84) Therefore the need for an ontological bias without neglecting methodology in interpretation or understanding. In biblical interpretation we cannot, therefore, separate object and subject. There is always a movement toward the object which is already part of the interpreter.

Understanding is what it means to be human. In this sense then, the ontological character of understanding is able to ‘speak into’ the epistemological questions asked about understanding and provides for corrective guidelines. When we come to a text we have already understood in some way and “... hence that any act of understanding commences with the fore–structures of understanding and interprets these as something.” (Schmidt, L 2006: 99) We have inherited from our traditions, to which we already always belong, our initial points of

departure. Our task is to work out these fore-structures in terms of the things themselves and not in terms of our own conceptions. The new way(s) in which the Bible speaks is never arbitrary for understanding is always a fusion of two horizons in which truth or true interpretation is an agreement, reached through conversation, of the matter or object under or of the conversation.

Truth does not depend on any kind of self-reference. Truth does not depend on the subjective reaction of the interpreter, although we can speak about inter-subjectivity. In this sense, this thesis is also able to address a major critique by those who hold to an objective hermeneutics, namely, that the liberation of prejudice will make for too subjective a reading and thus lead the interpreter into relativism. Truth is in the 'world' that comes to the fore in the conversation between text and interpreter and in this sense then one's prejudices come face to face with the prejudices in the texts and are thereby questioned.

Language is the object of the hermeneutical experience. In understanding something we have translated it into our own language. The hermeneutical task is to understand what a text is saying as opposed to a mere recreation of the text. If we always translate something into our own language it means that different interpreters in different historical times will have different expanded horizons. The correctness of a text, therefore, will be stated differently in different hermeneutical contexts. "There cannot, therefore, be any single interpretation that is correct "in itself."" (Schmidt, L 2006: 118) This is how interpretation 'works' for every language is a particular view of the world and there is no 'perfect' language. Thus we can say that all interpretation is speculative, for each 'performance' of the text is different yet it is the same subject matter.

## 6. The research problem, thesis and methodology

We can now begin to formulate the problem for Christian ethical decision making by observing, firstly, that **"... it is a travesty that the work of biblical**

**study and of ethics have been so often compartmentalized from one another in the life of the church.”** (Birch, B & Rasmussen, L 1989: 150)  
Secondly that in Christian ethical decision making there is a need for “...  
**reflect(ing) on the ethics of interpretation (so as) to reflect on what kinds of acts of interpretation are responsible in a number of senses,”** (Botha, J 1994: 42) and thirdly, that in reflecting on the ethics of interpretation, there is **a need for the interpreter to reflect on the prejudices which influences his or her ethical decision making in relation to a specific moral issue and, at the same time, his or her biblical interpretation, so as to determine whether or not the prejudices influencing him or her, lead to acts of interpretation which are responsible in a number of ways or senses.**

The problem can be studied thus: The constructing<sup>2</sup> of a model, as an ideal type, of Christian ethical decision making, in which the decision making, or process thereof, is influenced by ways in which responsibility should qualify Christian ethics. In this model or ideal type of Christian ethical decision making, the use of the Bible is influenced by prejudices which are conformable to the ways in which responsibility should qualify Christian ethics, that is, by ‘ways’ which influences the ethical decision making itself. The process of ethical decision making itself, being influenced by ways in which responsibility should qualify Christian ethics, thus is able to put forward those prejudices which lead to responsible use of the Bible in Christian ethical decision making. This is linked with the hermeneutical notion of prejudices being the link between past text and current interpreter. By doing so, it is able to give an answer to historical objectivism as hermeneutical principle. That is, it is able to provide a corrective to historical objectivism, with its prejudice against prejudices in the use of the Bible in Christian ethical decision making.

One can begin describing the thesis by noting that if the foundation of knowledge for Biblical interpretation, in other words, the question of historical

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<sup>2</sup> Die ‘daarstelling’ van ‘n model.

knowledge, is historical objectivism, then the interpreter "... fail to see how much situatedness affects the judgment of the 'observer.' (Selby, R 2006: 165) In other words, "(i)n relying on its critical method, historical objectivism conceals the fact that historical consciousness is itself situated in the web of historical effects." (Selby, R 2006: 165) The foundations for hermeneutical knowledge is thus not to be found in historical objectivism and its methodologies and approaches which makes for a final meaning valid for all times and under all circumstances, a kind of closure, but in the truth claim of an event, the merging of two horizons in which "(t)he text is, ... continually, being re-understood and re-presented and the horizon of the past moving with respect to each present." (Selby, R 2006: 107) And it is in this, the merging of two horizons that "(a) person who does not admit that he is dominated by prejudices will fail to see what manifests itself by their light." (Selby, R 2006: 166)

The thesis, therefore, is that, those approaches to the relation between the Bible and ethics or between Christian ethical decision making and exegetical methods, which take the author's or final redactor's intent or message as the final meaning, valid for all times and under all circumstances, followed by application, as in objective readings of the Bible, in which there is a denial of the role of prejudices in ethical decision making and thus also in biblical interpretation, or which holds to the prejudice against prejudices, cannot fulfill the criteria for 'ways' in which responsibility should qualify Christian ethics and therefore cannot lead to responsible use of the Bible in Christian ethical decision making. Those approaches to the relation between the Bible and ethics or between Christian ethical decision making and our exegetical work, which takes as a hermeneutical principle, prejudices as constituting, more than our critical judgements, the link between past text and present interpreter, in which interpretation is application, and each new situation is to understand the text in a new way, do fulfil the criteria for ways in which responsibility should qualify Christian ethics and thus lead to responsible use of the Bible in Christian ethical decision making.



It therefore seeks to correct those false understandings of the use of the Bible in Christian ethical decision making which embraces a "... hermeneutic which breathes the air of a Cartesian, Newtonian, Baconian inductive paradigm, an ideal of absolute, certain knowledge based on scientific premises and methodology. (which) As heirs of ... (the) enlightenment common sense tradition ... share a general optimism about the clarity of the text and our ability to approach it in a pure, laboratory-clean manner. ... (a) hermeneutic (which) remains dominated by a heavily objectivist, inductive, scientific paradigm." (Miller, B 1995: 215) It thus seeks to undo historical objectivism in biblical interpretation. It also, at the same time, seeks to overcome the criticism that allowing for prejudices to influence one's interpretation leads to relativism. Therefore the title: 'Undoing Closure' for the meaning of a text can never be 'closed,' or fixed. It is not to undo method, for without method we cannot proceed in interpretation, but to point to that which makes method possible in the first place.

This is a non-empirical study, based on relevant literature and following the methodology of an ideal type, in the constructing of a model of ways in which responsibility should qualify Christian ethical decision making. Within this model, as an ideal type, the use of the Bible as a source of moral norms in Christian ethical decision making is influenced by those prejudices which are conformable to the ways in which responsibility should qualify Christian ethics. This ideal type of Christian ethical decision making thus lead to responsible use of the Bible in Christian ethical decision making.

As an ideal type it gives us only a certain type of behaviour and its justification can only be had when it turns out that it really gives us a grip on the facts. In other words, it is an explanatory model, which is able to help us make sense of the facts, yet which is itself never perfectly realised and it is based on one's own value-orientated approach. An approach which entails the following two quotes:

“What actually existed was not an Idea of the Good relevant to all situations, but only good persons or good actions in many varying contexts. The proper aim in ethics was not to determine the nature of absolute virtue, but to be a virtuous person.” (Tarnas, R 1991: 66)

“All human understanding is interpretation, and no interpretation is final. The subject can never presume to transcend the manifold predispositions of his or her subjectivity. One can at best attempt a fusion of horizons, a never–complete rapprochement between subject and object.” (Tarnas, R 1991: 397)

To begin an investigation into this ethical issue, what is firstly given, is an introduction to and overview of the different approaches to the use of the Bible in Christian ethical decision making, and the different exegetical methods in use in modern day interpretation. It is precisely the plurality of, and conflict in, the use of the Bible in ethical decision making which lead to an ethics of interpretation. The hermeneutical work of K. Nürnberger and M. Gorman is used here for they have been able to explore and highlight the differences between the different approaches to the use of the Bible in Christian ethics.

This is followed by an investigation into ways in which responsibility should qualify Christian ethics. Here the ethical work of Etienne de Villiers and Max Weber is used as their work is able to show in what ways responsibility should qualify Christian ethics. The work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer is then introduced and used so as to describe the link between ways in which responsibility should qualify Christian ethics and the Gospel message or between Christianity and ethical decision making.

This is followed by the liberation of prejudices. It is shown how prejudices constitute the link between past text and current interpreter and the ethical

implications of this for Biblical interpretation. The work of Hans–Georg Gadamer is used fruitfully in this discussion for he, more than anyone else, has been able to show how prejudices influence the hermeneutical task and its implications for ethical decision making and thus also for an ethics of interpretation.

Having done the work of exploring the ways in which responsibility should qualify Christian ethics and establishing prejudices as the link between past text and current interpreter, what follows is an investigation into and the constructing of an ideal type of Christian ethical decision making in which the work done previously, is used to show how the Bible is used responsibly in Christian ethical decision making. The model of ethical decision making developed by H. E. Tödt is used here as an ideal type.

Lastly then is given a brief overview of the debate on same-sex civil unions and responsible use of the Bible, in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa.

#### 7. On the possibility of the task at hand

Is it not the nature of prejudices to not be known? That it is something one is blind to precisely because without it one can see nothing at all? “Prejudices are inherited during acculturation and especially in learning a language.” (Schmidt, L 1995: 73) In this way they “... form one’s horizon of possible meaning.” (Schmidt, L 1995: 73) They play a role in the process of understanding. “Whatever is to be examined is initially grasped by one’s pre–understanding.” (Schmidt, L 1995: 73) They are legitimate, arguably, when they are grounded in the thing that is being examined itself, in the presentation of that which is being examined, the world that comes to the fore in the presentation, in the content of what is presented, and not in any of one’s own fancies or what is popular. This, whether they are legitimate or not, can be achieved by facing one prejudice with another. However, “... reflective consciousness cannot transcend its own

position in history. It is unable to escape from the influence of its horizon of prejudices to some absolute horizon of meaning. ... therefore, one is unable to discover and justify a historically independent truth.” (Schmidt, L 1995: 73)  
What one is thus able to do is to compare and justify prejudices but what one is not able to do is to establish ‘truth’ outside of a historical situatedness.

The nature of prejudices is thus that it is unknowable in the sense that it operates unconsciously in one’s life, it is the taken for granted meanings. It becomes knowable when the moral agent does not try to do what he or she is not able to do, that is, establishing truth outside of a historical situatedness, but rather engage in historical horizon as a hermeneutical principle and thus is thereby able to become aware of those prejudices operational in one’s own historical situatedness in the ‘coming to the text.’ In this sense it becomes that which is known and can be compared to other prejudices.

## Chapter 1

### Plurality and Conflict

#### 1. Introduction

Approaches to the use of the Bible in Christian ethical decision making refers to the different approaches used in working out the relation between the Bible and Christian ethical decision making. Exegesis refers to the different exegetical methods employed by interpreters so as to determine the text's intention or meaning in its original setting and its application for today. Hermeneutics, as understood in this thesis, enfolds both the relation between the Bible and Christian ethics, and the relation between the text's meaning and its application, and more: it is concerned with what it means to understand, in other words, with both the epistemological and ontological aspects of understanding, in relation to the understanding of texts from the past, which at the same time raises ethical implications for biblical interpretation and the relation between biblical interpretation and a specific moral issue.

One of the reasons for the plurality in the use of the Bible is that a shift has taken place in the ethics of interpretation. Although it can be said that this shift, from the “... presupposition ... that ethics is rooted in an irreducible ‘ought,’ to a goal-oriented and transformative ethic of political responsibility,” (Botha, J 1994: 42) contributes to the plurality of the use of the Bible in Christian ethical decision making, it would seem that this plurality also has to do with, or would also depend on, one's “... theory of understanding or a theory about what knowledge itself is.” (Schmidt, L 1995: 6). The plurality of the use of the Bible thus turns to epistemological questions and answers or philosophical reflections on different kinds of knowledge. Can knowledge only be had in one way? Is method, scientific or social, the only way to knowledge so that one only has to find the ‘perfect’ or most relevant methodology for understanding texts and the issue would be resolved? To put it differently, in anticipation of what is to

follow, is truth in interpretation located in a reconstruction of the original author's intentions or creative act as in an 'objective' reading, of the Bible in which one's prejudices have been overcome? Or is it located somewhere else, without leading the interpreter into subjectivism which is a form of relativism.

## 2. Approaches to the use of the Bible in Christian ethical decision making.

We can assume that all Christians use the Bible in their ethical decision making. Whether we read the Scriptures more 'literally' or more 'loosely,' we look to the Bible for moral guidance. The problem is how we can hope to understand the Bible's relevance to the moral life when those using Scripture arrive at different positions. It would seem that all kinds of problems arise when we try to develop a rationale for the use of the Bible in ethical decision making. Not the least of which is the nature of the Bible itself. The Bible being a "... collection of books, consisting of two testaments, each with its own long and complicated history. It came into existence during a period of more or less one thousand four hundred years. It was written by different communities living in places such as modern-day Palestine and Israel, Turkey, Rome and Iran. Different ancient Near Eastern cultures, and the Hellenistic and Roman cultures as well, all produced parts of the Bible." (Botha, J 1994: 38) Given this nature and its development all kinds of moral and ethical directions are found in the Bible. In trying to relate the Bible to modern day ethical issues we are to imagine the 'moral world' in which the Bible came to be. It is like trying to unravel a 'foreign language.' In order to do this we certainly have to investigate the historical and grammatical backgrounds. In this sense we need to enter into the world of the Bible so as to determine the meaning of texts. The problem, however, is, what place do we give to this historical-critical investigation in the hermeneutical task as a whole? On what foundations must the relation between the Bible and ethics rest? It would seem that, in line with Christian ethics in general, there has been a shift in

recent decades which can be seen, or understood, as a decrease in the legitimacy of the prescriptive use of the Bible, and with this decline, at the same time, an increase in the descriptive use of the Bible in Christian ethical decision making.

There are, basically, four approaches to the use of the Bible. The first approach is an approach which takes, for example, the New Testament as a book of laws or codes for human conduct. God has given us, in and through the Bible prescriptive laws and all the interpreter needs to do if she or he wants to know what is the right thing to do is to objectively read or refer to these laws, in the form of commandments or ordinances. Objectively, for these laws stand objectively before the interpreter or ethical agent. One can argue that such an approach is valid because it certainly is true that the writers of, for example the New Testament, do not employ suggestions but are rather prescriptive in their approach to ethical issues. In this way God's divine will is that which is objectively knowable and normative for all human activity.

What are some of the problems inherent in this approach? In such an approach what will eventually be required is that it is to be accompanied by a system of written interpretations in order to understand them for each new situation. The New Testament, for example, also portrays the Christian life as more than regulated behaviour. It is much more than just the control of immoral behaviour. The Gospel calls forth a response in terms of relationships rather than regulated behavior. What often happens is that the accompanying rules for application takes on an authority of its own and takes precedence. Codefied laws are often outdated and have nothing to say to issues which are not directly addressed in the Bible. What specific does the Bible, in the form of law or commandment, have to say about, for example, collective bargaining?

A second approach takes seriously the universal principles which underlies all biblical witnesses. What is binding is the universal principles behind Biblical statements.

Although the Bible speaks about laws for different situations the principles behind those laws are fixed precisely because they are universal in nature. What then remains is for the interpreter to apply those principles with a specific situation in mind. One problem with this approach is that the universal principles can also be had from, for instance, universal philosophical principles, turning theology into philosophy. Natural law can thus take precedence and human reason becomes the guide to what is normative.

A third approach takes as its starting point a free encounter between God and interpreter through God's Spirit as she or he reads Scripture and in this way God is able to give to the interpreter some kind of ethical direction. The descriptive force through laws or principles is exchanged with God self who gives direction to what is good for a particular situation. The interpreter needs to be obedient to the outcome of this encounter with God. The problem with such an approach is that it can lead to subjectivism and is thus too individualistic. Another problem is that it tends to exclude all external criteria in deciding what is the right thing to do.

The fourth approach, leading on from the previous one in its opposition to prescriptive laws and principles, emphasises the individual's response to the situation which is being confronted. This is to say that there is an emphasis on understanding the situation by getting all the facts and then ask what the most loving thing to do would be within the specific situation. In this way, for instance, although love can be seen as a principle, it does not insist on any predefinition for what kind of action is to follow, as each situation requires love to be applied differently. Laws and principles in the Bible are thus treated as 'advice' and not in a prescriptive sense, it could be 'set aside' if love so required. The problem however is that love can be defined differently in different situations. It also ignores the fact that people will not always act lovingly.



As will be shown later on, on both epistemological and linguistic (ontological) grounds, there cannot be objectivity and certainty in knowledge. That is, "... all dreams of absolute certainty based upon objective knowledge ... (are) castles in the air." (Selby, R 2006: 221) Does this then mean that every possibility of knowledge, in which there is always a claim to truth, is gone? What then is the foundation/s for knowledge and truth claims in the relation between the Bible and ethics as the interpreter is often faced with a choice between "... pre-critical closure and a post-modern unlimited pluralism of readings"? (Selby, R 2006: 222)

### 3. Exegetical methods as hermeneutical tools for relating past text to current interpreter

It is not the aim of this dissertation to "... deny the necessity of methodical work, ..." (Foster, M 1991: 51) but to ultimately aim for differences in the objectives of knowledge as it relates to the use of the Bible in Christian ethical decision making. It is about what is involved in all understanding. That is, that which makes methodical work possible in the first place. In other words, what is being aimed for is "... an orientation which brings together both methodological access to our world and the conditions of our social life..." (Foster, M 1991: 56)

Exegetical methods and approaches have to do with those 'learnable crafts and skills,' so essential for our communal life. It is in this sense that the hermeneutical task is understood today but is it not rather the case that "... application is more than a methodological instrument,"? (Foster, M 1991: 66) Hermeneutics is always about application; this concretisation of the general, and this application, or the application of rules can never be done by rules. We can only act wisely or not, something that can only be done by the person him or her self, not by mere rules or method, in specific situations and this is the difference between a hermeneutics which favours rules for correct understanding and a hermeneutics which favours a correct 'understanding' of understanding or an

ontological bias. As technical crafts and skills we can adopt and adapt and apply and reapply our methods and approaches, we can be like a craftsperson who can work at making things better or do things better, yet it will not lead us to the heart of the hermeneutical matter or truth in interpretation. It will only take us there some of the way. But it is necessary for we need that ‘some of the way.’

It would seem that exegetes are, more or less, in agreement on the appropriate tools used in Biblical interpretation, that is, exegetical methods and approaches may differ to varying degrees, but there is an agreement that “Exegesis may be defined as the careful historical, literary, and theological analysis of a text.” (Gorman, M 2001: 8) Exegesis is an investigation of the many different dimensions of a text. Exegesis is also a conversation in which the interpreter listens to how the text has been understood over time and how others today would understand the text. Exegesis is also an art for it implies, over and above one’s method, intuition, sensitivity and imagination. Exegesis can also be seen as that which is “... concerned with the process by which one understands a text and by which one is able to tell what one has understood.” (Deist, F & Burden J 1989: 1) The task is to find those methods and approaches that can be used as tools for interpretation, as a ‘technical help,’ which are conformable to a ‘correct understanding’ of understanding and thus truth in the hermeneutical task in Christian ethical decision making. A correct understanding of understanding entails the hermeneutical notion that prejudices constitute the link between past text and current interpreter. The correct relation would be to say that Biblical interpretation starts with prejudices and ends with method but because prejudices can only be critiqued at the end of the investigation it is therefore necessary to begin with the different exegetical methods as tools for interpretation.

### 3.1. Synchronic, diachronic and existential readings

To begin to understand the exegetical task in Christian ethical decision making one can begin by defining the different methods in terms of: a synchronic, diachronic, and existential, reading of the Bible. A synchronic approach to the exegetical task focuses on the text as it stands in the Bible. The final text, as it stands, is analysed in relation to the world in which it exists. This approach is often described as: narrative–critical, semantic or discourse analysis, literary–criticism, social–scientific or socio–rhetorical, in which it seeks to “... integrate the ways people use language with the ways they live in the world.” (Gorman, M 2001: 12) As it focuses on the final text itself in relation to its world it does not seek to understand the oral history of the text nor its written sources.

“A synchronic approach to the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7) might ask questions such as the following: What are the various sections of the Sermon, and how do they fit together to make a literary whole? What does the narrator of this gospel communicate by indicating the setting of the Sermon, the composition of the audience before and after the Sermon, and the audience’s reaction to it? What is the function of the Sermon in the Gospel’s portrayal of Jesus and of discipleship? How would a first–century reader understand and be affected by this Sermon?” (Gorman, M 2001: 14) The following aspects of the text are considered: The topic and theme of the text, its structure and unity, its genre and the life situation implied by the text and also, one can add, the beauty or artistic value of the text.

But exegetes not only make use of a synchronic approach; often elements of a diachronic approach is used. A diachronic or historical–critical approach, more or less, “...focuses on the origin and development of a text, employing methods designed to uncover these aspects of it.” (Gorman, M 2001: 15) Included in this approach are the following: “textual criticism – the quest for the original

wording of the text (and the ways later scribes altered it). Historical linguistics – the quest to understand words, idioms, grammatical forms, and the relationships among these items, often with attention to their historical development within a language. Form criticism – the quest for the original type of oral or written tradition reflected in the text, and for determining out of what sort of situation such a tradition might have developed. Tradition criticism – the quest for understanding the growth of a tradition over time from its original form to its incorporation in the final text. Source criticism – the quest for the written sources used in the text. Redaction criticism – the quest for perceiving the ways in which the final author of the text purposefully adopted and adapted sources, (and) historical criticism – the quest for the events that surrounded the production of the text, including the purported events narrated by the text itself.” (Gorman, M 2001: 16)

Of the Sermon on the Mount one can then ask the following questions: What sources, oral and written, did the writer used, adopted and adapted in order to compose the Sermon? What are the different elements of the Sermon? What are the theological interests of the author? To what extent do the teachings of the Sermon reflect the ideas or words of the historical Jesus? Although exegetes may differ as to what approach is to be used more fruitfully, it often is the case that exegetes incorporate into their exegetical work a combination of both approaches. In other words, there is some overlapping taking place in the different approaches. The two approaches can be seen as approaches which are interested in the text itself, or the world within the text and the world behind the text respectively.

A third approach can be seen as an existential approach in that what exegetes are primarily interested in are readings which allow the texts to be read as means to an end. This kind of reading is self-involving for the text is not being treated as a historical or literary artifact but as something which is engaged in experientially. In other words, the reading goes to a reality beyond the text which

affects the reader's lives. In this way, this is a 'before the text' reading. The goal is transformation, whether that of the individual or community. The reading is thus started from within one's situation, for example, that of being poor. It employs the following: "Canonical criticism – exegesis is done in the context of the Bible as a whole, theological exegesis and spiritual reading – exegesis is done in the context of a specific religious tradition and for religious purposes, embodiment or actualization – exegesis is done in the context of attempting to appropriate and embody the text in the world, advocacy criticism, liberationist exegesis, and ideological criticism – exegesis is done in the context of the struggle for justice or liberation." (Gorman, M 2001: 19)

The following questions may be asked of the Sermon on the Mount: To what kind of faith and practice for today does the Sermon call us to? If we look at the text about 'turning the other cheek' how might that text be a source for conflict or injustice in society? Can we say that love of enemies rule out any or all kinds of violence or resistance to unjust social systems? In existential readings of the Bible the ultimate goal is always something like transformation or liberation or an encounter with God.

Although more detailed work is available on opting for one or the other approach to the exclusion of the other, often it is rather the case that exegetes use more than one approach in an eclectic way. That is, in many different combinations. It has to be noted however that this does not mean that it is possible for the interpreter to choose any method and use in it conjunction with any other method, for some methods and approaches are mutually incompatible. Nor does it mean that the interpreter can say "Anything goes!" (for) ... the best endeavours of the scholar ... are regulated by a different maxim: "Only the truth goes." (Deist, F & Burden, J 1989: 127)

### 3.2. Reading 'in,' 'behind,' 'before,' 'below,' and 'above,' the text

What exegetes are dealing with are: What is 'in the text,' 'behind the text,' 'above the text,' 'before the text,' and 'below the text.' The 'behind the text' approach is an investigation into how the text came to be. "If God spoke to these ancient preachers, authors and editors, what was it that they originally wanted to say?" (Nürnberger, K 2004: 29) We are dealing here with the cultural and religious contexts of the early faith communities. A 'before the text' reading focuses not so much on "... the historical situation of the author, but on the present situation of the reader." (Nürnberger, K 2004: 32) 'Above the text' reading is a way to bring to the text a meaning derived from somewhere else, for instance, reading the text through one's 'doctrinal lenses,' or through "... some kind of conception of what the Christian faith is all about." (Nürnberger, K 2004: 33) "In the text' reading makes for an approach which says that the Bible is that which can and must speak for itself. This is to say it is then inappropriate to impose on the text our doctrines and other meanings.

A 'below the text' reading takes seriously the notion that God revealed God self in and through historical events which are always in flux. There is an undercurrent of meaning we find in the Biblical witness and this meaning is which speaks to us today in changing circumstances. When looked at from this viewpoint, it would seem, that the different positions related to the debate on same-sex civil unions, do so by reading either "... in the text, because that is where we find the witness to God's redemptive intentions; ... (or) go beyond the text to see how its particular message has emerged and evolved in history; ... (or) become aware of our situation before we read the text, because we want to hear what God's Word wants to tell us today. ... (or) move above the text to discern the whole of God's purposes. (or)... follow the dynamic vision of God's redemptive intentions which moves ... below the texts," (Nürnberger, K 2004: 38) or make use of a combination of these approaches.

Interpreters or hermeneutically trained minds have been able to develop sophisticated models in all of the different approaches or traditions, in order to get to the ‘truth’ of texts. In the ‘behind the text’ reading the interpreter seeks to go back to the ‘then and there’ of the text. This is, as was stated, mostly the historical–critical method of interpreting Biblical text. Some of the assumptions and prejudices guiding this kind of interpretation are: that the locus for truth is in the message as it was first intended. This first intention is located in the contexts in which it originated in. In this way it is assumed that revelation, God’s disclosure of God’s will for humankind, is contained within this first intention. That disclosure is then valid for all times. All that hermeneutical rules must do is to uncover this original message and so uncover its meaning for today. It is however not clear why God should “... reveal himself to a particular group of people during a particular time and in a particular situation – and not to others, not elsewhere, not before, and never again?” (Nürnberger, K 2004: 30) Is it then not possible that God can reveal God self to those living today? It is clear that the original authors and redactors were not, primarily, interested in putting the biblical material in a historical sequence. Although we can show that the Bible is also a historical book, their agendas were different and should we therefore not rather uncover these agendas? If we hold that God revealed God self only to an ancient people in a particular place and time and thereby the Bible is now ‘closed,’ how can it then speak into our current situations?

Thus it would seem, interpreters can be no more than “... experts in historical research, while becoming estranged from contemporary battles of life.” (Nürnberger, K 2004: 31) It is however, in spite of the objections raised, necessary to say that the Word of God is given to us in and through historical events. In this sense then, exegesis cannot escape its historical–critical task.

‘Before the text’ reading does not require of the interpreter to critically analyse the text’s historical situation but focuses on the present situation of the interpreter. Revelation, in other words, happens here and now. “The text is used

like a mirror in which the readers discover themselves, their problems and their tasks.” (Nürnberg, K 2004: 32) In this way the needs and concerns of the individual or the community is known before reading the Bible and those needs or concerns then determines the message of the text. In this way the original or first message of the text is being ignored and exchanged with a message which fits the current situation. This kind of reading also often leads to a literal reading of the Bible and a ‘straight-forward’ or direct application to today.

When the meaning of the text is being imposed on the text through some kind of conception of what Christianity is about and its doctrines, we have a ‘above the text’ reading. Often then any kind of reading which is not in line with a certain tradition’s confessions or doctrines are rejected. In this way the intended or first meaning of the text can be completely ignored by imposing on it some ‘additional’ meaning. With ‘in the text’ reading which wants to take the text as it stands the interpreter seeks to understand the text without its historical or literary contexts. The Word of God must speak for itself, without the interpreter adding on any doctrine, or assumptions, or notions of what the message must be or one’s own situation. Only texts can interpret each other. There is a focus on the Bible as canon or authority. In this approach we cannot critique the original authors or first messages. “... what we hear God saying.” (Nürnberg, K 2004: 35) is what is important. In this way what stands in the Bible cannot be critiqued because everything in the Bible is equally valid and nothing can be disputed, for instance, slavery. The different aspects of the Bible are being harmonised so as to safeguard the Bible’s eternal truths. There is, in other words, a neglect of the change in contexts in which different texts came into being and therefore the Bible, has a certain ‘timelessness’ to it. The problem with this approach is that what happened before and after the text is of no consequence.

The Word of God can thus not speak into changing situations. One can say about the different exegetical methods: “Some want to get behind the text to see how it came into being. They assume that revelation happened long ago when



the Bible was written. Some use the text as a mirror for their lives and for their world. They assume that revelation happens here and now. Some are geared to the doctrines of the Church and read the Bible through those spectacles. Some believe that the Bible has emancipated itself from its historical origins and speaks to us as it stands today.” (Nürnbergger, K 2004: 39) But a further approach, a ‘below the text reading’ can be added, in which the starting point is that God has revealed God self in and through changing processes which implies that “Running below each text, as it were, is an undercurrent of meaning to which the text bears witness.” (Nürnbergger, K 2004: 37) The text was never the first word God spoke on the subject matter nor was it the last. In other words, identifying these undercurrents in its applications make it possible for the subject matter of the text, the ‘old,’ to speak anew in each new situation. “After having looked at the messages that the biblical authors came up with for their own situations, we have to come up with the messages we owe to our contemporaries in their own situations, on the basis of the biblical witness.” (Nürnbergger, K 2004: 38)

It would seem, that in one way or the other, depending on one’s method or approach, the following elements of exegesis are employed to a greater or lesser degree: A contextual analysis in which there is a consideration of the historical and literary contexts of the texts, a formal analysis in which the form and structure of the texts are investigated, a detailed analysis of the various parts of the texts in relation to the whole, and application of the texts for today. What is thus needed for exegesis are: Background knowledge, language proficiency, understanding of literary codes, and knowledge of contexts, those of the speaker or writer, those of the hearer or listener and those of the exegete.

When dealing with exegesis we can ask whether all methods of exegesis are equally valid for interpretation. In this sense we can note that our methods of and approaches to the use of the Bible in ethics can be checked “... against the various events that take place within the process of understanding.” (Deist, F &

Burden, J 1989: 127) In exploring the different approaches to the relation between the Bible and ethics and the different exegetical methods, available to the interpreter today, it has become clear that it is not a straight-forward issue. Within an ethic of interpretation, located within the wider issue of an ethical dilemma confronting the Church, and one can add, based on the epistemological and ontological character of texts and understanding, there is a "... very strong argument against the celebration of indefinite plurality of interpretation," (Selby, R 2006: 241) for in reading texts there is a concern with the ethical behaviour within the text itself, the effects of the results of interpretation on individuals whose own behaviour are modified and the responsibility of readers to the text.

There is thus a need to tests one's criteria for interpretation within the widest possible debates. Part of this testing is precisely "... the recognition of presuppositions .... and the way the ensuing exegesis affects other .... readers." (Selby, R 2006: 243) It is clear in biblical interpretation that "... exposition without a norm is problematic – all exegesis treads a fine line with eisegesis." (Selby, R 2006: 150) On epistemological and ontological grounds it can be shown that the meaning of a text goes beyond its author. It is, that understanding is "... not merely reproductive but always a productive activity ..." (Selby, R 2006: 144)

#### 4. Text and understanding

Understanding then can never be a mere reproduction of the text but is rather an application of the text to the present interpreter's situation which makes for the production of the meaning of a text. Biblical interpretation thus consists of three basic elements: the first element is those historical-critical methods which are able to provide some kind of overview of what the text point to. The next element is to gain a deeper insight into the subject matter of the text. For this some element in the retrieval of authorial intention is necessary but it goes further than that for there is a truth-claim of the text in respect of the subject

matter. The interpreter already have some fore-knowledge of the subject matter, and can only 'view' the subject matter from the standpoint of what he or she already knows about the subject matter. In this sense, the current interpreter 'knows more' than the author and the questions asked of the text will be based on this 'more.' This more is based on the context from within which the interpreter does his or her interpretative work and thus his or her ethical work in relation to his or her Biblical interpretation. A third element is to return to the first element, the historical work, with this new insight into the subject matter and thus a critical view on the work done in the first element. This means that in Biblical interpretation, there is "... the to-and-fro type of process which allows one's first ideas to be shattered and corrected by the text, leading to ever new readings ..." (Selby, R 2006: 153)

It has already been noted that the interpretative process cannot by-pass its historical-critical task. This is because the Word of God is given to us in and through historical events. We can thus ask: what is the importance of historical-critical work in Biblical interpretation? This historical-critical work includes source-criticism, redaction-criticism and form-criticism. From the start we can say that as we seek to understand the present, "... we naturally look to the past for bearings. At the same time, we constantly revise our understanding of the past in light of current developments, understandings, and attitudes." (Miller, J 1999: 18) Historical-criticism is a search for what 'really happened' and in this, the Bible presents to us a history. In other words, the Biblical authors "... were very conscious of history, and the Bible itself may be looked upon as largely historical in format and content." (Miller, J 1999: 20)

In dealing with the Bible as historical book we can thus note that "... Genesis through 2 Kings, present a narrative account of people and events that extend from creation to the end of the Judean monarchy. Another sequence of books, 1-2 Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemia, presents an overlapping account that begins with Adam and concludes with Nehemiah's activities in Jerusalem under Persian

rule. The so-called prophetic books (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, etc.) make numerous references to national and international circumstances. ... The Gospel of Luke dates Jesus' birth in relation to Roman history,... and all four of the gospels narrate episodes in Jesus' ministry in what the reader is left to suppose is essentially chronological sequence. The book of Acts describes the emergence of Christianity from the immediate aftermath of Jesus' crucifixion to Paul's arrival in Rome for trial." (Miller, J 1999: 29) It can thus be said that the very existence of the Bible, points us to (a) history.

If the Bible can be seen as that which points us to (a) history then we cannot bypass that history, for it is precisely in uncovering that history that we find our bearings for today. Yet, at the same time it is also the case that in uncovering that history, in other words, God's acts in dealing with humanity, or a specific people at a specific time, that we discover, that the 'uncovering' says as much about that history as it says about the current historian. Is it not the case that "(t)he historian's own presuppositions, ideology, and attitudes inevitably influences his or her research and reporting"? (Miller, J 1999: 18)

## Chapter two

### Christian ethics and responsibility

#### 1. Introduction

Responsibility sets itself up as a meta-ethic in that “... the symbol of responsibility links contemporary patterns of meaning and current notions of motivation in a general model of what moral action means today,” (Stone, R 1999: 7) and it denotes responsibility “... as an approach to contemporary problems that any ethics should take if it wants to be adequate.” (De Villiers, D 2007: 107) It is to say: Christians have the responsibility to act in such and such a way within the unavailability of value conflict and the ethical problem of how to act upon values. It thus includes the clarification of the principles of ethical argument. The question that has to be answered is: ‘In what ‘ways’ is responsibility to qualify Christian ethics?’ What is at stake here is the realization of values where there is “... irreconcilable conflict among the individual value levels and the different value spheres.” (Weber, M 1979: 78)

#### 2. Ways in which responsibility should qualify Christian ethical decision making.

In order to begin the investigation we can take note of a contemporary understanding of responsibility as a meta-ethic. In his article: ‘Prospects of a Christian ethics of responsibility (part 2): an assessment of three German versions’, D E de Villiers (De Villiers, D 2007) has given us a summary, yet not a final say, on how responsibility can qualify Christian ethical decision making. He comes to the following conclusion of five ways in which responsibility should qualify Christian ethics today: “Christians should not regard their moral obligations as narrow and very specific moral commands or duties that they have to fulfill in obedience to God, but rather as broad and comprehensive moral responsibilities that they have to assume and to give account of to themselves,

fellow human beings and God. They have the responsibility to contribute to the constitution of moral obligations in our time, which entails the responsibility to formulate new moral directives where necessary, find the moral consensus needed in particular situations of moral decision making, as well as the responsibility to conclude agreements or covenants among those involved to commit themselves to act in accordance with the moral consensus, where such a commitment is lacking. They have the responsibility to do justice to both moral obligations and the functional obligations that are prevalent in the different social systems without forfeiting the priority of moral obligations. They also have the responsibility in the present situation, earmarked by moral plurality, to take into account the consequences of the available options for action, especially their effect on the freedom of conscience of people who do not share their moral convictions. The responsibility to take the consequences of available options for action into account also relates to the consequences such action would have for the preservation of the environment and for the survival and quality of life of future generations.” (De Villiers, D 2007: 106)

### 2.1. The contributions of Huber, Fischer and Körtner

The three German versions referred to were developed by: Wolfgang Huber, Johannes Fischer and Ulrich Körtner. All three have developed their respective ethics of responsibility in response to the ethics of responsibility developed by Hans Jonas in which responsibility is seen as a normative principle and a one-sided future ethics. In response then to Jonas the three German versions “... do not make an imperative of responsibility, ... do not conceive an ethics of responsibility as an exclusive future ethics and do not try to find a universally recognised foundation for it.” (De Villiers, D 2007: 89) Taken together, some of the views of the three German versions, so-called because they were all published in German, can help to identify ways in which responsibility can qualify Christian ethics and to understand how De Villiers came to his conclusion.

Wolfgang Huber identifies four characteristics of an ethics of responsibility; Its foundations is to be found in a relational anthropology in which all “... theological ethics of responsibility rely on a relational rather than a substantialist anthropology.” (De Villiers, D 2007: 91) One of the more prominent representatives of such an approach is Dietrich Bonhoeffer. We are responsible for and have a responsibility to. We are responsible **to** God, and our responsibility **for** includes pre-care. He also recognises that in Christian ethics there is a need for a correspondence to reality. There is thus in Christian ethics the need for the reality of the real world and for the reality of God. Within these parameters it is understood as an ethics which is able to work from within an incarnational theology. This implies that the Christian as ethical decision maker continues to participate in finding criteria for what it means to be human within the historical character of society or world. It is further proposed that such an ethics of responsibility is teleological. In this way “... the distinction between eschatology and teleology should, however, be taken seriously.” (De Villiers, D 2007: 92) This means that the finitude of human existence and actions should be acknowledged in relation to the eschaton which can only be brought about by God. A further condition is that principles in Christian ethics be used in a reflexive manner. Within a plurality of values one has to relate or use one’s principles in a reflexive way in relation to the principles of others. In this way it is then important to take the freedom of conscience of the other into account. Also included is the consequences of one’s principles if applied.

According to Fischer what is new in ethics today is that it is not our task so much to discover our moral responsibility but rather our task is to create moral responsibility with others. In this way ethics has moved into the realm of community. This means that rather than to “... ground moral responsibility objectively in human nature or the nature of the world it should rather endorse the search for that which we should make each other responsible for and contribute constructively to the societal process of restoring moral responsibility” (De Villiers, D 2007: 95) He based his understanding on an

ethics of action which has its roots in the Judeo–Christian tradition in which it is held that we are responsible to God. The question, concerning the good, guiding this ethics is “What is the trans–subjective good that determines our lives, the ‘spirit’ from which we live and in which we communicate with each other?” (De Villiers, D 2007: 93) An ethics of action is related to the sense in which we give account of ourselves to, and can, therefore, be conceptualised as an ethics of responsibility.

Körtner also states that we are, in the first instance, responsible to God. An ethics of conviction holds ethical decision making in terms of the moral agent’s duty and autonomous acts. An ethics of responsibility, however, characterises the moral situation in a forensic sense. This means that the following questions become important; “who is the responsible agent, who (or what) is the instance holding the agent responsible, and what is the sphere in which the agent is held responsible?” (De Villiers, D 2007: 96) The theological point is that there is a recognition of the person by God. The view is that the sinner has been justified by God and therefore this can be used as the trans–subjective point of reference. If this is acknowledged then our moral actions have to be measured in terms of this recognition of God. It also says that responsibility is not based on principles which are accepted by everyone but precisely on the participation in seeking to find answers mutually.

Responsibility is also used as a force for integration in that it holds together a theory of values, a theory of duties and a theory of virtues. All three are integral parts of Christian ethics.

## 2.2. From obedience to responsibility

Although there are differences between these three German versions it becomes possible to identify the different ways in which responsibility should qualify Christian ethics. The conclusion drawn for an ethics of responsibility starts with



the observation according to Körtner, that "... the concept of responsibility, ..., reflects a change in the fundamental understanding of morality." (De Villiers, D 2007: 104) This change is a move from the moral agent having to obey specific duties as set out or promulgated by a lawmaker, toward giving account of one's actions and their consequences to an instance which holds one accountable. In this way one can then say that "... the fundamental moral situation entails more than just giving account before God or another instance of what one has done in the past. The fundamental moral situation consists also of the constitution of the relevant moral directive(s), the personal assumption of the moral directive(s) as one's own obligation and the application of this (these) moral directive(s) in real-life situations." (De Villiers, D 2007: 105)

The conclusion is thus drawn that for Christians the fundamental moral situation does not so much consist in "1. receiving God's command; 2. obeying God's command; and 3. giving account to God of their obedience or lack of obedience. It rather consists in taking on the comprehensive task of: 1. constituting moral obligation by finding consensus on the relevant moral directives, formulating new moral directives where relevant ones are lacking, balancing moral and functional directives and weighing up the consequences of options for action; 2. making ethical decisions and acting in accordance with them in real-life situations; and 3. giving account to oneself, to other people and to God of this comprehensive responsibility." (De Villiers, D 2007: 106)

From this work then is drawn the above mentioned five ways in which responsibility should qualify Christian ethics today. It is thus clear from the article that responsibility can be used as a critique of not only consequences but also the principles used for ethical decision making related to the construction of co-determined values for (a) society. It is also clear that ethics is more "... than the application of ethical rules in some bookish or casuistic manner." (Villa-Vicencio, C 1994: 75) Overall it would seem that responsibility as a meta-ethic accepts that the actual situation or value contexts are just as important as the

moral norms on which one draws in ethical decision making. This is not a denial of ethical principles, but such principles are only to be had in a formative, not a prescriptive sense. In this way responsibility also takes seriously the notion that often one has to do things for the ‘right’ reasons and in this way it is often demanded of the moral agent to ‘put aside’ certain ethical principles or convictions. This does not mean that the moral agent is without any principles but precisely because the situation demands the right thing to be done, there is a shift in one’s principles. This shift recognises that “... we are constantly required to seek to be obedient to higher values at the expense of what, in a given situation, may be regarded as lower values.” (Villa–Vicencio, C 1994: 86)

Responsibility is a shift toward dialogue between different value spheres so as to establish the kind of society or community in which the interpreter wishes to live in and therefore the values which will constitute one’s ethical decision making. In other words, responsibility takes seriously the notion that the moral agent’s ethical decision making is always happening within a hierarchy of values and norms. Ethical rules, in this sense, can be helpful, but the question is whether they always lead to responsible action or not in any given situation. De Villiers ends his article by noting that “Special attention should, in my opinion, be given to Max Weber’s original distinction between an ethics of conviction and an ethics of responsibility ...” (De Villiers, D 2007: 107) for Weber was able to make known some of the features of an ethics of responsibility as a meta–ethic.

### 3. Introducing Max Weber

In a narrower sense Weber speaks about personality “... in an ethical sense, defining it in terms of the consistency of its inner relationship to certain ultimate values and meanings of life, which are turned into purposes and thus into teleologically rational action.” (Weber, M 1979: 73) This narrower sense does not stand alone for he “... comprehends personality as the consequence of a

behavioral typification, which results from the character of the value system and the manner in which persons are socialized.” (Weber, M 1979: 73) But Weber also speaks about vocation and it is to this that we have to turn to first, for an understanding of responsibility in Christian ethics. Wherein does the vocation of Christian ethical decision making consists? Or to put it differently: What is the meaning of Christian ethical decision making?

### 3.1. Ethical decision making and vocation

“... only he has a vocation who serves a cause and makes the cause he serves his own, who finds it personally meaningful and is passionately devoted to it.” (Weber, M 1979: 100) In a political context we may speak of the “... civil servant (who) must find personal meaning in a socially recognized purpose, whereas the politician must find social acceptance for what is meaningful to him.” (Weber, M 1979: 100) What is of importance here is that the ‘role responsibility’ of the different personalities’ can only be achieved in different settings or contexts. In other words, different principles of responsibility operates in the different spheres because the different spheres operates with different means. Politics operates with the means of power which is backed up by the use of violence. The means to an end can thus not be ignored. The politician takes personal responsibility for his actions whereas the official acts on the responsibility of the politician who issued the instruction. Ethical decision making happens within the wider social context in which not only moral but functional and cultural values are at play. It is in this context of ethical decision making that one can ask about the kind of human being one must be. To put it differently, the vocation of a personality, with the demands it places upon the individual, are only possible within given “... institutional constellations.” (Weber, M 1979: 71) In this sense then the individual cannot understand his or vocation, or what he or she must be, without understanding the context of the institutional constellations.

To have a vocation is then to approach one's ethical decision making in terms of a cause, or ultimate goal, to take responsibility for that cause, and the means by which one achieves that goal or serves that cause, in other words for the consequences of one's actions, and the ability to judge. Herein we find, according to Weber, the strengths of the political personality. It is within this context that one can take one of two approaches which are in opposition to one another but are not absolute opposites. It is to say that although together they make for the person who is capable of having a vocation, ultimately one has to choose between them, for the question for Weber is what vocation can politics per se, independently of its goals, fulfill? We are speaking here of "... two kinds of commitment ... and the corresponding value positions." (Weber, M 1979: 88)

The two approaches can be summed up in this way; "The two ethics, ..., differed exactly in the manner in which they evaluated know-how and feasibility. Whereas the believer in an ethic of responsibility considers the instrumental value, ..., and hence the chances for success as well as the consequences, the believer in an ethic of conviction is concerned with commitment for its own sake, independent of any calculation of success." (Weber, M 1979: 85) In other words, ethics, any ethics, which includes Christian ethics, can take only one of two approaches, either it follows an ethic of principled convictions, in which case the moral agent do not feel him or herself responsible for any unwanted consequences, or it must follow an ethic of responsibility in which case the moral agent, takes responsibility for his or her actions or outcomes. In an ethics of conviction, the moral agent feels responsible only for ensuring that the flame of conviction is kept burning. He or she will place the responsibility for any unwanted outcomes on some other; the will of God, or the stupidity of others or the world in general. The person who subscribes to an ethic of responsibility, however, does not feel that he or she can place the consequences of his or her own actions, on the shoulders of others. Although in opposition to one another there are situations in which even the

person who adopts an ethics of responsibility “... must stick to his ultimate commitments and leave the consequences to God.” (Weber, M 1979: 85)

### 3.2. The Sermon on the Mount and politics

One can investigate, for instance, the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount, with its insistence that one must ‘turn the other cheek.’ This is an ‘all or nothing’ ethics. If one should subscribe to the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount then one has to be a saint. Only a saint can ascribe to this ethic in and under all circumstances. The politician, however, cannot do so for he or she employs power, back up by violence. To turn the other cheek is, for the politician, the wrong option, for if he or she does not use violence to stop violence or maintain the order then evil may spread and the politician will then be responsible for the spreading of evil. Responsibility is thus, in this sense, more in touch with reality. In politics one cannot ascribe to the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount as an ethics of principled convictions and leave the consequences to God. It is “... exactly the weighing of consequences that can lead one to say in Weber’s sense: “Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise.” This would be impossible only if the believer in an ethic of responsibility did not have any ultimate value.” (Weber, M 1979: 87) However, one must choose, for the present time, between the two approaches, for in any “... concrete instance of social action only one principle can be followed,” (Weber, M 1979: 87) but noting that they are not absolutely in opposition to one another, although they differ fundamentally in their approach; an ethics of responsibility is not without principles and an ethic of conviction is not without responsibility.

It is thus clear that in order to understand the vocation of the Christian as ethical decision maker one has to first understand the vocation or role of Christian ethical decision making within a wider social context. It is only an ethic of responsibility, as opposed to an ethic of conviction, that can clarify this role or vocation of Christian ethical decision making. For an ethic of conviction will

demand of one to ‘keep the flame of one’s conviction burning,’ ignoring differing value spheres and the consequences of one’s actions, thereby ignoring the realities of one’s social context(s). An ethic of responsibility on the other hand take into account the chances of success of, and the consequences of one’s actions and the dialogical nature of ethical decision making within a plurality of values. The vocation of the Christian ethical decision maker, from within an ethic of responsibility, can thus be constructed as a moral agent who is to act responsible in a number of ways as we have seen in de Villiers’s conclusion above. What are the external conditions under which Christian ethical decision making can be a vocation? Or, to put it differently, what is the vocation of the Christian ethical decision maker in the present South African society?

### 3.3. No christianization of society

Responsibility as meta-ethic speaks about the different ways in which responsibility should qualify Christian ethics. The South African society is a pluralistic society. Within this context not only moral values but also functional and cultural values are important. As opposed to an ethic of conviction which would argue for a christianisation of society and the moral values of the Bible as the only and final determinants for value formation and action in all social spheres, which can really only be achieved by an authoritarian kind of enforcement and by a disregard for the freedom of conscience of others, an ethic of responsibility will seek to find a more inclusive approach or goal where biblical values are in dialogue with other value spheres. An ethic of conviction will seek to apply their biblical inspired moral convictions in an absolute way without taking into account the nature of the different value spheres and the particular role responsibility in each. In politics the politician who subscribes to an ethic of responsibility will take full responsibility for deciding on the right political action and take the specific nature of politics as a separate life sphere with its own principles and demands, and thereby take their particular role responsibility as politicians and not only what they regard as their moral

responsibility, seriously and thereby consider the consequences their political decisions could have on the political play.

The outcome of Max Weber's distinction between an ethic of conviction and an ethic of responsibility is that any ethic, including Christian ethics, is a complicated matter in which a particular person or group of persons have to take responsibility for thoroughly analysing the concrete situation and deliberating the possible consequences of different options for action and also for weighing up different value systems that are in play, before making a decision on the right action. It is especially important to not only consider moral values based on the Bible but to take also note of the functional and other values that are valid in the different social systems. In other words, the vocation of the Christian as moral agent is to dialogue between different value systems so as to accommodate them all optimally.

#### 4. The work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Is it possible to show that responsibility, in the sense in which it is being used here, is Christian? In other words, it is to show that Christian beliefs point us to human responsibility. The ethics of Bonhoeffer "... emerges within the context of Nazi tyranny." (Villa-Vicencio, C 1994: 83) Within this context Bonhoeffer became engaged in a plot to overthrow Hitler, and in the end, to do so by attempting to murder Hitler. An engagement which involved him in deceit and lying. He joined the German military intelligence, but as opposed to further the aims of the German war effort he worked from 'within' to further advance his opposition to the regime of Hitler. This Bonhoeffer did within his convictions as a Christian, that is, within his call to Christians to an absolute obedience to what is contained in a New Testament ethics. In an earlier writing he stated; "To renounce rebellion and revolution is the most appropriate way of expressing our conviction that the Christian hope is not set on this world." (Villa-Vicencio, C 1994: 83) But at the later stage it would seem that a shift has taken place within

his ethical thinking, “from single-minded obedience ... to responsible freedom ...” (Villa-Vicencio, C 1994: 83) In this way, it would seem, he was driven by his context, which required of him to address the concrete problems which made up his life-world and within which he had to answer the question: ‘who is Jesus Christ for us today?’

For Bonhoeffer ethics had to then answer to one’s accountability to both God and the world. Ethics became the realization of Christ’s form or presence in the world which can only be understood within the concrete situation of one’s life-world. This stands against an ethics in which one seeks to be obedient to ethical principles, or concepts. In line with Christ becoming guilty for the sake of others, the Christian is also called upon to become guilty if and when so required, for the sake of others. This is done with the knowledge that we cannot earn our salvation by our moral behaviour but is in the final instance a gift from God. The law, although important in ethics, is never the final arbiter for sometimes, especially when the normal way of doing ethics, has broken down, “... we are required to break the law in order for Christ’s form to be realised in the world and for us to become Christ’s deputies.” (Villa-Vicencio, C 1994: 85) In other words, the responsible person is the one who seeks to share in the work of Christ without protecting his or her innocence.

#### 4.1. Christ and transformation

Three related aspects are necessary in an ethic of responsibility: In Christian ethics there is a need for the Christian as moral agent to engage in the transforming work of Christ in this world. Secondly an ethic of responsibility “... involves a hierarchy of values and norms.” (Villa-Vicencio, C 1994: 86) and thirdly it takes into account the human tendency to rationalise and of self-justification. “An ethic of responsibility asks us to act responsibly. It requires us to be human beings who are ready to risk ourselves in the service of others. ... we have no real alternative other than to reduce our function in life to seeking to



implement a set of rules which we, for one or other reason, regard as absolutely applicable in all situations of life. The problem is ... (these rules) do not always promote responsible action.” (Villa–Vicencio, C 1994: 87)

Bonhoeffer makes the point that ethics is in the first instance not about theory but dealing with reality. In other words, ethics can only be had from a contextual point of view. In the face of reality ethical theories can fail. If evil appears in what is, to us “... light, beneficence, loyalty and renewal...,” (Bonhoeffer, D 1955: 47) it is possible for the moral agent who holds to his or her theory, “(W)ith .... concepts ... already ... in mind, unable to grasp what is real and still less able to come seriously to grips with that of which the essence and power are entirely unknown to him.” (Bonhoeffer, D 1955: 47)

This contextualisation of ethics has to do with being. It is precisely the wise person who sees reality as it is, and who sees it in depth, who sees it in terms of what is essential. And who sees reality in God, for the one who sees the world or reality sees God and who sees God sees the world. Bonhoeffer adds; “The wise man is aware of the limited receptiveness of reality for principles; for he knows that reality is not built upon principles but that it rests upon the living and creating God.” (Bonhoeffer, D 1955: 51) Principles are then perceived as ‘tools’ only in the hands of God, which can be discarded when no longer fruitful. And this wisdom, to know reality in its concreteness, lies for us in Jesus Christ in whom the world is one with God. In Jesus we then see God and the world as one and the ethical agent is not bound by principles but by love for God. Reality can be overcome by this perfect love of God for this love of God is really the lived love of God in Jesus Christ, which “... does not withdraw from reality into noble souls secluded from the world. It experiences and suffers the reality of the world in all its hardness.” (Bonhoeffer, D 1955: 52)

Jesus does not ‘overcome’ reality for the sake of some idea to realise. He affirms and gives effect to reality. Ethics is not an abstraction but concrete. “What can

and must be said is not what is good once and for all, but the way in which Christ takes form among us here and now.” (Bonhoeffer, D 1955: 66) It is not written, “... that God became an idea, a principle, a programme, a universally valid proposition or a law, but that God became man. This means that though the form of Christ certainly is and remains one and the same, yet it is willing to take form in the real man, that is to say, in quite different guises.” (Bonhoeffer, D 1955: 65) When we think in terms of concreteness, the implication is that God, when we say that God loves the world, God loves the human being as he or she is, not some ideal man or woman. In other words, God loves the real world. God makes no distinction in God’s love for humanity. God, in other words, “... does not permit us to classify men and the world according to our own standards and to set ourselves up as judges over them.” (Bonhoeffer, D 1955: 53)

#### 4.2. Christ and human finitude

In overcoming the world, Jesus Christ comes to us in one form, and any forming or transforming can only be had from this form. Responsibility as an ethic is Christo–centric. Formation comes from being drawn into this form of Christ, into His likeness, and not by applying to the world the teachings of Christ, or Christian principles. This is not to be confused by what is often referred to as becoming like Jesus, for “It is achieved only when the form of Jesus Christ itself works upon us in such a manner that it moulds our form in its own likeness (Gal.4.19).” (Bonhoeffer, D 1955: 61) In other words, relating to the transformation of the world, it is not Christians who, with their ideas shape the world, but Christ himself who shapes the world in accordance with Himself. The form of Christ is not that of a teacher of goodness, or a pious life. To be a real person, is to be conformed to the Incarnate, to be God’s creature and to be ‘sentenced by God.’ He or she can never excuse his or her sin, but having been conformed with the Risen One he or she is also the new person before God.

The point of departure for Christian ethics is the form of Christ and the person who has taken on this form, who can say, 'Christ is my life,' (Phil. 1: 21) Our context is that which concerns us. That which we cannot say in advance what would be good for Christ takes form for us in the here and now. "... by our history we are set objectively in a definite nexus of experiences, responsibilities and decisions from which we cannot free ourselves again except by an abstraction." (Bonhoeffer, D 1955: 67) We live within this nexus, this historical finitude whether we are aware of it or not. We are thus, already standing in that which Christ has already taken form in.

#### 4.3. The structure of an ethic of responsibility

Bonhoeffer describes the structure of an ethic of responsibility in the following way: He begins by stating that "The structure of responsible life is conditioned by two factors; life is bound to man and to God and a man's own life is free." (Bonhoeffer, D 1955: 194) It is precisely this bond and this freedom which makes responsibility possible. Our obligation toward the other can be found in what can be called deputyship and a correspondence to reality. In living our deputyship we are called to be for the other and in this sense we can never be alone. This bond between us and others means that we take on responsibility for others. The moral agent is thus never an isolated individual and therefore cannot escape his or her responsibility. Jesus lived for us and it is on this bases that we can say that we too are to live for others. Whatever the consequences, we are to live for one another in deputyship. Ethics is thus never about reaching some kind of perfection only in relation to oneself but rather in our relationship to one another. Responsibility thus entails the notion of selflessness. Responsibility is directed upon the deputyship of Jesus Christ for all people. It thus prevents us from either turning our own ego or the other into an absolute. In this way responsibility can never be turned into a "... self-made abstract idol,"

(Bonhoeffer, D 1955: 196) for responsibility consists in living for the other as we have seen in Christ's life and death. Even our values, for which we take responsibility for, can only be had within Christ.

#### 4.4. Christ and reality

The responsible person, in other words, is the one whose conduct "... is not established in advance, once and for all, that is to say, as a matter of principle, but it arises with the given situation. He (or she) has no principle ... which possesses absolute validity and which ... (comes) into effect fanatically, overcoming all the resistance which is offered to it by reality, but ... sees in the given situation what is necessary and what is 'right' ... to grasp and to do." (Bonhoeffer, D 1955: 197) There is thus no absolute good to hold on to, to force upon the situation, but precisely the situation itself demands the self-direction of the ethical agent in which the agent has to show his or her preferences, often in the face of what is relatively better than relatively worse. In this way one can often see that one's absolute good may in fact be the worst within the specific situation. In this way the moral agent acts according to reality. Again the demands of particular situations cannot be had in an arbitrary way, for reality is in the first place reality as encountered in Christ. In Jesus we come to see what reality is. From Jesus reality get its limits and its rights. Jesus is always our point of departure when speaking about reality.

Jesus is never alien to reality. Jesus has experienced reality in a way that no other has. In interpreting the life of Jesus we are in fact interpreting reality. The words of Jesus, in fact, speaks about the responsibility of Christians, of responsible action, in specific historical situations. Our responsibility can only be had within specific concrete actions and not in any abstraction. "Action which is in accordance with Christ is in accordance with reality because it allows the world to be the world; it reckons with the world as the world; and yet

it never forgets that in Jesus Christ the world is loved, condemned and reconciled by God.” (Bonhoeffer, D 1955: 200)

Because of this ‘closeness’ of Christ with the real world we cannot set up Christian principles as against secular principles for to do so would be to fall back onto principles and laws, that is, they become absolutes. It is precisely this which is had been overcome in Christ in that God has reconciled the world unto God self in Christ. This does not mean that Christian and secular principles form a unity. In Christ’s deputyship there is no action wasted in conflicts of principles but action which is based in the reconciliation of the world with God self. It is in the world that we act responsibly and our actions are also directed toward the outcome of our actions. The moral agent can thus never be blind in this sense. But in our actions we are to fall back unto the grace of God. Responsibility always means a limitation, for we are limited in our responsibility toward our neighbour because we are always acting within a context, yet it is just this limitation which makes responsibility possible. Responsibility is never arrogant or unlimited in its claims, “... it is not its own master, ... but creaturely and humble, ....” (Bonhoeffer, D 1955: 204)

#### 4.5. Responsibility and interpretation

But what is the relationship between responsibility and interpretation? We can never view things outside of their relationship to God and to humanity. We thus have a responsibility to ‘see’ or understand things within these relationships. In its essence each ‘thing’ has its own law of being, and our task is to discover the ‘law’ by which the thing exists. Each thing’s law first appears to be something to be mastered. It appears as some kind of technique which can be mastered. But “... the more closely the particular thing with which we are concerned is connected with human existence, the clearer it will become that the law of its being does not consist entirely in a formal technique, but rather that this law renders all technical treatment questionable.” (Bonhoeffer, D 1955: 206)

There can be no doubt that interpretation cannot do without its technique. There are rules and methods and principles which cannot be disregarded in any arbitrary way, for they have come to us through the experience of past generations. It would be to deny reality if one would to disregard the wisdom in what has come to us from the past. But because interpretation as a ‘thing’ is bound up with human existence its “... essential law extends ultimately far beyond the range of anything that can be expressed in terms of rules.” (Bonhoeffer, D 1955: 207) There are thus instances when one has to act as in the case of necessity. This acting then cannot happen in terms of ‘laws,’ for there is the freedom of the moral agent to act, to not act according to any pre-given law. He or she cannot any longer hide behind such laws, but one’s decision is rather like ‘a free venture,’ and it may mean the breaking of a law, thereby acknowledging the law but also renouncing it in that the act(ion) is entrusted not to law but to God’s intervention in history. “The responsible man acts in the freedom of his own self, without the support of men, circumstances or principles, but with a due consideration for the given human and general conditions and for the relevant questions of principle.” (Bonhoeffer, D 1955: 217)

It is the value, the purpose and motives of the person self who makes for his or her decisions but these can never be something on which to fall back and so become a ‘law.’ We cannot simply always decide between right and wrong, good or bad, but are often called upon to decide between right and right and wrong and wrong. Responsible action does not seek a self-justification, a justification by any law and therefore responsibility is without “... any claim to an ultimate valid knowledge of good and evil.” (Bonhoeffer, D 1955: 217) It is in this that the responsible moral agent is able to choose between conflicting norms, in the hope that his or her action is in line with the form of Christ in the here and now, but without the absolute certainty that it is. The responsible moral agent is thus able to make ‘difficult’ moral decisions within a context which is characterised by conflicting norms. In this way there is no ‘direct and absolute’

access, for the responsible moral agent, to what the will of God is, in any specific situation.

#### 4.6. Christ and guilt

Once again we have to turn to Christ for “Jesus is not concerned with the proclamation and realization of new ethical ideals; He is not concerned with Himself being good (Matt.19.17); He is concerned solely with love for the real man, and for that reason He is able to enter into the fellowship of the guilt of men and to take the burden of their guilt upon Himself.” (Bonhoeffer, D 1955: 210) Acting within His historical finitude and those of humanity Jesus becomes guilty. There is thus, in His deputyship, which consists of His self-less love for others, a sharing in the guilt of all. In order to act ethically without guilt one thus cuts one-self off from others and so acts according to his or her own personal innocence rather than act responsibly. One cannot act contrary to one’s conscience but one’s conscience “... comes from a depth which lies beyond a man’s own will and his own reason and it makes itself heard as the call of human existence to unity with itself.” (Bonhoeffer, D 1955: 211) To act against one’s conscience is to lead to a disunity within one-self. But this unity is constituted by my relation to Christ and not to the law. The person is not an autonomous being but finds its unity in the other who can only act as his or her redeemer.

The foundation of one’s unity is to be found outside of oneself and in this case in Jesus. In other words, Jesus is my conscience. The unity I find within myself can only be had in the surrender of myself into Jesus. In this way we can see how Jesus broke the law for the sake of God and humanity, that is He became guilty. Our conscience thus is always open toward our neighbour. There is at the same time always a tension involved in this for one can carry just so much responsibility. We can break down under our responsibility yet we are called to be responsible. Another way we find tension in our freedom to act responsibly is

that the law always stands against us. We cannot disregard the law. “This is the law of love for God and for our neighbour as it is explained in the decalogue, in the sermon on the mount and in the apostolic parables.” (Bonhoeffer, D 1955: 216)

But what is the relation between responsibility and obedience? Jesus stands before God as the one who is always obedient to God and yet free to act responsibly. “Obedience without freedom is slavery; freedom without obedience is arbitrary self-will.” (Bonhoeffer, D 1955: 220) Obedience means that we must allow God to tell us what is good. But our freedom enables us to do the good ourselves. It was Luther who said that “In obedience man adheres to the decalogue and in freedom man creates new decalogues.” (Bonhoeffer, D 1955: 221) Although in responsibility there is tension between freedom and obedience, both are realized. “Responsible action is subject to obligation, and yet it is creative.” (Bonhoeffer, D 1955: 221)

Bonhoeffer also had something to say about the Christian’s vocation or calling as the place of Christian responsibility. “In the encounter with Jesus Christ man hears the call of God and in it the calling to life in the fellowship of Jesus Christ.” (Bonhoeffer, D 1955: 222) God’s grace comes to us where we are at and this means that it is in the place where we are laden with sin and guilt. In other words, it is the place of this world. From the viewpoint of Jesus, this life I am now living is now my calling, but from my own viewpoint, it is my responsibility. For wherever I may be there is always the encounter with the other and I thus have responsibility for other. It does not mean that thereby the worldly institutions in which I find myself is never questioned. I cannot be responsible outside of these but that the person takes up his position against the world in the world. It is the call by Christ to wholly belong to him. But it also goes beyond my limits in the sense that in the particular I also serve the universal. I am thus stretched to include all of reality – but precisely because I act in my context. My call cannot be had in terms of a principle or law but in





Jesus. Ultimately I am responsible to God and not the law. Law and liberty, “For the sake of God and of our neighbour, and that means for the sake of Christ, there is a freedom from the keeping holy of the Sabbath ... a freedom which brakes this law, but only in order to give effect to it anew.” (Bonhoeffer, D 1955: 229)

## Chapter three

### The production of the meaning of a text

#### 1. Introduction

How can one describe the hermeneutical experience? That is, describes that which happens in all understanding? We have already noted that prejudice constitutes the link between past text and interpreter, which is overlooked in those methods which claim to be objective, in the sense that uncovering the author's intent somehow overcomes one's prejudices. If this thesis thus seeks to 'correct' false understandings of the use of the Bible in ethical decision making the liberation of prejudices is necessary and by doing so, it speaks against those understandings which hold that moral action is "... defined by its conformity to universal and objectivable norms," (Grondin, J 2003: 105) and thus that truth in biblical interpretation can be had from the interpreter 'distancing' him or herself from the text, through "... historicizing or psychologizing interpretations of meaning." (Grondin, J 2003: 81) Application is then something which can only follow such interpretations of meaning. That is, "...that the task of literary interpretation is to reconstruct the author's "intended meaning" (sometime "verbal meaning") at the time of writing "(Garret, J 1978:169)

Such an objective distancing holds that the interpreter has overcome, or is able to 'bracket out,' his or her prejudices and therefore is able to find the meaning in or truth of the text in a totally objective way of which method and its assumptions have become the criteria for truth in interpretation. "There is nothing reprehensible in proposing rules for understanding, but can we then get to the bottom of understanding?" (Grondin, J 2003: 19) Ultimately we are engaging in the challenge "... of a proper understanding of the human sciences

(which) have been dominated by the problem of method and its ideal of a knowledge of uniformities, regularities and laws, from which is excluded all intervention of contingent factors concerning the observer himself.” (Grondin, J 2003: 23)

This does not mean that critical historical exegesis is outdated or not necessary for it remains crucial to the hermeneutical task, for investigating the conditions of a historical period is certainly valid, but we cannot restrict the meaning of a text to what was in the author’s mind. The issue here is what place historical criticism should have in interpretation. Historical criticism with its insistence on objectivity, of distancing, may establish what things were like once, but does it address the requirements for the text’s application for today? In this it has its shortcomings. Understanding is rather an event than method or approach. This thesis is thus against that which reduces understanding to an instrumentalist approach. “To speak of criteria, of norms, of foundations, ... is to give an instrumentalist conception of the understanding which perhaps misses what is essential.” (Grondin, J 2003: 20) In a correct understanding of the hermeneutical task it is our methodologies which constitute the ‘instrumentalist’ in interpretation.

The basis of understanding is that we belong to the world more than the world belongs to us. In this sense we are receptors of that which is handed to us. This is our historical consciousness and prejudices constitute, more than our critical judgments, the foundations of the way we belong to the world. The epistemological question, after the ontological nature of understanding has been understood, is “... on what is to be founded the legitimacy of prejudices? What distinguishes legitimate prejudices from all those innumerable ones which critical reason must incontestably overcome?” (Grondin, J 2003: 126) This question needs to be answered first in terms of ‘understanding’ understanding, in other words, as a meta-critical exercise to discern those prejudices which lead to a correct understanding of knowledge, before prejudices can be distinguished in

terms of the ways in which responsibility can qualify Christian ethical decision making. Only then can one proceed to work with specific texts in which one's prejudices of a subject matter come face to face with those in the text. One can also say "What the tool of method does not achieve must – and actually can – be achieved by a discipline of questioning and investigating, a discipline that authenticates ... truth," (Schmidt, L 1995: 72) in which what is to be investigated is grasped by one's pre-understanding which consists of one's prejudices.

In order to liberate prejudices from its negative connotations we can turn to the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-George Gadamer who more than anyone else had been able to put forward an 'understanding' of understanding in which prejudice is the link between interpreter and tradition, where tradition "... refers essentially to ways of thinking and acting which antedate our own present thinking and acting," (Garret, J 1978: 1) and 'tradition' in the sense that the past, or text, speaks to us, addresses us. In understanding, the past takes precedence, which at the same time invites a constant revision and where truth in interpretation is to be had from an agreement about the truth of a text rather than understanding the author's intended meaning. But does this lead us then into the primacy of subjective readings in which we can super-impose ourselves and our preferences unto the text? "Too subjective, or modernizing, an interpretation is just that which super-imposes itself on the text and which is noticed, and disqualified, as such." (Grondin, J 2003: 126) But perhaps it is helpful to give a more detailed account of historical objectivism.

## 2. Objective thinking or historical objectivism

Speaking about objective thinking, historically, "... the rhetoric of objectivism – the invocation of self-evident truth and objective fact, intrinsic value and absolute right, of that which is universal, total, transcendent, and eternal – has had tremendous power. It is the power that we call inspirational when produced

by those we follow or admire,...” (Smith, B 1994: 292) It holds that some knowledge is able to overcome the perspectives, the whims, the artifices, the prejudices of some individual or community.

In dealing with events or texts from the past it is too easy to think of texts from the past, or their meaning, as something which is fixed and uninterpreted. Objective thinking has a negative relation to subjectivity, it seeks to expel subjectivity, or to at least subordinate subjectivity to the judgement of certain rules for hermeneutics. Although objectivity used to refer to the thing itself, the way it is being used today is in the sense of criteria to judge claims to the representation of things themselves. Objectivity seeks to find a knowledge without any distortion. In this way it seeks to establish an authority that “... no rational person, after due investigation, would call... into doubt.” (Megill, A 1994: 3) It operates on the principle of neutrality and detachment, distancing itself from values in interpretation, while at the same time, not questioning their own perspectives, as if one’s morality has nothing to do with the task of interpreting or investigation or their methodology. In doing so it looks to models for the best knowledge possible. It speaks about the rationality of standards for models in which any or all theory must be tested against. These standards are then able to distance knowledge from their producers and hence the impossibility of theoretical evaluation. Objective thinking denies the possibility that knowledge is a product or that it could not fail to “... bear the mark of its producers, or the processes of its production: hence questions about who knowers are, how they are located with respect to “objects” of enquiry, are crucial to epistemological analysis.” (Code, L 1994: 181) It has to do with an attitude which called for “... “impartiality” that held the passions, if not the personal, at bay.” (Daston, L 1994: 38) Objective thinking comes to us in two ways: In demonstrated, universal truths and in historical knowledge. In both, objective thinking amounts to “... a “view from nowhere,”” (Porter, T 1994: 198) for its program is to establish a kind of knowledge which can be had without taking into account or independent of any particular historical, cultural

or circumstantial conditions, and free from the perspectives of particular interpreters.

To put it differently: Objective thinking is to forsake particulars for knowledge of universals which is then able to provide knowledge of all the particulars. Universality is thus seen as an attitude, that is to say, that if the interpreter employs such a method of impartiality, the results of his or her work will lead to that which is universal and thus valid for all particulars. This leads to, citing one criticism from the feminist program, the interpreter to work from the "... vantage point of a self proclaimed representative self who, when it is a matter of knowing other people, think of how things are for him, and generates "objective" solutions for everyone else from that introspective, ... exercise. He pays no heed to the diverse experiences and circumstances that often produce an imperfect fit between principles and situations,..." (Code, L 1994: 182)

Objective thinking makes for closure in that there is an attempt to provide standards, in its methodology, in which there is a curtailing of one's historical situatedness. There is an attempt to find, 'one truth,' as against all the possibilities for truth. In other words, texts are seen as objects as they exist independent of "... the inquirer's thoughts and desires regarding them." (Hawkesworth, M 1994: 151) It promises impartial standards which is able to produce judgments free "... from distortion, bias, and error in intellectual inquiry and from arbitrariness, self-interests, and caprice in ethical, legal, and administrative decisions." (Hawkesworth, M 1994: 152) It thus promises that there is something like a rational method of interpretation which "... can be utilized regardless of social context or the phenomenon being investigated." (Hawkesworth, M 1994: 152)

Objective thinking, then, starts with the notion of the passivity of the observer, which is made possible through methodology, with its objective standards and which leads to criteria of certainty. In doing so, it "... completely ignores

experiencing, knowing subjectivity, subjectivity which performs real, concrete achievements ...” (Selby, R 2006: 21) By not reflecting on its own historical situatedness, objective thinking, in its methodology, forgets its own historical situatedness.

### 3. The universal and meta-critical nature of hermeneutics

Hermeneutics has set itself up as more than just rules for correct interpretation in order to avoid misunderstandings. What has occurred is, a paradigm-shift in the nature of hermeneutics. If truths cannot be verified with method, then truth is to be found in the experience of the world which “... do not consist of the calculation and measuring of what is present-at-hand, but in becoming aware of the meaning of beings.” (Bleicher, J 1980: 119) We are always busy with that which is present at hand, concerned with what is right in front of us, and in so doing we can forget the possibilities that are to be had from the past. We are always understanding in one way or the other and all understanding is interpretation in which prejudices constitutes, because of the “Recognition of the past as the determinant of our consciousness, ...” (Bleicher, J 1980: 266) the “on-going mediation of past and present which encompasses subject and object and in which tradition asserts itself as a continuing impulse and influence.” (Bleicher, J 1980: 266) It is being which underlies all methodical investigations for understanding takes the form of dialogue, provided for by language, where there is an agreement reached on the subject matter. To understand is to let a subject matter address us and in this way it is rather an event in which something meaningful happens to us. Understanding is thus a fundamental characteristic of our existence of which hermeneutics is the ‘philosophical working out’ by relating it to the whole of our “... experience of the world.” (Bleicher, J 1980: 120) A philosophical justification for “... the experience of truth that transcends the domain of ... method.” (Schmidt, L 2006: 95)

We can also say that “Hermeneutics looks to understand what the understanding is, over and above the ease of a purely technical control of it.” (Grondin, J 2003: 19) We can then ask the question whether there is in all understanding not something which happens which is outside the control of method? It is this ‘something,’ this event which is often overlooked in our methodologies. Gadamer says that this hermeneutical experience is “... truth (which) does not only, and perhaps not even primarily rely on what has an absolutely firm foundation, as scientific methodology insist. ... (it) is to value experiences of truth, of “knowledge,” which go beyond the infinitely restricting limits of what allows it to be objectified in a method of knowledge.” (Grondin, J 2003: 22) Our objectified method of knowledge leads to a kind of alienation in that our historical consciousness leads us to something like “... holding ourselves at a critical distance in dealing with witnesses to past life.” (Bleicher, J 1980: 130) In this way, and here we are speaking of the universality of the hermeneutical problem, we are busy with ‘extinguishing the individual,’ busy with “... extricating them (witnesses of past time) from the preoccupations of our own present life, ...” (Bleicher, J 1980: 130)

It is in this, our claim to historical objectivity, that there are serious problems. We need to put into place those methods who will help us to not misunderstand the witnesses of the past but does it help us to fully understand the past and its transmissions? Understanding and misunderstanding takes place between an I and a thou. To interpret texts is to enter into a dialogue with a ‘thou,’ another person, and not an ‘it,’ therefore interpretation takes on the nature of a conversation. These two never exists in isolation from one another. There is already a common experience or understanding between the two. In other words, “Something enduring is already present ...” (Bleicher, J 1980: 132) And it is this which comes into play when we try to reach agreement on some matter, although we may even have different opinions.



When we look to a hermeneutic which demands objectivity it seems that that which we have to understand is always something alien to us and we are thus 'lured' into some kind of misunderstanding and therefore our hermeneutical task is to use every available means to make sure that no misunderstanding occurs. And it is this which we accomplish "... by a controlled procedure of historical training, by historical criticism, and by a controllable method in connection with powers of psychological empathy." (Bleicher, J 1980: 132) But is it not rather the case that, because prejudices, more than our judgments, constitute our being, our past influences us in everything we want, even for our future? We thus cannot overcome the problem of historical consciousness by referring it to some kind of objective knowledge.

Because we are always understanding in one way or the other, understanding can be seen, as we find it in the work of Martin Heidegger, to be "... a fundamental ontological structure of human being." (Schmidt, L 2006: 99) In this sense then to understand is to be a 'being-in the-world.' In this we discover our 'thrownness,' that is, we discover that we are already always within a specific historical context and that we have a past. We can then say that "... any understanding or truth claim depends on the temporal horizon within which .... (we) live(s) and its projective interpretation towards its possibilities of being." (Schmidt, L 2006: 99) In other words, relating it to the interpretation of texts from the past, understanding a text from the past eventually makes for a self-understanding in which there is always reference to future possibilities of being. Because of this 'thrownness' we are already always understanding something, and therefore any understanding begins with our fore-structures of meaning. In other words, the 'thrownness' of understanding means that "... the inherited tradition forms the initial point of departure for all acts of understanding." (Schmidt, L 2006: 100) In this sense we can say that all of reality is hermeneutical for we are, as human beings, always already understanding something.

Not only is hermeneutics universal in nature but it is also meta-critical, especially so in the work of Gadamer. In doing so he draws our attention to the basis of understanding and our relation to truth which raises questions about 'historical finitude,' and the very foundations of human understanding. At a meta-critical level we investigate the nature of criteria used to discern what would count as the most fundamental criteria of success in interpretation. This is opposed to a pre-critical reading of the Bible in which a reader would read a text rather than engage on a conscious level in the task of interpretation. On a critical level we may ask critical questions of the text, for example; 'How does this part of the narrative fits in with the whole of the narrative?' In other words, on a pre-critical level we may 'live out the story' and on a critical level the text becomes an object of enquiry. The critic thus distance him or herself from the text by a level of abstraction. There is a looking at the text, as it were, from the outside, where on a pre-critical level there is an 'entry' into the text and a going along with it wherever it may lead to.

On a meta-critical level the critical reader's own program of criticism is being questioned. In other words, we now ask about the criteria used by the critical reader. This leads to the notion that when we start analysing the criteria of critics it seems that there can be no 'objective' answer, for the answer would always be dependant upon the aims and interests of the critical reader. At a critical level one's criteria may be accepted within one's community or group but on a meta-critical level, what are the criteria for hermeneutical success to be seen in terms of? We are dealing here with the appraisal of 'foundations of method,' through the question of historical finitude/historical-conditionedness, and the role of language in understanding for it is in answering questions about these that the meta-critical nature of hermeneutics can be established.

Because of our historical finitude there is an already pre-givenness into which we are born. It is this which determines what we understand or perceive as this or that. In this sense even our reflections to obtain objectivity, our choice for

objectivity, is already included in our life–world or pre–givenness. It means that our reflections are already informed by our historical situatedness. When we make assertions about something it is only done so within an already given horizon. The kind of statements that objectivity makes, or the fact–stating language we find within science, can thus only be had on an instrumental level, for on an instrumentalist level, instrumental language reflects to us only that which we already have, in other words, our world. What is important is the primacy of the game, (historical situatedness) over the consciousness of the individual players. In this sense the game is the master of the players as the players react to the tasks and rules imposed upon them by the game. In what is presented to the audience the player is only an element of the whole. In other words, the performance exists in the interaction with the audience. In this performance there comes to the fore, as in the work of art, a world which is presupposed and created.

There is thus an event of productivity in the performance, productivity brought about by the interaction between game and audience. That is, that each performance is different, for any game which seeks to merely reproduce itself, an exact copy of a previous game, would not be a game anymore, yet it is the same game. Gadamer also uses another key concept namely that of ‘effective–history’ to show the dominance of the game over the players. Rather than that history belongs to us, we belong to history. Before we understand ourselves through self–reflection we understand ourselves in what is a self–evident way and it is in this that truth cannot be individual–centred rational reflection but rather based on context–related foundations, which is our prejudices or prejudgments. This is taken from an inter–subjectivity between past and present community. The ethical implication of this is that there can be no rules for a correct interpretation for each game is different in its performance as it is actualized in the horizon of the current audience.

However, this ‘truth of the performance’ is never arbitrary for truth arises in dialogue, in the to–and–fro of a conversation. Within this questioning and answering, as have been noted earlier on, the prejudices of the interpreter, more than his or her judgements, constitute the historical reality of his or her being. In other words, the truth of the text does not exist apart from or away from that moment of performance, that moment of interaction. To discern whether a performance is valid or not we are thus to look back onto our subjective tradition, and forward to the advance which can be had from the dialogue and our anticipation of completeness. What constitutes norms for a correct or good judgment can thus never be separated from our historically situatedness. In other words, every age or historical situation or way of being in the world, has to understand a transmitted text in its own way. This theme will be further pursued when we investigate the relation between understanding and application.

Our historical finitude is therefore a critique against those who hold that it can be dealt with by some ‘objective’ program in which the notion that prejudices constitute the link between past and present can be denied. We can also, in order to show the universality of hermeneutics, and to speak against any hermeneutic which holds that hermeneutics has only to do with techniques which are to avoid misunderstanding, refer to the science of statistics: It (the science of statistics) seems to be an exact observational and mathematical discipline based only on the facts. Is it not rather the case that the kind of questions asked, make for the facts? In other words, if other questions were to be asked, that other facts would speak? Is it also not the case that the kind of questions being asked have to do with the prejudices of those asking the questions? Is this not a hermeneutical issue?

Hermeneutics is not restricted to the human sciences alone, but starts, always, in any kind of scientific exercise, whether in the humanities or ‘pure’ sciences, with the problem of our historical finitude. In historical finitude, both the interpreter, and the text, stands in a given historical situation. Precisely because

of this historical finitude our historical consciousness our understanding can never achieve what is known as an objective viewpoint or absolute truth.

To further explore hermeneutics as universal and meta-critical in nature we can now turn to language as a hermeneutical ‘vehicle,’ for it is in language that conversation takes place and the text ‘speaks’ to us, that is, “Each speaker must listen to the other if the conversation is to conclude in an agreement.” (Schmidt, L 2006: 117) The world that we have as human beings is made possible by language, that is, language is where the world and I meet. Language mediates this world, between text and interpreter rather intersubjectively than objectively. The background to the ‘nearness’ of language and that in language hermeneutics takes an ontological turn is that it begins with the notion that in order to understand a text we understand it as an answer to a question. “... I cannot understand something except by also paying attention to the constellation of questions within which the text that I am interpreting is inscribed, a constellation which I must bring into words, in terms which I can follow.” (Grondin, J 2003: 125) It is in this that application happens, for the fusion of two horizons is nothing else than a dialogue between the interpreter and his or her language and the text which is also its own language. In other words, “The linguisticity of understanding is the concretion of historically effected consciousness.” (Schmidt, L 2006: 117)

Gadamer maintains that there is no ‘gap’ between a word and its meaning. The ‘right’ word presents the thing to us. Our hermeneutical experience happens within language. Understanding thus begins with our inherited language, which is our prejudices and then through our interpretation “... finds the correct words to bring the subject matter into explicit understanding.” (Schmidt, L 2006: 120) Because of our historical finitude and the fact that we experience an openness to the future mean that whatever the subject matter is, it can never be fully known. We can say that “The different human languages illustrate the creative complication of language where different linguistic communities develop their

concepts in relation to their own way of life.” (Schmidt, L 2006: 120) In this way every language is a different way of viewing the world. Language then presents us with a worldview because of what has been handed down through tradition or in the particular language. In this sense then there is no perfect language in which everything would appear in itself and hence each language has its limitations. If language is then the hermeneutical vehicle through which we experience we can say that all inquiry has to do with language. In this way the ontological nature of hermeneutics as we have discovered it in language is able to critique the foundations of understanding. If language can never fully understand the subject matter under discussion because each language understands differently then we can say, against an objectivist understanding of interpretation which seeks to work with laws and foundations, that each historical era does offer its own criteria of rationality, and its own views on what constitutes truth.

When we speak about the appraisal of the foundations of method we are speaking about that which can critically enquire about the foundations for understanding. According to Gadamer, the notion that the foundations of understanding can come face to face with the prejudices of (a) methodical work which holds that truth is to be had in a totally objective way, can be had from the notion of play. Gadamer writes that no game is ever played twice in exactly the same way, yet it is still the one game. And hence to prescribe a criterion for right judgement in advance would make for a return to historical objectivism. Yet, at the same time, we cannot remove all rules from the game. It must continue to create their ‘world,’ must constrain the purposes and reactions of the players. In this way then Gadamer’s critique against the foundations of method is at the same time able to critique both those who hold to objectivity and those who fall into relativism.

In this way, in this ontological turn of hermeneutics and historical finitude, hermeneutics has set itself up as universal in nature and able to critique the

foundations of our theories of knowledge which is precisely what makes for the plurality in the use of Scripture in ethical decision making as has been suggested in the introduction to this dissertation. But more about this when we will be dealing with understanding and prejudice proper. First we have to investigate the notion that ethical decision making is more about practical wisdom than the application of rules in a straightforward way.

#### 4. Practical wisdom and ethical rules

Hermeneutics has moved to that which speaks about a fundamental attitude which can best be described by practical wisdom. It is practical wisdom which speaks against the notion, inherited from the Enlightenment, "... following their legacy of Renaissance thinking, ..." (Larkin, W 1988: 30) that "In the exercise of the historical-critical method, liberated human reason may come to conclusions critical of Scripture's content." (Larkin, W 1988: 30) It is precisely the objectivication of interpretation against which a hermeneutic which serves understanding wish to take a stand for the hermeneutical experience inherent in all understanding points us to somewhere else for the location of truth in interpretation. But not only does such a hermeneutic wish to stand against an objective interpretation but also against subjective readings in which one may fall into an all out relativism. Here such a hermeneutic can be seen to be in agreement with the 'objectivists' who holds that "...modern critics assert both that the text itself is independent (nothing controls it) and that so are they (nothing controls them)." (Bauman, M 1995: 6) What can we understand about the hermeneutical task and its ethical implications from an emphasis on practical wisdom?

We can begin this study by investigating Gadamer's stance toward humanism in which often "... "human" perspective takes a second seat to the divine or merely "logical" perspective and where man fits in through the use of reason." (Grondin, J 1995: 111) It was Immanuel Kant who maintained that "Anything

that does not correspond to the methodological criteria of exact science is deprived of any cognitive value. Common sense, judgment and taste, which were cultivated by the humanistic tradition because of their .... cognitive importance, are thus relegated to a merely subjective sphere that is devoid of scientific import.” (Grondin, J 1995: 116) In this way then all cognitive activity which do not fulfill the criteria for scientific objectivity became relegated to the areas of subjectivity and aesthetic and method became independent from context and the one observing. “Method is the objective instance which guarantees that the scientific results do not depend on the subjective prejudices of the observer,” (Grondin, J 1995: 127) and in which there is always a search for universal laws. Against this Gadamer claims that methods alone do not determine the relevance and scientific program of the human sciences. Gadamer then goes back to the humanist tradition before Kant and the Enlightenment. What had been lost is that humanity does not distinguish itself from animality through reason, but that humanity has to always overcome the animality within, and it is in this that humanism is a never ending vigilance toward this ‘darker side’ which can only be attained through some process of education or formation for which there are no scientific rules but only some models. Models that comes to us in the process of culture and the development of one’s talents.

One can also say that because we are made in God’s image we can rise above our animality and in this sense we are called to a higher dignity. In other words, humanism, correctly understood, acknowledges humanity’s fallenness and its ‘task’ to overcome it. ‘To let one’s talents flourish is nothing other than the realization of man’s higher calling as an image of God.” (Grondin, J 1995: 129) From our traditions we gain insight into what it is to measure up to humanity as made in the image of God. We are to overcome our particularity by being lifted up into what is universal. But this universality is not the same as that which is sought by reason which holds to some universal laws but rather the broadening of one’s horizons. By learning from others, from our traditions. This overcoming of one’s particularity is a task in the sense that one can never achieve it once and



for all. It requires ongoing education and openness and it thus speaks about an ongoing formation. Humanism is thus about making us more human and not by making us yield to scientific laws. But this, making us more human is not about the human being as the ‘centre’ of all that is, as if it seeks to replace God. Humanism is to not forget that humanity is “... but a grain of sand in the vast universe.” (Grondin, J 1995: 133) Earlier on we spoke about humanity’s thrownness, in which it is the task of humanity to gain insight into its limitedness, its historical finitude. Yet at the same time it is true to say that humanity can in some way build itself and in this way what is central to humanism is not humanity at the center of the universe but the promise of this building, of this overcoming of one’s particularity into some universal. Humanity never stops learning and it is this which is important. Humanism stands for truth which can be had in an ongoing dialogue about the meaning of human life, and the lessons from history. It is these lessons from history which “... critical acquaintance with tradition teaches that tradition itself is always studied and applied very differently from one generation to the next.” (Grondin, J 1995: 138)

Practical wisdom or phronesis can be seen as prudence, a reasonableness and discernment. It is not an ability in the sense of technique but rather a way of being, for instance, in being reasonable. We can also say that it is a way of looking at things rationally from below rather than from above. Phronesis is a term or concept that Gadamer inherited from the work of Aristotle. Basically it speaks about a moral context which is able to sustain the ethical individual. Modern scientific work in itself, cannot provide us with something like a unified view or conclusion about the world. What we need is rather a “... critical effort which shares the modern ideal of method and yet which does not lose the condition of solidarity with and justification of our practical living.” (Foster, M 1991: 54) Practical knowledge is different than theoretical and technical knowledge and it is this distinction which Aristotle makes which is so important to Gadamer. Aristotle described three branches of knowledge: episteme which is

the science of unchanging things, techne, which is the science of humanly created things, as in human crafts and skills and thirdly, the science of human practise in which we can see a science of that which is good in human life.

Moral knowledge is not in the first instance a theoretical knowledge in the sense of unchanging, for example, mathematical truths, but rather the knowledge of a person who is always acting and who is ultimately concerned about with what is not always the same. In this way practical wisdom has not to do with that which can be characterised as learnable crafts and skills but rather with "...what is each individual's due as a citizen and what constitutes his (or her) ... excellence." (Foster, M 1991: 59) And he then adds, "... it has to be accountable with its knowledge for the viewpoint in terms of which one thing is said to be preferred to another: The relationship to the good." (Foster, M 1991: 59)

Linking hermeneutics, which is, as we have seen, a fundamental activity of what it means to be human, to moral action, Gadamer writes that "If the heart of the hermeneutical problem is that one and the same tradition must time and again always be understood in a different way, (i.e., in each new historical horizon of prejudice), the problem, ..., concerns the relationship between the universal and the particular. Understanding, then, is a special case of applying something universal to a particular situation." (Foster, M 1991: 60) It is in this that we need practical wisdom rather than preset rules, although as we have seen in our investigation into game, we can never work outside of the rules of the game but we can never have "... some pre-given universal to the particular situation," (Foster, M 1991: 61) as we find in some understandings of the hermeneutical task which have changed hermeneutics into a mere technical process.

Moral knowledge is not like a technique which we can acquire and forget again. We are already always acting and thus be ready to apply our moral knowledge. Moral knowledge is not something we have beforehand and when the situation

arose we simply apply it, but rather moral knowledge is that which we discover we have and which is not independent of the situation which requires the right action. Moral knowledge is rather like applying the law than applying the skills we have learned in a craft. The judge applies the law or rule with a view to the specific case under consideration. In this way we can say that “Moral application, then, is always more than technically subordinating a case to its appropriate rule in an automatic fashion; moral application, as illustrated by legal judgment, requires a discerning wisdom about the various ‘rules,’ written and unwritten, which are appropriate to the particular case.” (Foster, M 1991: 63) This means that neither the end nor the means to an end can fall outside of the situation which requires one to act. We can also say that moral knowledge points us to a certain kind of experience. If moral knowledge is understood in this way it follows that unlike technical knowledge which is able to ignore the ‘other,’ moral knowledge is understanding which does not judge the other. Rather the one who understands is also effected, thinking with the other from within some common bond.

Understanding is never separated from the interpreter but constitutes his or her moral practise. Application for the interpreter must always relate the text to his or her own hermeneutical situation if he or she wants to understand at all. But this does not mean that ethical decision making has nothing to do with theoretical description. It is so that ethical decision making is in a sense rather that which happens to us then us ‘making judgments,’ but we cannot overcome theoretical description. Gadamer invokes a metaphor used by Aristotle, to underline this aspect of practical wisdom of which practical philosophy or philosophical hermeneutics is an instance of, of a man who “... tries to hit the goal as an archer, and Aristotle compares his own function (in trying to discern good practice) with this man. .... Practical philosophy serves the function of helping to identify the target of action, and nothing more: The target serves a real function in that the moral agent will more easily hit the mark if he or she has his or her target in view. The acting human being (is) “... the one who – in

accord with his ethos – guided by his practical reasonableness in making his concrete decisions.” (Foster, M 1991: 72) What we find to be good in theory, in other words, the absolute good we strive after, is very different from what is often the right thing to do at which, our practical rationality aim. Gadamer writes, quite passionately, about the issue of practical wisdom. “The function of phrases .... is .... The application of more or less vague ideals or virtue and attitudes to the concrete demand of the situation. Moreover, this application can not evolve by mere rules but is something which must be done by the reasoning man himself. ... to understand in concreto what the text in general says, .... that is the task of the teacher in explaining the message of the Bible; and for it one needs “prudence.” In whatever connection, the application of rules can never be done by rules. In this we have just one alternative, to do it correctly or to be stupid. That is that!” (Foster, M 1991: 75) For Gadamer what is important is that the truth claim of a text can only be had within its application. Ethically one can never behave outside of this principle. The universal is only ethically true in its application to a specific context.

## 5. Understanding and prejudice

Although much have been said so far on understanding we still have to give a proper rational account of what understanding is and the ‘fit’ of prejudices in understanding, according to Gadamer. Understanding is in the first instance an event, it is about being rather than consciousness. This event is not dependant on the one or other methodology. In this sense Gadamer moves away from epistemology to a kind of ‘grounding.’ Although epistemology or the mode of knowledge or approach to what constitutes knowledge, cannot be left behind, hermeneutics is in the first instance, not the experience of the scientists in his or her laboratory but experience which is part of us, in a more forceful way than any analytic argument. It is that experience which we do not know where it comes from yet it sustains us, the kind of experience we learn through suffering. It is this which the emphasis on methodology makes us forget. Epistemology

seems to be too instrumentalist, too reflective. Gadamer claims that thought has limits, yet this does not silence us but open us up to dialogue. The truth does not only, and not even primarily, rely on what has an absolute firm foundation, as scientific methodology insists.

The primary role of Gadamer's hermeneutics is to value experiences of truth, of "knowledge," which go beyond the infinitely restricting limits of what allows itself to be objectified in a method of knowledge." (Grondin, J 2003: 22) The context of Gadamer's work was precisely this dominance of objective method, that is, that the methodology of the objective sciences as used in the humanities and thus any truth which did not correspond to this objectivity are then pushed aside into aesthetics or subjectivity. The only epistemological method open it would seem was that of the natural sciences, "... where objectivity reigned supreme." (Grondin, J 2003: 29) In other words, taking their cue from Kant, the sciences of the mind, were pushed into the domain of method, that is, that which was developed for the natural sciences. Truth, Gadamer claimed, is rather in that which is based on belief, integrity and probability, in which and where ultimate foundation is lacking, and truth is in practical wisdom "... always what concerns me directly, without being a matter of technique." (Grondin, J 2003: 22) It is a kind of knowledge opposed to inductive knowledge as we find in the exact sciences. To know what truth is in understanding we can turn to art for if truth in interpretation cannot be found according to this epistemological model of objectivity how is it then to be had?

Art invokes in us an aesthetic consciousness. Because of the dominance of method, of science, of objectivity, the experience of art has been pushed aside to aesthetic consciousness. But in this what has happened is the forgetting of the moral and cognitive dimensions of art. Art has been cut off from its message or truth. Not that there is a denial of the aesthetic in art but we must not forget the truth claims of works of art. But the work of art clearly shows that truth is rather within an encounter. Is hermeneutic truth not rather a truth of formation? In

understanding the truth claim in art we can better understand the understanding appropriate for the human sciences or the act of interpretation. It is in the first instance a critique of all epistemology, in that it is a critique of an understanding of interpretation which holds to method and "... its ideal of a knowledge of uniformities, regularities and laws, from which is excluded all intervention of contingent factors concerning the observer himself." (Grondin, J 2003: 23)

With this as background Gadamer then asked whether for a methodological paradigm, we should not rather start from humanism and the concept of 'bildung,' "... the uniquely human way of developing inherent dispositions," (Grondin, J 2003: 24) which allows for a certain capacity for judgment. As opposed to a lack of a universal rule, it speaks rather about the possibility of a 'faulty judgment' in a particular case. In interpreting art what comes to the fore, more than a merely aesthetic experience, is an experience of the truth claim of the work of art. And to this experience we bring our own world. This provides for a hermeneutical experience as a productive exercise rather than a mere reconstruction of the pastness of the work of art.

## Chapter four

### Undoing closure

#### 1. Introduction

Having done the preparatory work, this thesis is now to provide points of departure for a recommended approach, as an ideal type, to Christian ethical decision making. In doing so it is to work out the implications, for Christian ethical decision making, of what have been said thus far.

In Christian ethical decision making the Christian as moral agent starts from ways in which responsibility should qualify Christian ethics as opposed to an ethics of conviction, which implies that the moral agent's approach is characterised by an inclusive, rather than an exclusive approach. He or she also starts from the notion that prejudices, constitute the link between past text and current interpreter, rather than historical objectivism. Another fundamental starting point is that the ability to correctly process ethical decision making in which both moral norms and the context in which ethical decision making happens, determines the outcome, is more important than either a purely deontological or teleological ethics. Rules are descriptive, in that they can only function as broad moral guidelines, rather than prescriptive and not only must the consequences of one's ethical decision making be taken into account but also the moral obligation to constitute moral norms for what would lead to the good of society.

#### 2. Inclusive and exclusive approaches

One of the implications of the ways in which responsibility should qualify Christian ethics is that the particular role responsibility or vocation of the Christian as moral agent is taken seriously. This vocation is never separated from the transformation of society and in turn, this transformation can never be

separated from the concrete reality of the context or society in which the moral agent finds him or herself. In working out Christian ethical decision making within a society which is characterised by a plurality of values which are often in conflict with one another, a distinction can be made between an exclusive and an inclusive approach to the transformation of society. This distinction is based on Max Weber's differentiation between an ethics of conviction and an ethics of responsibility.

An exclusive approach has as its goal the christianisation of society and in so doing holds that biblical norms should be the final authority for moral action in all spheres of life. It regards its own "... interpretation of the moral message of the Bible as the sole and final measure of political policies and actions." (De Villiers, D 2005: 526) Referring to Max Weber's distinction between an ethics of responsibility and an ethics of conviction, an exclusive approach holds to its moral values in an absolute way without taking into account the specific nature of politics and the very specific role responsibility politicians have as politicians. There is also a neglect of taking into account the negative consequences of political moral action when such actions are based on absolutes derived from the Bible without taking into consideration the role responsibility of the politician.

An inclusive approach, on the other hand, holds that what can be aimed for is the optimal accommodation of different value systems operating in a given context. An inclusive approach takes responsibility for analysing the situation as thoroughly as is possible and deliberating all the possible consequences of different options for action, "...also for weighing different value systems that are in play, before making a decision on the right action." (De Villiers, D 2005: 527) The vocation of the Christian as moral agent can thus only be had from an inclusive approach for ethical decision making can never be reduced to "... a simple matter of mechanically applying only moral principles in particular circumstances." (De Villiers, D 2005: 527) In an inclusive approach not only



moral values based on Biblical grounds but also the functional values and cultural values operating in any given moral sphere is taken into account.

In taking into account the different value systems which are in play in any given situation the priority of moral and religious values is never an absolute one. In other words, it is not the case that "... moral values always completely replace functional values that seem to be in tension with it." (De Villiers, D 2005: 527) It is rather the case that "...the role of moral and religious values over against other values is primarily a limiting one: To prevent them from claiming validity outside their sphere of competence." (De Villiers, D 2005: 528) Religious and moral values can also be used to speak against 'distorted versions' of other value systems, when they do become so within their own sphere of influence.

An inclusive approach also holds to the notion that what is needed is a consensus on what the good South African society entails. This can only be achieved through open dialogue between Christians and between Christians and non-Christians. In this dialogue there is the need to admit that "... not all the normative elements needed for the construction of a Christian vision of a good contemporary society can be found in the Bible." (De Villiers, D 2005: 529) This will mean that, when Christians engage in dialogue with others as to what would constitute the good South African society, there is a need to do so, firstly, on the basis of those values shared by all and not on the basis of what amounts to a strong Christian morality. Secondly, however, there is the need to argue for Christian moral values so as to influence policy making, but this can only be done on the basis of arguing for views which can be accepted by other sectors of society.

Relating this need for consensus to biblical interpretation, there is thus a distinction, on a spectrum of views, between those who hold that all biblical moral directives are equally valid for today, and on the other hand, those who hold that, because such directives are culturally situated, they have no validity

for today. When, however, prejudices is seen as the link between past text and current interpreter, one can overcome both these positions in that it is acknowledged that the Bible still speaks to us today, for we can never move outside of the truth claim of the text, yet it speaks in new ways because of our new historical situation.

### 3. Responsibility/prejudice and conviction/objectivism

In Christian ethical decision making, as a fundamental starting point one either starts from the ways in which responsibility should qualify Christian ethics and prejudice as the link between past text and current interpreter or one starts from an ethic of conviction and the hermeneutical principle of historical objectivism. This link between responsibility and prejudice and conviction and objectivity is crucial to Christian ethical decision making for it addresses or link the use of the Bible within the process of ethical decision making to the process itself. In other words, if one starts one's ethical decision making from the ways in which responsibility should qualify Christian ethics, as a fundamental attitude or starting point, one's use of the Bible will be influenced by the fundamental starting point that prejudices constitute the hermeneutical link between past text and current interpreter. This is so, for the prejudices which influence one's use of the Bible are conformable to the ways in which responsibility as a meta-ethic should influence the decision making process. In other words, within the moral agent, the one leads to the other. The basic prejudice is that prejudices constitute the link between past text and current interpreter.

If one starts from an ethics of conviction then one's hermeneutics will be influenced by historical objectivism. The prejudice then is the prejudice against prejudices in biblical interpretation, which, as we have seen, does not lead to responsible use of the Bible, for prejudices are never critiqued as to whether they are justifiable or not.

#### 4. Correctly processing moral decisions

What is important in Christian ethical decision making is the ability to correctly process moral decisions. The work of Heinz Eduard Tödt is introduced as an ideal type of such a way of ethical decision making. Correct in the sense that it is being influenced by the ways in which responsibility should qualify Christian ethics. It is being introduced as an ideal type of, "... the steps to go through in judgment–formation to arrive at a decision. (Tödt, H 1994: 291) He identifies six steps, or aspects in the process of ethical decision making. This does not mean that these steps follow one another in an orderly way.<sup>3</sup> What is the case is that these six steps can rather be seen as six aspects of the one process which will become clear when and as the moral agent reflects on or looking back on, his or her ethical decisions made and those aspects which influenced his or her ethical decision making. Ethical decision making happens in a kind of circular way and it is possible for the moral agent to enter the circle at any place and proceed from there, as in a kind of going forth and back. The different steps influences one another so that a constant revision is taking place within the moral agent.

#### 5. An ideal type of Christian ethical decision making.

Using the issue of same–sex civil unions, the role of the following six steps is to be illustrated:

- 1 Definition of the problem
- 2 Analysis of the situation
- 3 Behavioural options
- 4 Testing the norms
- 5 The judgement as decision

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<sup>3</sup> "...ses fasette wat duidelik word wanneer 'n mens terugkyk op etiese beslissings wat gevel is en vra wat die oorwegings was wat 'n rol gespeel het..." (De Villiers, D & Smit, D 1996: 33)

## 6 Retrospective adequacy control

### 5.1. Definition of the problem

Defining the problem as a moral problem requires of the moral agent to ascertain the way he or she is 'involved' in the issue, and thus effected by it. There needs to be an investigation into what is at stake, whether it requires more than just mere "...technical" solutions inasmuch as they challenge his or her own ethical judgment." (Tödt, H E 1994: 292) There is a confrontation with the problem as a concrete problem. In other words, the moral agent must be aware of the problem as moral problem. Not all problems we encounter are ethical in nature. An ethical or moral problem is only ethical or moral when it effects the person as such. Even our choices in relation to what are moral problems for us and which are not are ethical in nature. The involvement of the moral agent also entails the instance(s) holding the moral agent accountable and the sphere in which the moral agent is held accountable. We have broad moral responsibilities for which we are accountable to God, others and self. It is also so that often people have to formulate their moral decisions in conjunction with other people when they are faced with common problems.

It then becomes necessary to, as a moral responsibility, enter into dialogue with others so as to determine whether the problem is being understood in the same way by all involved. This dialogue also entails the constitution of moral obligations in our time, which entails the formulation of new moral guidelines where that may be necessary, and thus a search for moral consensus.

The task of reaching consensus on what the problem entails, or the definition of the problem, can only be done from an ethics of responsibility which is able to recognise the role of the prejudices of both the individual and tradition and the need to critically engage with such prejudices. Historical objectivism and/or an ethics of conviction, thus an exclusive approach, is not able to reach such an

agreement, or deny the need to do so, for they ignore or deny the role of prejudices in dealing with or understanding the moral problem. In coming to the issue as a moral problem the moral agent already has some pre-understanding of the subject matter, in this case, both to, the issue of same-sex civil unions and that of the hermeneutical task or use of the Bible in relation to the moral problem at hand.

In acknowledging prejudices as the link between past text and current interpreter, there is a critical reflection on such prejudices so as to determine which are conformable to the ways in which responsibility should qualify Christian ethics and which not. In this way there is no separation between an ethics of interpretation and the ethical issue at hand, and biblical work. In linking these prejudices to the ways in which responsibility should qualify Christian ethics, it opens up the way for these prejudices to be in dialogue with the values of others, and different value spheres, so as to determine new moral directives for our time.

It is now possible for people of the same sex to enter into a lawful civil union, under the Civil Union Act. Different denominations and individuals/groups have acted differently, to this Act, from positions which reject such unions as not in accordance with God's revealed will, based on their use of the Bible, to positions which advocate an acceptance, also based on, their use of the Bible.

It would seem that for some, it is not a moral problem at all, as the Scriptures are clear in their condemnation of such unions or it is not a problem, for the Scriptures are interpreted in such a way that it does not condemn such unions. However, it would seem that for some, the Scriptures are not clear, in other words, it is possible to interpret the relevant texts differently which makes, between different denominations, and within a particular denomination, for some to condemn such unions and others to not condemn such unions. It is thus

clear that only for some, there is a challenge of their ethical judgement related to the issue of same-sex civil unions and their use of the Bible.

It is precisely in ignoring or forgetting the role of prejudices, and thus ascribing to an ethics of conviction, that some denominations and individuals, are able to hold onto a position which advocates a 'no moral problem' approach. For a meta-ethic which holds to the ways in which responsibility should qualify Christian ethics, therein lies the moral problem for those who do not acknowledge the role of a prejudices. They fail to see just how much their positions are influenced by their prejudices, especially so, their prejudice against prejudices. Following on from this there is a neglect of reflecting on what kinds of acts of interpretation are responsible in a number of ways.

For a denomination to have its ministers officiate at such unions the denomination is to apply, on behalf of its ministers and/or marriage officers, to the Minister of Home Affairs for permission. In this, there is a dialogue with a Constitution based on human rights which includes the rejection of any unfair discrimination on the grounds of one's sexual orientation

Both the particular denomination the minister as marriage officer belongs to and the Constitution can thus be seen as the spheres or instances holding the moral agent accountable. The moral problem thus arises or is accentuated, when a minister as a marriage officer is asked by a same-sex couple to officiate at their union, or asked to bless such a union, and based on his or her use of the Bible, can agree to such a request, but because of the position of the denomination he or she belongs to, holding him or her responsible, cannot consider such a request favourably. The denomination is thus not willing to, at least for the foreseeable future, for one or various reasons, apply for permission for its marriage officers, to officiate at such unions.

It is also possible that a denomination allows its marriage officers to officiate at such unions but because of his or her use of the Bible, the marriage officer, as moral agent cannot agree to such a union. The moral agent is then confronted with a moral problem, that is, that which effects him or her directly in a moral or ethical way. The Act, however, does allow for such marriage officers, to deny such a request based on personal religious or moral grounds.

It is thus clear that what is called for is an ongoing dialogue between Church and Constitution, between different denominations and between those within particular denominations so as to come to a mutual understanding of the moral problem as it relates to same-sex civil unions and within that, the use of the Bible or an ethics of interpretation. Only when the moral agent, the individual and/or denomination/Church, is able to approach the problem from assuming broad moral responsibilities toward God, self and others can this dialogue take place. To approach it from an ethics of conviction/historical objectivism is to prematurely end the dialogue. According to this view, there can not be a formulation of the problem in solidarity with others for it holds to ethical or moral exclusivity or an exclusive approach as described above. Historical objectivism denies the notion of pre-understanding in the moral issue at hand and as such holds to what can be objectively known, thus also claiming that the meaning of the text is closed. This position can thus not lead to dialogue between Christians on what would count as biblical norms in relation to the ethical issue at hand.

The moral problem can also be seen as grounded in the difference between those who see their ethical decision making as broad moral responsibilities one has toward God, others and self and those who seek to base their ethical decision making on their obedience to God in terms of prescribed laws or commandments, thus an objective hermeneutics. Within the Churches, it would seem there is a plurality of ethical approaches. According to an inclusive approach those approaches which hold to an exclusive approach, cannot

contribute to this dialogue. Defining the problem in an ideal type of Christian ethical decision making, leads us to say that the problem is, that in dealing with the issue of same-sex civil unions, some approaches are ‘closed’ in that they are based on ‘objective obedience,’ while others are ‘open,’ that is, they are open to current day categories influencing their decision making, and in so doing they allow for their prejudices to be challenged by the prejudices which make for ways in which responsibility should qualify Christian ethics, and be corrected. This latter approach makes for truth in biblical interpretation whereas an objective hermeneutics cannot lead the interpreter to the truth claim of the text.

## 5.2. Analysis of the situation

The second step is that of an analysis of the situation. “This involves an investigation of the “real context” in which the problem arises (for instance, the social and political framework, the relationships to personal or group life and action), in order to determine how the definition and solution of the respective problem is conditioned by the context.” (Tödt, H 1994: 292) Dealing with context, ethical decision making grounds itself in reality. A reality which is made up of different value systems which can be in conflict. Not only does the moral agent have to deal with a plurality of value systems, but also the reality of a hierarchy of values operating within a context. We have to choose from within a wider context the specific situation in which the moral problem is situated in and this choice or selection depends on the ‘world-views’ and interests of those involved. Included in this step is that the moral agent is being influenced by and thus have to make use of the contributions of those sciences and frames of references which each has something to say about our life-world although each can only do so in a limited way from within its own horizon of meaning. In this way it is already an ethical issue, in determining which sciences will be allowed to say what on the particular issue. We cannot but simplify things in order to deal with ethical issues for we live in a pluralistic society which means that things are not always so clear and self-evident as we sometimes may think. We



thus need to determine what is really at stake. In this step we also gain insight into the origins of the problem, because it is so that the nature of the problem is also a result of what happened in the past on the present.<sup>4</sup>

The first instance in terms of context is the Constitution of South Africa. Section 9(3) of the Constitution states that the state may not unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds which includes sexual orientation. Section 10 provides that everyone has inherent dignity and the right to have their dignity respected and protected and section 15(1) provides that everyone has the right to freedom of conscience, religion, thought, belief and opinion. The Constitution is based on an open and democratic society which is based on human dignity, equality and freedom. It is against this background that the Civil Union Act was promulgated.

The law provides further that any religious denomination or organisation may apply to the Minister to be designated as a religious organisation that may solemnise civil unions in terms of this act. It is clear that within this context there are different value systems operating. The state has a responsibility to uphold the Constitution. Within this responsibility there cannot be, within the dialogue between Church and Constitution, a demand for biblical norms to be upheld against the different value systems and the freedom of conscience of others as we have seen in the description of an exclusive approach. Responsible moral action is opposed to an approach which seeks to 'keep the flame of one's convictions burning,' within a context which is characterised by a plurality of value systems. The context thus addresses the issue of religious obligations related to the Constitution which is based on the separation between religion and state. It thus has to do with the vocation of the Christian as moral agent within the context of society as a whole and especially within this separation between state and Church.

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<sup>4</sup> "Die aard van die problematiek word mede-bepaal deur die voortwerking van die verlede in die hede." (De Villiers, D & Smit, D 1996: 37)

The second instance in terms of the context is the Christian community itself. The plurality in the use of Scripture relating to the issue of civil unions is but one instance of the plurality of ethical views or approaches within the Church. Moral decision making can be based on one of many possible approaches to ethical decision making, which includes, amongst others, ethical theories related to: Principles, Natural Law, Intuition, Laws and Rules, Character and Community. Each of these and other approaches has its own strengths and weaknesses but the issue is whether they lead to responsible moral acts or not. The context, in this way, can thus be seen as that of the conflict between different ways of doing ethics in the life of the Church and the implications of these different ways for the Church and the individual moral agent's approach to the use of the Bible in its or his or her ethical decision making. In this, two approaches, based on their respective fundamental starting points, have been identified, namely, historical objectivism/ethics of conviction and prejudices as the link between past text and current interpreter/ways in which responsibility should qualify Christian ethics. As a fundamental starting point the Church or individual starts out from one of these approaches.

It would thus seem that the Church is a place of ethical diversity. Within Christian ethical decision making there is, basically, four approaches to the use of the Scripture as we have seen in section one and a plurality of exegetical traditions each made up of different approaches or models. There is thus a moral obligation to make use of those approaches and exegetical methods which ascribe to an ethics of responsibility, as opposed to an ethics of conviction, for not all approaches and methods can be responsible. The responsible moral agent cannot celebrate the plurality in the use of the Scripture. Only those approaches which allows for the liberation of prejudices, that is, prejudices as the link between past text and current interpreter, and which allows for the hermeneutical task to be influenced by prejudices which are conformable to the ways in which responsibility should qualify Christian ethics, can lead to responsible use of the Bible.

A third instance in terms of context has to do with our understanding of human sexuality. In other words, the context is that of what sciences has to say about homosexuality. At this moment in time there seems to be a move away from the psychological models used to explain homosexual behaviour to biological explanations, although, "... the biological theories, ... 'seem to have no greater explanatory value,' than the psychosocial models they seek to displace." (Jones, S & Yarhouse, M 2000: 104) In the end it would seem that homosexual behaviour is based on the same grounds as that of heterosexual behaviour, namely, that "... sexual orientation is assumed to be shaped and reshaped by a cascade of choices made in the context of changing circumstances in one's life and enormous social and cultural pressures." (Jones, S & Yarhouse, M 2000: 105) There is thus for the homosexual person, as it is for all persons relating to their sexuality, both genetic and environmental factors present. This modern knowledge in terms of human sexuality does have a bearing on the understanding of what the Bible is saying about homosexuality. For the biblical authors and their readers, as we will see later on, did not have these insights into the matter and looked at homosexuality in terms of their own frames of moral and other references.

A fourth context to be considered is the institution of marriage. Marriage is seen as a life-long union between two people of the opposite sex, male and female, thereby excluding all else. This is still the view of both the state and the Church. The Civil Union Act did not replace the Marriage Act but adds a provision for same-sex couples to have a lawful civil union in which all the privileges and responsibilities of a marriage, under the Marriage Act, are binding.

It is thus clear that the responsible moral agent will take into account and thoroughly analyse the context(s) in which ethical decision making occurs. In doing so he or she will at the same time hold to an overall schema in order to make sense of the diversity or the plurality of viewpoints. This overall schema is based on ways in which responsibility should qualify Christian ethics, prejudices

as the link between past text and current interpreter in the hermeneutical task and the relation between Christianity and ethical decision making.

### 5.3. Behavioral options

Thirdly, Tödt speaks about behavioral options. Here we need to give an answer to the question: What needs to be done? Whether our behaviour would be ‘good?’ And we do so in terms of our moral norms, the context we find ourselves in and the foreseeable consequences of our moral actions. Taking into account the foreseeable consequences of one’s ethical behavior the moral agent also takes into account the effect of his or her behaviour on the freedom of conscience of those who do not share their moral conviction. It also includes the notion that current ethical behaviour relates to the quality of life of future generations. We are engaging in who we have become, as moral agents, without realizing it, and our critical judgments, for asking questions about possible options for behavior we are asking about the different possible options which exists in terms of who we are, in terms of the moral agent remaining true to him or herself.<sup>5</sup> Our ethical behaviour cannot be separated from who we are as human beings.

There is in ethical decision making an overcoming of a legalistic approach in which ethical decision making can be had only in terms of pragmatism and in a technical sense. We have to morally evaluate even our choices in the light of how our ethical choices are going to influence the future. And because we cannot know the future, in an absolute or definitive way, we are forced to acknowledge that ethical decision making cannot happen in a simplistic way. This implies that we, in ethical decision making, have to do with choices based on ethical or moral preferences in terms of giving preference to one rather than the other, rather than between the good and the bad.

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<sup>5</sup> “Welke moontlikhede van reaksie bestaan daar vir ons, sodat ons getrou bly aan onself, aan wie ons is en wil wees.” (De Villiers, D & Smit, D 1996: 38)

Here we move into responsible freedom. It is precisely the context which ask of the moral agent to address the concrete problem in terms of who Christ is for us today. This is to say that in each situation Christ, as the One for the other, takes on, or exercise his deputyship, his being there for the other, according to the demands of the context as we have seen in the discussion on the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Christ acts within the limits of the world or context. Our theology in ethical decision making is thus an incarnational theology. In this sense we may become guilty because not only here and in our earlier steps we can be at fault but to do the ‘wrong’ thing, in terms of principles and rules, for the right reasons. We are sharing in this work of Christ and therefore our options are to be guided by this ‘concreteness,’ of Christ. This is who we are in Christ and any moral behaviour will have to share in this deputyship of Christ.

To not examine the context as fully as is possible and to not explore all possible options for action and to not take into account the foreseeable consequences of one’s moral actions is already a way of not being responsible. We have a responsibility to the text and to those who are influenced by our reading of the text. There can thus not be ethical ‘solutions’ in terms of predetermined laws, principles and rules but rather in what responsible action entails within a certain context. Ethical decision making has to do with applying that which has become for us universal to a particular situation. This application cannot be done in terms of rules but rather in terms of what it is to act with practical wisdom in a given situation. Practical wisdom implies the descriptive function of principles and rules, rather than being prescriptive. In other words, the context provides for what would be good. Only in that way does the universal become applicable.

What needs to be done is the acceptance that homosexual acts are based on the same evaluation as that of heterosexual acts. In other words, all sexual acts should be evaluated on the quality of the relationship or the context in which it happens. In this way, homosexuality is but one aspect or one expression of human sexuality. Homosexual relationships and behaviour can thus be

legitimate in terms of the context in which it happens. The Bible does not condemn homosexual behaviour in and under all circumstances. As we will see later on, the Bible does not refer to homosexuality in terms of the Civil Union Act we have today, or to the kind of homosexual relationship which is being considered today. We can thus not base our ethical decision making on preset rules or principles, based on traditional views of marriage and human sexuality, and legitimised by objective readings of the Bible.

This conclusion can only be drawn if the role of prejudices in ethical decision making is acknowledged. And with that, if there is no separation between our ethical work and our biblical interpretation. It also entails that the different contexts, in this case the dialogue with the Constitution, the understanding of homosexuality and marriage, and the plurality of ethical views, in which ethical decision making happens are taken into account. The consequences of this option, are: The affirmation and acceptance of the homosexual person based on unconditional acceptance and need for intimacy, a move away from discrimination between heterosexual and homosexual people, an allowance for the state to exercise its task in terms of the Constitution, legal rights for homosexual couples, the full participation in the life of the Church by homosexual people and the destigmatisation of homosexual people affirming their dignity and worth as people. In this way the moral agent engages in the optimal accommodation of all relevant value systems.

Concerning an ethics of interpretation such an option will be conformable to the ways in which responsibility should qualify Christian ethics and thus make for responsible moral action. The hermeneutical notion of prejudice as the link between past text and current interpreter is affirmed, which makes for truth in biblical interpretation. Any other option, for instance those proposed by objective readings of the Bible, as we will see in the chapter on the debate in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, will take the moral agent away from acting responsibly within this context.

#### 5.4. Testing the norms

In the next step we must test the (our) norms. In this way we must “...survey and choose among the ethically relevant criteria of decision.” (Tödt, H 1994: 293) We employ norms in order to decide between possible options for action. In our actions we must then ‘activate’ those relevant norms in terms of the issue at hand. We thus have to decide which norms are valid, often within a plurality of conflicting norms. In this task it is not just moral norms which are at play but also our roles in society, in other words, ourselves in relation to the institutional settings in which we find ourselves in. Conflict is caused by norms which are in conflict with one another. It is also caused by the fact that different people have different expectations and wishes. In our wanting to achieve certain aims we find ourselves in conflict with one another. This is followed by what else is needed, namely points of departure, or an overview, which is able to help the moral agent to have in view all conflicting norms and thus being able to make an evaluation of them. In the end it is precisely this overall view which is able to help the moral agent to choose between conflicting norms operating in any given context.<sup>6</sup>

The different relevant ethical criteria chosen from can be explored under the following headings:

Those pertaining to the vocation of the Christian in the South African society. Here there is a focus on what would constitute the ‘good’ South African society and the role of Christians as moral agents in the constituting of moral norms for such a society. Herein, as we have already seen, there is a dialogue with a Constitution based on a separation between State and Church which includes the rejection of any unfair discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation.

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<sup>6</sup> “Uiteindelik is dit die geheel-perspektief van persone wat hulle help om te kies tussen die veelvoud van (botsende) norme...” (De Villiers, D & Smit, D 1996: 42)

Secondly, those pertaining to the relation between ethical decision making and Christianity. In other words, what makes responsibility in Christian ethical decision making, Christian. In this, as we have already seen, we are to adhere to the notion of the concreteness or context of moral action determining the good, as opposed to some universal rule valid for all times and under all circumstances.

Thirdly, those pertaining to the use of the Bible. That is, the hermeneutical notion of prejudices as the link between past text and current interpreter which lead to, in an ideal type of Christian ethical decision making, the use of the Bible being influenced by the ways in which responsibility should qualify Christian ethics. The biblical message is thus to be understood in a new way in each new historical situation.

#### 5.4.1. Vocation and society

Within the context of the challenges presented to the Church by the Constitution of South Africa we can ask about what would constitute the ‘good’ society. In this there is a need to have a Christian consensus on what would constitute a good South African society and secondly to effectively translate this ‘vision’ into the wider South African Society. It has been noted that “...the relation between human rights and the Christian religion is a contested issue in itself.” (Van der Ven, J, Dreyer, J & Pieterse, H 2004: xii) One may also add to it in this way: “... how can religious people consort with nonreligious people in such a way that the former can authentically think and act in terms of their own tradition without striving for religious hegemony over the latter?” (Van der Ven, J, Dreyer, J & Pieterse, H 2004: 256) The Constitution is based on a separation between state and religion. The norm here is to contribute to the constitution of moral norms for both the Christian society and society as a whole. Here we may speak about solidarity and dialogue.



This is also in line with a correct understanding of humanism, that is, that in its insistence on the historical situatedness of humanity, it entails the constitution of moral norms for today or the current situation. In this way it is acknowledged that we live in our own finite historical time which says that whatever is universal for us can only be correctly understood as we apply it to the concrete realities of today's moral issues. For instance, in terms of what constitutes 'a marriage relationship,' we can ask whether a different or new definition would not be able to more correctly define such a relationship for us today. In this task the moral values of the Bible cannot be the only nor final measure for our action. The freedom of conscience of others who are not Christian must also be taken into account and also the freedom of conscience of those who belong to different Christian traditions.

Thus, there is the need to dialogue with others, at the same time being able to put forward an own comprehensive view of what would make for such a good society. Concerning the dialogue within the Christian society, and within the wider society, there is a need for the establishing of moral covenants or partnerships in order to overcome moral dissensus.

In this dialogue the following need to be taken into account:

The specific nature of the political sphere with its own principles. In this way it is also important to take into account the functional and other values operating in any given context. This is not to deny that for the Christian as ethical agent, the moral values coming to us from within our Christian tradition do have some priority, but this is never an absolute. There is always a tension involved, without moral values always being able to replace functional and other values. As we have already seen the priority of religious values comes into play when it is acknowledged that other values are overstepping their mark. In other words, values can have a limiting effect on one another. Within a culture of human rights the values underlining same-sex civil unions are legitimate and the state

operating within its means in order to achieve its goals in terms of non-discriminatory measures for the good of the whole of society. In this way then, the state does what is necessary for the maintenance of order in terms of the Constitution.

What also needs to be considered is the possible outcome or consequences for the foreseeable future of such a dialogue or the lack thereof. What will the effect be, for instance, on the Constitution and on the legal implications for the persons involved, if same-sex civil unions are to be disregarded, or had not been made into law?

The vocation of the Christian as moral agent can only be fulfilled within this dialogue between different value systems and within an ethic which takes seriously the consequences of one's moral action. This is the meaning or role of Christian ethical decision making in the context of South Africa today. The 'good' South African society thus entails an ongoing facilitation between different value systems in order to accommodate them all optimally. In this task principles can only be used in a reflexive manner in dialogue with others.

Another aspect concerning the vision of what constitutes a 'good' South African society, is a need for consensus between Christians on what would a normative biblical basis be. Within this dialogue it has to be accepted or assumed that the Bible, although providing for moral orientation to ethical issues today, is not always so clear on ethical issues and that many biblical norms are simply not in use today. It thus concerns the dialogue between what would constitute truth in biblical interpretation or an ethics of interpretation. Without this consensus and consequent covenant making there seems to be little hope of effectively implementing or fulfilling the role or vocation of the Christian as moral agent. In terms of the vocation of the moral agent which can only be implemented within an ethics of responsibility there needs to be a dialogue on the hermeneutical task

in ethical decision making related to the hermeneutical notions of historical objectivism and prejudices as the link between past text and current interpreter.

In other words, the dialogue needs to include what constitutes truth in biblical interpretation based on epistemological and ontological grounds and thus the role of prejudices in biblical interpretation. It is within this dialogue that the vocation of the Christian as moral agent can be defined.

#### 5.4.2. Christianity and ethical decision making

Christian ethical decision making has to do with responsible freedom. In this freedom the Christian is to ask him or herself: Who is Jesus Christ for us today? This is the basis of one's accountability to God and to others. It is only the concrete context of one's situation which can provide an answer to this question. The Christian needs to work for the transformation of the world. And this work is done within the Christian being a wise person bound to God by love as opposed to preset rules or principles. The wise person "... is aware of the limited receptiveness of reality for principles; for he knows that reality is not built upon principles but that it rests upon the living and creating God." (Bonhoeffer, D 1955: 46) In dealing with the world it takes seriously the reality of this world. Jesus, one can say, acts in a real world, in concrete situations and so make the universal concrete, for each situation demands its own responsible action. In other words, Jesus suffers the reality of the situation. He does not withdraw into timeless principles or rules. Thus, nothing can be said which can be good once and for all but Christ takes form among us in the here and now. Transformation means being drawn into this form of Christ. Although in one sense the form of Christ is and remains the same, that of love of God for humanity in its concreteness, it is willing to take the form in different ways in different situations.

In order to be a real person, the Christian is always the new person before God. And this is to be conformed to the Incarnate. Life is bound to God and to others. In living our deputyship, we are living for the other, as Jesus lived for us. This bond thus calls us to take responsibility for the other as opposed to turning our own ego or the other into absolutes. Ethical ‘perfection’ is thus never reached without taking into account our relationship with the other. There is a closeness between Christ and the world. In interpreting the life and words of Jesus we are in fact interpreting reality. In Jesus this world is loved by God, condemned by God and reconciled by God. “Action which is in accordance with Christ is in accordance with reality because it allows the world to be the world; it reckons with the world as the world; and yet it never forgets that in Jesus Christ the world is loved, condemned and reconciled by God.” (Bonhoeffer, D 1955: 200)

Standing before God we can act obediently yet we are free to act responsibly. “Obedience without freedom is slavery; freedom without obedience is arbitrary self-will.” (Bonhoeffer, D 1955: 220) We can also say that “Responsible action is subject to obligation, and yet it is creative.” (Bonhoeffer, D 1955: 221) In linking Christianity with responsible ethical action the focus shifts to a radical Christology. Christ is, one can say, the link, for in his life we see reality as it is and Christ acting responsibly within specific contexts. And acting responsibly simply means that the universal is related to the particular in a specific way. The moral agent is always engaging in finding criteria for what it means to be human, for Christ deals with humanity in its reality, in his or her current historical context or the historical character of society.

#### 5.4.3 Interpretation and being human

What concerns us has to do with human existence. Interpretation has to do with who we are as human beings. And what has to do with our existence can never be understood in a purely technical way. We are always understanding in one way or the other. And this understanding is made possible by our prejudices. In

the use of language we can see the universal nature of understanding for in order to understand something we must already have some inclination of what it is about. And we understand things in terms of these pre-inclinations or prejudices. In speaking about something we comprehend it. Thus different languages will have different comprehensions or different ways of understanding something. The past speaks to us but the past is only comprehended in terms of the present context. Thus, the norm on which we draw is the humanness in all understanding. Therefore, when we speak about good moral acts it is always in line with this reality. The implication for an ethic of interpretation is that the way we approach texts has to do with who we are as human beings. We are finite creatures yet at the same time this allows for us to be responsible. As Christians we find our identity as the new person in Christ. This identity can therefore not be separated from an incarnational theology. As those who have been resurrected with Christ we know God's grace, even though we are guilty. We also share in Christ's guilt for we do not know what the situation is going to ask of us or how we are going to act in terms of being wise rather than in terms of rules or principles. We may transgress one of God's laws in order to act responsibly. But even in this, although we take responsibility for our moral acts, we have to throw ourselves back onto God's grace. This is our trans-subjective point of reference: Those who have been touched by grace or justified. This is the spirit from which we live.

#### 5.4.4. The use of the Bible as a source for moral norms.

Within a plurality of approaches to the use of the Bible in Christian ethics and exegetical methods it must be said, again, that not all approaches or methods can be responsible. There is a responsibility to the text and to those who will be influenced by our reading of the text. Based on the epistemological work done earlier on and the 'nature' of understanding, the hermeneutical task can only be influenced by the notion that prejudices constitute the link between past text and current interpreter. And in order for our prejudices to be legitimate the

prejudices have to be conformable to the ways in which responsibility should qualify Christian ethics.

We can now put forward the ways in which responsibility should qualify Christian ethics in general as those prejudices which are to influence the biblical hermeneutical task in Christian ethical decision making. This can be done because the ways in which responsibility should qualify Christian ethics are located in the context in which ethical decision making happens. That is, the ethical agent comes to the task already from these pre-understandings, which is a result of the way in which the current day interpreter, as moral agent, is in the world. This is how the current historical situation is able to provide those prejudices which is to influence the hermeneutical task. In failing to acknowledge the role of prejudices, historical objectivism fails to see just how much its prejudices is a result of an own historical situatedness. To then hold to those prejudices as though they are valid for all times and under all circumstances cannot make for truth in biblical interpretation.

Prejudice toward accountability to God, self and others in terms of broad moral responsibilities as opposed to accountability in terms of obedience to principles and rules for moral action. The reading of Romans 1:26–27, as an example, to the issue of same-sex civil unions, is thus not done in terms of, nor the conclusions drawn, to preset principles or rules or obedience to commandments as we find in objective thinking, but rather in terms of the broader moral responsibility we have toward others, God and ourselves. A pure historical-critical reading will only give us what was customary for Israel, in terms of what was the expected norms at the time, but will not lead us to this broader moral responsibility we have for today. This broader moral responsibility thus relates to both our understanding of the ethical issue of same-sex civil unions and our interpretation of the Bible and the influence the one has on the other. Included in this is the responsibility we have toward homosexual people, toward our own Christian communities, and toward the Constitution and by so doing it takes into

account the different value spheres operating within the given context. The points of departure in, and the results of, our exegesis and approaches to the use of the Bible in our ethical decision making, must thus be able to assume this broader moral responsibility.

Prejudice toward dialogue in the constitution of moral obligations with others for our time as opposed to keeping the flame of one's convictions burning regardless of different value systems at play in a particular context. Points of departure in, and the results of, the exegetical task and our approach to ethical decision making, must be able to contribute to the constitution of moral norms for the South African context. It must be able to contribute to dialogue within the Churches and within the wider society on what would constitute the 'good' South African society. In other words, exegesis is a way of contributing to the vocation of the Christian as moral agent. The results of the exegesis must be able to take into account the relationship between the Constitution and the Church and the value sphere in which the state operates. It also includes dialogue within the Church and between Church and state, on issues such as marriage and human sexuality. To be able to enter into dialogue means that the moral agent cannot hold to a position which advocates a closure beforehand.

Prejudice toward taking into account, and taking responsibility for the consequences of one's moral action as opposed to leave the outcome to God or to blame the consequences on others. An ethics of conviction which holds to objective thinking in interpretation is first and foremost concerned with the convictions or principles from which one operates from. The responsibility for the outcomes of moral action is left to God or to others. The responsible person, however, will thoroughly think through the effects of his or her interpretation on the text and on the lives of others and will take responsibility for it. The approach to the use of the Bible and the exegetical results must thus be evaluated in the light of what the consequences might be for those effected.

Prejudice toward the relational nature of ethical decision making as opposed to a substantialist view. Ethical decision making always happens in terms of relationships. Our exegesis must be able to address the issues around relationality. This implies that it be done in such a way, what amounts to practical wisdom within a context, that the relational demands of the situation influences the outcome of our exegesis. Exegesis is thus always done with a view to the other or to the context.

Prejudice toward the world in all its reality and toward the reality of God in the deputyship of Christ Jesus as opposed to timeless principles or laws as absolutes. This is to say that our exegesis must always be done in such a way that it meet the demands of the reality of the world and the reality of who God is for us in Christ Jesus. It thus does not attempt to hide or run away but approaches interpretation in terms of the full reality of the world in its concreteness. Ethical action is always concrete. In this way there is a close relationship between biblical norms and secular norms. They need not be the same but they find their unity in the reality of the world and the reality of God. Biblical interpretation cannot escape this reality. It must thus seek to answer the question about what it means to be human within a certain context. In this, the spirit in which we live is that of the grace of God.

These prejudices are based on, as an ideal type, ways in which responsibility should qualify Christian ethics as opposed to an ethics of conviction and prejudice as the link between past text and current interpreter as opposed to objective historical thinking.

Perhaps, as nowhere else in the Bible, in Romans 1: 26-27, we do have, based on historical objectivism, a 'clear' condemnation of same-sex civil unions. In order to make clear how objective readings of the Bible cannot lead to responsible use of the Bible, this passage is used as an example. This is done by putting in its place the hermeneutical notion of prejudices being the link between



past text and current interpreter which makes it possible for the the use of the Bible to be influenced by the ways in which responsibility should qualify Christian ethical decision making. This then, is what makes for responsible use of the Bible in interpreting Romans 1: 26-27, with a view to the ethical issue of same-sex civil unions.

Reference to Romans 1:26–27.

The exegetical task, as we have seen in chapter one, can also be understood as consisting of three element or stages: “The first stage is a historical–type look at the text concerned with gaining a first “provisional clue” to the establishing of what the text points to and utilizes the results of a variety of historical methods.” (Selby, R 2006: 152) The second stage or element consists of gaining a deeper insight into the subject matter. This stage can also be characterised by reflection for the interpreter must of necessity “... everywhere betray the fact that, consciously or unconsciously ... he has approached the text from the standpoint of a particular epistemology, logic or ethics...” (Selby, R 2006: 153) This leads the interpreter to the truth claim of the text concerning the subject matter. The third stage is to return to the text with this deeper insight into the truth claim of the text. This stage can also be called ‘application,’ although application is already at work, in a Gadamarian sense in the previous stages. Without this, the first element or stage can only be a “... historically aesthetic survey, and reflection only idle speculation.” (Selby, R 2006: 155) There is thus a shift now, from both the reader and authorial intent, to the truth claim of the text concerning the subject matter. With this in mind we can turn to an exegesis of Romans 1: 26–27 as an example, as it relates to the moral problem.

It must, however, be said that these three stages or elements do not follow one another in the sense that the interpreter first engages in step one and then step two and then step three. As with the process of ethical decision making itself, it is rather a case of the interpreter going backwards and forth in his or her

interpretation because it is what happens ‘inside’ the interpreter. It is thus rather the case that already in step one we can discern steps two and three. But steps two and three are necessary for although we start from our prejudices, it can only be critiqued at the end.

Romans 1:26-27: For this reason God gave them up to dishonourable passions. Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural, and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error. (Revised Standard Version)

#### Introduction

In beginning to exegete this text it can be noted that Romans 1: 18–32 had been used in past debates around the issue of general and specific revelation. One of the conclusions reached is that “... man (has) the ability to know God by means of his mental faculties enabling him to deduce certain general principles relating to God’s revelation in the creation, preservation and government of the universe (often called the revelation in nature)” (Kruger, M 2003: 613) The debate then centres around the issue of whether this knowledge is sufficient to be led into saving righteousness or whether humanity also need further revelation, eg. in Jesus Christ, in order to attain full salvation.

The issue is whether revelation, general and specific, condemns same–sex behaviour in and under all circumstances. Romans 1: 24–27 is set within a warning against idolatry, which seems to be the main focus of Paul’s argument. Jewish monotheism is/had been exchanged for pagan idolatry, although it is clear from revelation that monotheistic belief is true and so discernable. This is the basis of their (paganism) culpability before God. An example given of behaviour which is consistent with idolatry is that of unnatural sexual relations.

As the truth is exchanged for the lie so what is natural is exchanged for what is unnatural. Unnatural behaviour is thus to be avoided by those who honor and thank God as (creator/one) God. What is thus seen as natural or unnatural is linked with a view or configurations of social, cultural and religious customs and conventions, including the issue of gender and honor/dishonor.

### A Provisional Clue

There is nothing to doubt that the author is Paul, formerly Saul of Tarsus, a rabbinic Jew who received his training in rabbinical Scriptural study and who comes from a Hellenistic Judaistic background. In 1Thess. 1:9–19 an important observation is made about Paul and his message, namely, “... how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, ...” (Nebe, G 2000: 113) Paul is now at the turning point of his third missionary journey and wish to extend his work further west. In Rom. 1:11 it is indicated that he wants to do so in order to strengthen the believers in Rome, and in chapter 15 Paul gives further reasons for his proposed visit to Rome, namely, that he has already proclaimed the Gospel from Jerusalem to Illyricum, he is on his way to Jerusalem to assist financially with help from Christians in Macedonia and he wants to visit Rome as part of his plan to go further west toward Spain.

The Church in Rome was started by ordinary Christians travelling to and from Rome from all over the known world. The membership is made up of both Jews and gentiles. For the Jewish membership we can note that the letter is in many ways a debate between “... the Pauline gospel and Judaism,” (Kümmel, W 1975: 309) and in “... 9:3ff; 10:1ff; 11:23,28,31; Paul speaks to non-Jews concerning his own people.” (Kümmel, W 1975: 309) In 1:7 the letter is addressed to ‘all in Rome.’ In 1:5–6 and 11:13, Paul states the inclusion of those who have come from pagan, that is, non-Jewish, backgrounds. Rom. 1: 18–32 is thus addressed to a mixed audience.

Rome was a city which, to the Jewish mind, must have been filled with an all encompassing polytheism and idolatry. There is no doubt as to the existence of different cults, public religion, ruler cults and syncretism, as is evidenced in “Extensive building works, expanding cult centres and temples into large complexes ... attested to in this period.” (Van den Heever, G & Scheffler, E ed. 2001: 17) One’s social identity was also constituted by common religious cults and practises which in turn gave rise to correct and incorrect moral behaviour, as the following, from an inscription found at Philadelphia in Asia Minor dated from the first century, states: “Apart from his own wife, a man must not have sexual relations with another woman whether free or slave, neither is he to seduce boy or young girl, nor advise it to anyone else. ... the gods who have been set up in this house are great and they keep watch over these things, and they will not tolerate those who transgressed the ordinances.” (Van den Heever, G & Scheffler, E ed. 2001: 21) Judaism stood in sharp contrast to the paganism of the Graeco–Roman world. For the Jews the fundamental sin was idolatry.

Their religion was characterised by “...a strict allegiance to Yahweh, (and the) rejection of other deities.” (Gnuse, R 1979: 177) For both Jew and gentile Christian then, daily confrontation with paganism was a reality with paganism denounced “... in accord with traditional Jewish reasoning. Although God’s sovereign power was evident to the gentiles in the created order, they chose to worship gods of their own making ... this is their sin, their attempt to exist apart from God.” (Furnish, V 1985: 77)

As already indicated Rom. 1:24–27 forms part of 1:18–32 in its immediate literary context. This passage follows immediately after Paul has stated the theme of the letter in 1:16–17. From 1:18–4:25 we have a development of this theme with 1:18–3:20 showing “On the negative side ... that those outside the gospel stand under the wrath of God.” (Kümmel, W 1975: 306) The theme of 1:16–17 and its subsequent development in Romans is ultimately evidence of God’s saving work in Christ. As background Paul expounds on the relationship

between God and pagan and Jew. Rom. 1:18–32 thus serves as warning to all those who have turned away from God and in doing so are suppressing the truth.<sup>7</sup> Rom. 1:18–4:25 can thus be summed up in this way: God acted “... to bring ... (humanity) into the right relationship with himself. This was necessary because both Jew and non-Jew are under the dominion of sin and are therefore culpable before God .... The relationship has been restored ... (humanity) can share in this ... by faith ...” (Du Toit, A ed. 1996: 51)

It would be fruitful to look at 1:26–27, starting from verse 18 in order to make sense of the passage’ form, structure and movement. In Rom. 1:18–20 we have the following: God’s wrath is directed or revealed against all who suppress the truth. The truth which consists of the revelation of God self in and through God’s works. The conclusion reached is then that the wrath of God is against those who do not believe in and live according to the truth revealed. The next verses move forward by saying that those who do not believe in this revelation have exchanged God for animals. In this way, God is then put on the same level as human beings/animals, or the creator with the creatures.

The next conclusion reached is that, in 24–26a, having exchanged the truth for the lie, God gives those who do so over to their own desires. Those who exchange the truth for the lie, are thus living according to their own desires. In 1:26b–27 we have an example of behaviour that is consistent with those who have been given over because of their exchange of the truth for the lie or Creator for the creatures. 1:24–27 is thus part of the bigger argument of 1:18–32. An argument is thus presented in the form of: If A = B and B = C then A = C. (A) God gave them up. (Those who have exchanged the truth for the lie)<sup>8</sup> (B) Those who have done so live according to their own desires. (C) God gave them up to their own desires. Then follows an example in the form of an anti-model, the purpose of which is to convince the readers to not follow the particular

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<sup>7</sup> “... (wat hulle) van God wegdraai in hulle onderdrukking van die waarheid, (sal) deur God geoordeel (word).” (Cornelius, E 2003: 725)

behaviour mentioned as an example, in this case, unnatural sexual relations. In order to follow his theme in 1:16–17, Paul, in 1:18, puts forward a warning and an example which will not be disregarded for his example should have the status of fact in order to be effective.

Behind Paul’s argument lies his understanding of the doctrine of creation starting with monotheism. For Paul, his ideas about creation and the cosmic world were deeply rooted in or on the Septuagint, Hellenistic–Jewish tradition and Hebrew Scriptures. On the basis that only one God exists he “... sharply distinguishes between creator and creation, monotheism and polytheism, monotheism and worship of idols or demons.” (Nebe, G 2000: 117) Paul has also been influenced by the ideas of Stoicism, who contended “... that the existence and providence of God can be deduced by rational reflection, on the ... world/universe.” (Adams, E 2000: 158) Hellenistic–Judaism again finds a kind of cosmological proof of God’s existence. The difference though between Paul and the Stoics is that for Paul the natural order is that which is intended by the Creator. Paul also speaks, not about the possibility, but the fact of heathens having knowledge of God by revelation in nature. Thus, in spite of knowing God, they suppress the truth for the lie. In other words, they did not honor Him (the One God) and therefore there is no excuse.

The natural order, in the first place, points to One God/Creator (monotheism) and this can be deduced by rational means. It would thus seem that what is important to Paul as that which is against revelation in nature is idolatry which in turn lead to paganism’s refusal to honor and be thankful toward the One God. For Paul there is linked to creation the notion of a well-ordered world. Disobedience is then placed within this well ordered moral universe. There is thus “... a rational, natural order, ... in accordance with which one is expected to live.” (Adams, E 2000: 161) Homosexual behaviour is then given as an

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<sup>8</sup> “... leef in hulle eie begeertes.” (Cornelius, E 2003: 729)

example of behaviour which is not in accordance with this well-ordered universe (which lead to a well-ordered moral order) and thus to be avoided.

The notion of ‘God gave them up’ can only be read with the example, unnatural sexual relations, given. It would seem that the argument is that it is “... this line of behaviour that reveals them as idolaters since their behaviour is a direct tit-for-tat ... outcome of idolatry.” (Malina, B 2002: 145) In line with Paul’s distinction between the ‘us’ and ‘them,’ he (Paul) acts according to the standard “...Judean accusations against Gentile idolatry.” (Malina, B 2002: 144) By this distinction Paul “... claims homosexuality (unnatural sexual relations) is a social, not an individual, consequence of a society’s idolatry.” (Gudorf, C 2000: 134) In the world of Paul, one’s identity was rooted in one’s social environment. Due to the strong social or group identity, the assessment of self and others were to a large degree based on stereotyping. We find thus a strong ethnocentrism which “... divided the peoples of the world in terms of their own broad ethnic reference group and the rest of the world.” (Malina, B 2002: 128) There is thus no reference to the individual per se. “... early Christian authors and their audiences did not at all comprehend the idea of an individual person in his or her uniqueness.” (Malina, B 2002: 128) Homosexual behaviour was thus assessed as morally right or wrong in terms of social networks/functions. Behaviour was controlled by social inhibitions with a resultant lack of personal inhibition. It was thus typical of certain societies, those who engage in idolatry, that their members would engage in unnatural sexual behaviour.

One of the hallmarks of Paul’s understanding of his own community over and against other communities, was the exclusivity which it entails. This exclusivity reached into moral behaviour and had to do with with the categories established by the One/Only God when God created the world. Categories which were understood in terms of Jewish definitions, of “... what is in place (pure, clean) and what is out of place (impure/unclean)” (Malina, B 2002: 394) It was only the pure who could share in what was exclusively Israel’s. We thus see that the

issue of homosexuality, (see Leviticus 18 and 20) first appeared within the context of “... themes of purity and separation from the nations/peoples ...” (Bird, P 2000: 156) There was thus a theological concern “... in the context of an attempt to redefine the boundaries of the community in terms of praxis ... governed by a culturally derived notion of holiness.” (Bird, P 2000: 156)

Taking a closer look at purity/impurity in the life of Israel it is noted that impure or unclean behaviour can be put right or purified through ritual purification. In terms of homosexuality, however, we have to do with prohibitions which were anomalous. It is for “... the Israelite contrary to nature,” (Malina, B 2002: 397) which have no place and thus either to be eradicated through the death penalty or be left to God to penalise the offending nation/group. It would seem that Paul is making use of traditional Israelite categories but because of his Hellenistic–Judean appropriation of such categories uses ‘according to nature’ and ‘against nature.’ Because of this appropriation Paul understands impurity according to sin and not in terms of Old Testament understandings of impurity.<sup>9</sup> Paul was not the only one to appropriate earlier categories as we can see from the use of the command not to sacrifice one’s children to Molech by first century Israelite who believed that to sacrifice their children to Molech was to allow them to intermarry with non–Israelites, i.e. mixed marriages.

What is against nature, as an example, unnatural sexual behaviour, falls under a category that deals with behaviour punishable by death. These categories served not only to protect Israel’s boundaries in relation to other nations/peoples but also her inner solidarity. What happened customarily “... was natural, traceable to origins, to creation.” (Malina, B 2002: 147) To behave differently was to dishonor God and this is what was wrong with pagan society. “What the creator did in Gen.1, then, defines the meaning of “holy” or “in place.” Therefore what does not perfectly fill those categories is “unholy” or “unclean.” The issue lies in

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<sup>9</sup> Paul understands “... onreinheid in die sin van sonde en nie in die sin van Ou Testamentiese reinheid nie.” (Dreyer, Y 2004: 185)



knowing the symbolic categories of the culture so as to identify what does not perfectly fit them.” (Neyrey, J 1996: 88) What was customarily, or fitted them perfectly, for Paul and his readers was the “... categorisation of people on the basis of gender.” (Malina, B 2002: 146) For all Mediterraneans “... of antiquity the gendered self was essential either male or female, each with nature given, distinctive, gender based social expectations.” (Malina, B 2002: 146)

Males were: dominant, active, penetrating, seed bearing, active, had a concern for family honor, represented the family to the outside and like father, like son. Women, on the other hand were: passive, controlled, seed receiving, had a concern for family shame, represented the family to the inside and like mother like daughter. This gender based understanding of the differences between male and female would have informed Paul and his readers relating to any kind of interaction between the two groups. We are thus dealing with unnatural sexual relations in terms of gender based categories and with honor and dishonor for “Honor and dishonor played a dominant part in moral instruction ... the phrases “it is disgraceful” and “it is noble” (rather than “it is right” or “wrong”) (is used as sanctions for behaviour. (deSilva, D 2000: 24) It was thus crucial to be seen to behave properly according to one’s gender. Unnatural or against nature, would then imply that such behaviour transgresses male and female gender boundaries leading to the dishonoring of the male/female gender. The early Christians, in line with their Jewish counterparts were very concerned to preserve the male role. The male, in homosexual behaviour, can become like female: seed receiving, passive, controlled and so on. The same then applies to women: Women could not take control in sexual relations for to do so would be a transgression of femaleness. Such behaviour then, “ ... ignore(s) the realities of gender ... reducing sex to mere pleasure.” (Botha, P & van Rensburg, F 2004: 42) The function of sexual relations were thus seen in terms of procreation, going back to creation and “... the embedment of the woman into the man and the group of which he is a member.” (Dickson, C 2002: 358) What was thus

natural for Paul was that male and female would be obedient to the creational intent and as it relates to sexuality it would have meant procreation.

It would thus seem that Romans 1: 24–27 could be read in the following way or points us to the following: They, that is, those societies, who have exchanged worship of God, for idolatry, or Creator for creatures, are given over, tit–for–tat, to sexual behaviour that transgresses gender and honor based social expectations and roles. Boundaries which had their origin in God (monotheism) and creational intent and as first expressed in Israelite social, cultural and religious customs and conventions. This served to maintain her exclusivity as a nation. This is why same–sex relations is against what is natural and thus punishable by death or those who engage in such behaviour are given over to the wrath of God: Because they do not fit what is socially natural or customary. This was typical of those societies who did not honor the One and only God.

A deeper insight into the subject matter

In dealing with the provisional clue we have already extended the traditional historical-critical method by approaching the text from current categories related to the subject matter, as in, for instance, the difference between the cultural notion of moral behaviour embedded in one’s social network as opposed to the current understanding of behaviour as a consequence of or embedded in one’s individuality. This have enabled us to have a deeper insight into the subject matter.

The provisional clue to the text is based on a reading which do not ascribe to the subject matter being seen as a preset rule or commandment which is valid for all times and under all circumstances. The author’s intent is broadened to include categories of behaviour with which we are dealing with today. In this way, the horizon of meaning from which the interpreter comes to the text has been fused with the horizon of meaning of the text. This is how interpretation works. The

link between past text and current interpreter is thus, inter alia, constituted by this prejudice, namely, that we are to assume broad moral responsibilities toward God, self and others. This we can only do within our current context. Our context, as we have seen, consist of: the dialogue between religion and state, the Church as a place of ethical diversity, the modern understanding of human sexuality, and the institution of marriage. In bringing to the text the context in which our ethical decision making happens, we are thus able to make concrete for today, Paul's understanding of same-sex behaviour.

A society based on a Constitution such as that of South Africa cannot, in terms of the Constitution, 'tolerate' unfair discrimination on sexual grounds. The responsible politician will have to uphold the Constitution. The reading of the Bible can thus be used in the dialogue as to what would constitute the good South African society.

In terms of our moral responsibility to the text, we have not moved outside of the subject matter of the text. It is clear that Paul speaks about homosexual behaviour. In this way we cannot say that Paul has nothing to say to us about such behaviour. However, in coming to the text from our current understanding or context, it is also clear, from what we now know about the subject matter, that Paul does not speak about such behaviour within the context which is being considered today. He does not speak in terms of our Constitution and our understanding of human sexuality. In our responsibility to others we have been able to open up the way for those in such homosexual relationships to be accepted. In this way we have also been able to be responsible to God, also in terms of the broader themes in the Bible, which include the notions of love and justice and to fall back, by applying the universal only in a certain way and not in another way, onto the spirit from which we live, namely, that of grace. We have done so by engaging in the concreteness of moral action, which is, as we have seen, in line with what it means to follow Christ. That is, like Christ we

have allowed the concrete situation to co-determine what would constitute Christian moral action as opposed to only adhering to timeless principles.

To put it differently: we live from the spirit of God's grace, in which we are to be there for the other in his or her concrete reality. Our responsibility to God can never ignore or neglect this concrete reality of the other, as we have seen in the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In this way Paul's message, based on the concrete realities of today, is able to speak into the situation in which we live today. By not engaging in the text as a commandment or fixed rule we fall back onto God's grace. In this way our exegesis has been relational in that the relationships in which same-sex behaviour is being expressed in, also that of our ethical action, is taken seriously and also in the sense that the consequences of our exegesis has been taken seriously.

The provisional clue have been influenced by all of these. In the exegesis modern day categories, made possible by our prejudices which were conformable to the ways in which responsibility should qualify Christian ethics, were thus used to the understanding of the text. We have also adhered to the hermeneutical notion that in reading texts from the past we are already engaging in application. That is, application is not something which is added on after the author's intent has become clear. Already in coming to the text we have been able to apply it for today. It became clear that Paul speaks of same-sex unions only within a certain context. This context is different than the context with which we are dealing with today.

The provisional clue is characterised by the ways in which responsibility should qualify Christian ethics, in that the fundamental starting points from which we have worked from, are conformable to the ways in which responsibility should qualify Christian ethics. The approach and the exegetical method used is thus able to ascribe to those prejudices which are conformable to the ways on which responsibility should qualify Christian ethical decision making.

When going back to what were said earlier on, (Chapter one), on the plurality of the approaches to the use of the Bible, and exegetical methods used, in Christian ethical decision making, it would seem that, within an ideal type of Christian ethical decision making, we can only make use of those approaches and methods which take seriously both principles as descriptive moral guidelines and the context in which ethical decision making happens. We can thus not, in general, use those approaches and methods which subscribe to the Bible as being a book of laws or codes, in the form of commandments or ordinances, for human conduct, in which the meaning, usually derived from the author's intent, is understood to be valid for all times and under all circumstances.

We can also add to what have already been said by pointing out that Natural law "...deduces rules of human behaviour from the rational observation of natural phenomena." (Pityana, N 1994: 49) Natural law thus allows for the use of reason in the moral discerning process. Natural law then seeks to make us aware that some human behaviour can be contrary to nature and thus against the human reasoning behind such a viewpoint. When one deals with the issue of homosexuality in terms of biology it seems that there is, based on the anatomy of male and female "... a sense of revulsion toward a practise that is "not done here"." (Bird, P 2002: 157) But as we have already indicated, Romans 1: 26–27 does not deal with homosexuality in these biological terms. For Paul, contrary to nature, "... cover all those behaviours in Israel that are anomalous and punishable by death." (Malina, B 2002: 405) Thus we can conclude that in terms of what is natural and unnatural we can only work according to the categories found in Scripture and those categories have to do with what was customary for Israel. In dealing with the issue of same-sex behaviour Paul thus works from his own rationale as to what constitutes what is natural. But human reason and the knowledge it gains are characterised by finiteness. Therefore, we use categories relevant for today in reading the biblical text so as to find the application or meaning of the text for today.

Working from within our own prejudices it is clear that the distance between what was customary for Israel and current notions of what is customary makes it possible for us to understand the text in its current day application. A ‘pure presuppositionless’ historical objective reading, in which the role of prejudices is being denied, is thus not possible. To then use those categories for a ‘straight-forward’ application for today would be to deny the historical distance which makes understanding possible in the first place. In this way the text, or the subject matter of the text, is able to correct the prejudices embedded in objective readings of the Bible, the most important of which is the prejudice against prejudices.

We can also note that as the notion that the condemnation of same-sex behaviour is based on biological grounds, which often characterises objective readings of this text, comes face to face with the prejudices in the text, that is, the fundamental starting points in Paul’s thinking, this notion is overturned by same-sex behaviour defined in terms of social roles. Again, the historical distance between the text and the current day interpreter makes this clear and so the current day interpreter cannot hold to a prejudice which advocates a condemnation of same-sex behaviour on biological grounds. At least he or she can not hold to such a position based on Romans 1: 26-27.

The creation accounts themselves nowhere indicates the institution of heterosexual marriage. These accounts served rather to explain what was already in place, including the roles of male and female. It is thus explained in terms of a society constituted in terms of gender based identities. What was natural or unnatural had to do with categories of behaviour made customary in and through a people’s experience of their social and moral world. Marriage is a social or cultural institution with legal implications. It is thus not a religious institution in nature. “Marriage as ‘ordained’ by God has no biblical foundation, especially not according to the traditional quoted Genesis 2: 18.” (De Villiers, G 2007:

110) In today's world the role of men and women within marriage relationships is also changing and does not reflect the biblical view of a patriarchal society.

When dealing with the issue of human sexuality a distinction can be made between an essentialist and a social constructionist approach. "Essentialist .... refers to a view that given phenomena in human beings can be understood with reference to an inherent 'essence' residing in the individual," (Szesnat, H 1997: 337) and a social constructionist view refers to "... a perspective on human sexuality .... that... (it) is a social construct." (Szesnat, H 1997: 340) For an essentialist an important point of departure is the biological nature of human beings and gender is then grounded in one's sexual anatomy. Homosexuality can then be used to refer to an aspect of human beings which is culturally independent. The view of the social constructionist is that "Sexuality as such is not an independent category, objectively definable in every culture and historical context: Each culture determines what is 'sexual' and what is not." (Szesnat, H 1997: 341) Sexuality is thus to be viewed in terms of a complex set of human relations and interactions. Human sexuality can thus only be understood in relation to other social and cultural factors, which includes power and gender. Or to put it yet again differently: "The appropriation of the human body and of its physiological capacities by an ideological discourse." (Szesnat, H 1997: 342) We can then also say that although biology does not cause human behaviour it does condition it. Human sexuality is also understood today in terms of the individualism of today's western culture.

Returning to the text

The third step in exegesis is to return to the text with the new insights gained. In reality, these insights were already at work from the very beginning of the exegetical task. The question is whether the interpreter was aware of the prejudices influencing his or her exegesis. In returning to the text, it is now clear that there is a distinction to be made between the understanding of homosexuality

and homosexual relationships in Romans and current day understandings. In this way it is clear that Romans 1: 26-27, does not address the issue of homosexuality in the way that we are today. Although it certainly does say something about homosexual behaviour it would be very difficult to justify a condemnation of homosexual behaviour between two people who are professing Christians in a faithful, loving and homogenous relationship which is implied in same-sex civil unions considered today. This conclusion drawn is based on prejudices being conformable to the ways in which responsibility should qualify Christian ethics. There is thus an acknowledgement of, and reflection on, the prejudices influencing the hermeneutical task in Christian ethical decision making.

This responsible use of Romans 1: 26-27 leads us to say that this text does allow for same-sex civil unions within the current day South African moral context. From this we can thus conclude that in our ethical decision making the biblical norms pertaining to same-sex behaviour does not condemn same-sex civil unions.

#### 5.5. The judgement as decision

In the next step in ethical decision making we are dealing with the judgment as decision. It entails "... an active self – determination: "I make up my mind ...." To do such and such." (Tödt, H E 1994: 293) Here we are dealing with the historical situatedness of the moral agent. It serves as a limiting factor in ethical decision making for we can only see from within our own finitude. Reason or our rationality is itself historically situated. In this sense our moral action does not in the first instance consist of the rational nature of humanity but rather on the responsibility we have as human beings in dialogue with other human beings. It is only in solidarity with others that we can make our ethical decision making.



From the norms identified and the results thereof the moral agent is now in a position to say that he or she, as part of his or her vocation as a Christian moral agent in the current South African context, subscribes to the position that the Church should sanction same-sex civil unions. This position has proved itself to be accepted by many but especially in terms of our Constitution it is a position which makes for a good South African society in which unfair discrimination has no place. From within this context, this situation, as far as the moral agent can 'see,' this would be the most responsible position to take.

This position is also in line with the hermeneutical notion of prejudices being the link between past text and current interpreter which makes for truth in biblical interpretation.

#### 5.6. Retrospective adequacy control

And lastly we engage in retrospective adequacy control for judgments "... are often made in a tentative and preliminary manner." (Tödt, H E 1994: 293) We may, for instance, decide to re-evaluate whether the solution really addresses the problem we have started out with. Ultimately we are concerned with whether our choice of action fulfills our sense of own identity.

Having started out from particular prejudices which is a result of the kind of person one is, in a moral sense, which conforms to ways in which responsibility should qualify Christian ethics, the decision reached is a position which is conformable to those prejudices and can thus be forwarded as part of one's contribution to the ongoing dialogue within the Churches and within the wider South African society as to whether the Churches should sanction same-sex civil unions or not.

The problem in Christian ethical decision making, that is, the separation between ethical and biblical work has been overcome and the role of prejudices



has been investigated so as to determine whether they fulfill the criteria for ways in which responsibility should qualify Christian ethics in general.

## Chapter five

### **The debate in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa and responsible use of the Bible**

#### 1. Introduction

In a summary of the debate, DEWCOM (The Doctrine, Ethics and Worship Committee of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa) identified four ethical views on same–sex relations, linking the ethical views with their particular biblical/moral basis. In the document: ‘Christians and Same–Sex Relationships, A Discussion Guide for the Methodist People of Southern Africa,’ (DEWCOM 2003) ethical decision making in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa is influenced by four ‘pillars,’ namely: Scripture, Reason, Tradition and Experience.

In the use of Scripture three approaches are identified, namely, a first approach which focus on what is explicitly stated in Scripture in an objective way, neglecting the historical and cultural distance between current and biblical times. A second approach subjects particular biblical passages to the wider witness of Scripture as a whole and a third approach sees the Bible as the living Word of God or document in the life of the Church, which is interpreted to us by the Holy Spirit leading to new and fuller understandings of the biblical witness in each new situation.

In terms of reason the document identifies two key influences on moral–theological thought in the debate, namely: Natural Law and the influence of the Scientific Age. Dealing with tradition there is an exploration into the views of the Historical Church, the Contemporary Church, World Methodism and other denominations. Experience focusses on the narratives of homosexual persons.

## 2. Four different views

In the summary the ethical views and their respective biblical bases are as follows: The four views are identified as: rejecting–punitive, rejecting–non–punitive, qualified acceptance and full acceptance. In the first view, that which is being described as rejecting–punitive, the ethical view is that both homosexual orientation and behaviour are rejected which lead to a punitive attitude toward homosexual persons. The biblical basis is that only heterosexual, monogamous marriages are allowed as the only place for legitimate sexual intercourse. It also leads to homosexual people being excluded from the life of the Church for they can have no place in God’s Kingdom.

The second view, described as rejecting–non–punitive, holds that a distinction is to be made between orientation and behaviour. Homosexual behaviour is condemned as unnatural and thus as against God’s intention or purposes. The homosexual person is thus treated with compassion as one who stands in need of healing and thus the Church’s ministry. Again the biblical view is that heterosexual, monogamous marriage is the only legitimate place for sexual intercourse. The Bible in this instance condemns only homosexual behaviour. The consequence is that it is expected of homosexual people to remain celibate while playing a meaningful role in the Church. In this way sexual intimacy is denied for homosexual people and they are, in the final instance, in need of healing and the Church’s ministry.

In the third view, described as qualified-acceptance, there is an affirmation of God’s heterosexual intent, thus indicating that if it is possible for the homosexual person to change his or her sexual orientation he or she is morally obligated to do so. Those who cannot should thus remain celibate. However, if this is impossible, then homosexual behaviour can only happen within a relationship which can be defined as adult and monogamous. In this way then homosexuality, although seen as a distortion is not condemned. Turning to the use of the Bible it is then said that

homosexual orientation is clearly a result of the fallenness of humanity and is therefore not part of God's creative intent. God does, however, allow for same-sex relationships on the grounds of God's mercy and compassion. Sexual intercourse must thus be heterosexual but there is a compassionate approach to homosexual people, for both healing and intimacy. Same-sex behaviour is thus allowed under certain conditions.

The fourth view, described as full acceptance, holds that homosexual acts or behaviour are to be evaluated on the same grounds as that of heterosexual acts. In this way same-sex relationships do fully express God's purpose for marriage. In other words, all sexual acts should be evaluated by the quality of the relationship in which it happens. Homosexual orientation is thus just one aspect of human sexuality and thus part of God's creative intent. The Bible, in speaking about homosexuality, does not refer to homosexual behaviour in terms of the kind of relationship, we are speaking about today.

### 3. The debate and responsible use of the Bible

From the work already done it is clear that the biblical basis, referring here to the use of Romans 1: 26-27, for an ethical view, relating to the issue of same-sex civil unions, is that the Bible does not primarily speak about homosexuality in terms of the kind of civil unions which is being considered today. From our exegesis it is thus clear that homosexual behaviour in Romans 1: 26-27, does not refer to the kind of relationship we are considering today. In exegeting Romans 1:26 -27, the 'more' we know about the subject matter, that is, the prejudices from within which we have approached the subject matter of the text and the relation between the text and our ethical decision making it is clear that this text deals with homosexuality in terms of what was the expected norm of the day and not in terms of today's understanding of same-sex civil unions, which is based on individual choices and which implies a faithful, loving, relationship between two consenting adults.

This exegetical work is based on prejudices which are conformable to the ways in which responsibility should qualify Christian ethics in general. On epistemological and ontological grounds it has been shown that an objective reading of Scripture is not possible anymore. Historical objectivism or objectivity in biblical interpretation has been undone by the movement in hermeneutics. This movement has led to new insights related to not just the text but also the current interpreter standing in his or her own historical situation and each new situation brings forth its own prejudices, which is not something negative, but precisely that which makes interpretation possible in the first place. Truth in interpretation is thus found in the hermeneutical notion of prejudices constituting the link between past text and current interpreter.

Concerning the three approaches to the use of Scripture in the debate, it is now clear that only the second and third approaches would, to a lesser or greater degree, fulfill the criteria for responsible use of the Bible in ethical decision making. The first approach in which there is a neglect of the distance between past text and current interpreter and in which there is a preference to ‘directly’ translate the text into today’s context, in an objective way, does not fulfill such criteria. With the second approach, which subjects certain passages to wider themes running through Scripture, there is a constant critique of texts and thus can be corrected in terms of these broader themes, for instance the revelation which we find in Jesus Christ. There is within this approach the element of the concreteness of the situation. The third approach takes this one step further by arguing that there is, in biblical interpretation, an openness to the ongoing truth, being revealed through the ongoing ministry of the Spirit. This ongoing work is being unfolded as the Church grows in her capacity to understand God’s revelation in a new way in each new historical situation. It would thus seem that this third approach comes nearest to responsible use of the Bible in Christian ethical decision making as understood in this (current) work or thesis.

These approaches have also not moved outside of the three other pillars, namely, reason, experience and tradition. In terms of tradition we have seen that tradition can only be had in its current day application. In this way tradition is always about something old and something new. Experience, as the narratives of those affected by the issue of same-sex civil unions, is also taken into account. Although our prejudices come about as a result of our experiences, or historical situatedness, which implies a legitimacy of different experiences, the question is whether those prejudices lead to responsible use of the Bible in Christian ethical decision making. It is precisely this difference in historical situations which makes understanding possible. We cannot celebrate the plurality of the use of the Bible in Christian ethical decision making. Prejudices can come face to face with other prejudices and thus be ‘corrected.’ We can thus explore the possibility of whether our prejudices lead to responsible use of the Bible or not.

In dealing with reason we have seen how Natural Law is subject to human reason. We have also applied the current day understandings of sexuality and homosexual relationships to the exegesis.

#### 4. Conclusions reached

The Summary then comes to the following conclusion as to the consequences of implementing the second and third approaches:

“1. The assumption that the Bible condemns unequivocally every expression of the modern–day experience of homosexuality is without adequate foundation.

2. Any dehumanisation, rejection, oppression or injustice experienced by a homosexual person is contrary to the loving intentions of God.

3. The attitude of the Church towards homosexual people should be patterned upon the ministry of Christ, who welcomed the outcasts and touched the untouchables.

4. The ongoing witness of the Spirit can free the church from the shackles of oppressively time–bound understandings and interpretations of the Scriptures.

(Perhaps here one can refer to the tyranny of prejudices when not liberated or understood in a positive sense)

5. The Spirit helps the Church to engage rigorously with the Scriptures in order that the Living Word of God might be heard and known in every age.

In order to have reached such a conclusion, it would seem that the authors, although not explicitly referring to it, are aware of the influence of prejudices in the interpreting task. That is, they have used current day categories in order to interpret the text. The prejudices are rather discernable in the descriptions and conclusions came to. Only an awareness, even though it may be limited, of prejudices can ask for ‘new understandings in new times.’

An explicit reference to prejudices in the debate, and this is not in relation to the use of Scripture, is in a document, entitled: ‘Christians and Same – Sex relationships: An alternative guide to the Discussion Guide,’ (Morgan, D 2007) in which it is said: “There can be no place for prejudice amongst God’s people. Have we forgotten that we are all sinful and unworthy of any of God’s great grace and riches – lay, clergy, saved and unsaved? How dare we pretend that we are acceptable and others not! This prejudice applies to many groupings:

- Homosexuals
- Other races
- Lay people who are made to feel unworthy by some clergy
- Alcoholics
- Beggars, hobos and other ‘undesirables.’”

Again here we see the ‘negative’ connotations that prejudices has. As long as prejudices are not ‘liberated,’ that is, understood as something positive, that which makes understanding possible in the first place, the different documents will reduce prejudices to this negative connotation. The question is whether our prejudices are legitimate or not. Even though our prejudices, for instance, toward homosexual people, can be positive, in terms of the understanding of prejudices





above, in other words, we are to accept ‘them,’ and ‘love’ them, when it comes to the use of the Bible there is a falling back onto objectivism, which makes such acceptance and love not possible. In other words, it plays no role in our understanding of the biblical text. The issue of prejudices in Christian ethical decision making has not yet been answered in an explicit way in the debate.

## Conclusion

The aim of this thesis is to lead the interpreter as moral agent to responsible use of the Bible in Christian ethical decision making. In doing so, it demonstrated that historical objectivism can no longer make for truth in biblical interpretation. In the place of historical objectivism, it positioned the hermeneutical notion that prejudices constitute the link between past text and current interpreter. One consequence of this link is that the prejudices influencing the interpretative task, can be questioned, as to whether they are conformable to the ways in which responsibility should qualify Christian ethics in general.

The Bible is being used responsibly in Christian ethical decision making, when the prejudices influencing the hermeneutical task, are conformable to the ways in which responsibility should qualify Christian ethics in general. In an ideal type of Christian ethical decision making the one leads to the other, for both has to do with a fundamental attitude one takes toward ethical decision making and thus toward one's ethics of interpretation in relation to a specific moral issue, in this case, that of same-sex civil unions. This has led to the conclusion that Romans 1: 26-27 cannot be used to condemn same-sex civil unions, but rather that, based on this text, the Church should sanction such unions.

This is not a journey into relativism for the truth claim of the text has been respected at all times, in terms of what makes for truth in biblical interpretation. As it has now become clear, objectivity in biblical interpretation cannot engage with the truth claim, precisely because of its rejection of prejudices influencing the hermeneutical task, and can therefore not lead to responsible use of the Bible in Christian ethical decision making. Only in this way: from ways in which responsibility should qualify Christian ethics and the hermeneutical notion of prejudices as the link between past text and current interpreter, can the moral problem of same-sex civil unions be addressed for there is an acknowledgement of and investigation into the prejudices influencing one's ethical decision making.

There is thus no separation between the Christian moral agent's ethical and biblical work.

Within the debate on whether the Church should sanction lawful same-sex civil unions or not, it is also clear that if the Church should not sanction such unions it is not acting morally responsibly, in terms of its vocation within the current day South African context. In insisting on not sanctioning such civil unions within the South African context today, that is, in its refusal to apply for permission for its marriage officers to officiate at such unions, it may operate in terms of certain principles or rules, that is, holds to historical objectivism, but it is clear that these rules or principles, and thus historical objectivism, do not always lead to responsible action in Christian ethical decision making.

On the positive side, however, is the Church's ongoing dialogue as to what to do, that is, what is the morally right thing to do. This dialogue is included in what it means to act responsibly. There is thus a moral obligation on the Church's ministers, especially its marriage officers, and members to contribute to this dialogue.

Perhaps, in the end, one can say, firstly, that:

**Prejudices is God's way of reminding a forgetful humanity  
of its finiteness as opposed to God being infinite**

And secondly that:

**Prejudices is, at the same time, God's gift, for it makes all  
understanding, also understanding for moral action, possible**

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## ABSTRACT

Undoing closure: Responsible use of the Bible in Christian ethical decision making.

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Contemporary Christian ethical decision making includes a move toward responsibility, that is, ways in which responsibility should qualify Christian ethics in general. Linking the ways in which responsibility should qualify Christian ethics with the process of ethical decision making itself as an ideal type, it clarifies the prejudices which make for responsible use of the Bible in Christian ethical decision making. When the prejudices influencing the hermeneutical task in Christian ethical decision making are conformable to the ways in which responsibility should qualify Christian ethics, the Bible is used in a responsible way in Christian ethical decision making.

Responsible use of the Bible is linked with the hermeneutical notion that prejudices constitute the link between past text and current interpreter. This leads to the text being understood in new way(s) in each new historical situation. In this way it is able to undo the notion that the link between past text and current interpreter can be had from historical objectivism, with its prejudice against prejudices in Biblical interpretation, and which holds that the meaning of a text is restricted to what the original author intended. Once this original meaning has been uncovered it becomes valid for all times and under all circumstances, and can therefore be closed. This closure is then linked with an ethics of conviction, as opposed to the ways in which responsibility should qualify Christian ethics.



In exegeting Romans 1: 26-27, as an example, within an ideal type of Christian ethical decision making, it is shown how the interpretation of the text is influenced by the ways in which responsibility should qualify Christian ethics in general. This makes for a new understanding of the text related to the context in which the interpretation happens. As an example it is thus able to show how prejudices can influence the hermeneutical task in Christian ethical decision making. It makes for a responsible reading of the text for the prejudices which are allowed to influence the hermeneutical task are conformable to the ways in which responsibility should qualify Christian ethical decision making. In this way the exegesis of the text is able to show that the understanding of a text, in an ideal type of Christian ethical decision making, is subject to prejudices as that which makes all understanding, also understanding for moral action possible.



**Key Terms:**

Responsibility

Prejudices

Historical Objectivism

Ideal type

Ontological

Epistemological

Practical wisdom

Vocation

Hermeneutics

Conviction

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