

Biblical perspectives on the ministry and mission of the church – with special reference to human rights¹

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ABSTRACT

Christianity is the religion of the majority of the South African population (between 60%–70%) and has great influence within South African society. Unfortunately, as in the case of any great power and source of such tremendous influence, its effect can be ambiguous. It can not only do good but also bad. In this paper this ambiguity is addressed with specific reference to the role of the Bible in public life. It is argued that, on the one hand, the use of the Bible as well as the Bible itself can be a serious stumbling block in the way of the promotion of respect for human rights, and, on the other hand, that the Bible can play an important role in the promotion of a culture of human rights in South Africa. In the first part of the paper four preliminary issues are discussed, namely, (i) important general distinctions in our understanding of human rights, (ii) the complexity of the Bible, (iii) the complexity of the contemporary interpretation of the Bible and (iv) the issue of the use of the Bible in public discourse. Following this, the paper deals with the dark side of the use of the Bible with regard to human rights issues and possible strategies to deal with this dark side. The paper concludes with a few remarks about the bright side of human rights and the Bible.

1. THE SOCIAL, CONTEXTUAL AND PUBLIC DIMENSIONS OF THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

It is not the aim of this paper to deal at length with the controversy about Christian missionary work. It is well known that the 19th century missionary activities of Christian churches went hand in hand with Western colonialism. It is also well known that the

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exclusivist claims of a number of religions (for example, the Christian claim *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*; “outside the church there is no salvation”), is a highly contentious position to hold today in our global village. However, it would be unfair, therefore, to discredit the whole missionary enterprise on the basis of its negative and controversial aspects. The contribution of missionaries to literacy, development and health services in many places in the world speaks for itself. It is, nevertheless, clear that much depend therefore on *how we understand and define mission*. Aspects of the following three understandings of mission appeal to me:

1.1 The formulation of the Nairobi assembly of the World Council of Churches (1975):

The Gospel is good news from God, our Creator and Redeemer ... The Gospel *always* includes the announcement of God’s Kingdom and love through Jesus Christ, the offer of grace and forgiveness of sins, the invitation of repentance and faith in Him, the summons to fellowship in God’s Church, and command to witness to God’s saving words and deeds, *the responsibility to participate in the struggle for justice and human dignity, the obligation to denounce all that hinders human wholeness*, and a commitment to risk life itself (my italics).

1.2 The formulation of David Bosch (1980:18):

... mission ‘gives expression to the wholeness of God’s involvement through the church with the world. It identifies some of the frontiers the church should cross in her mission to the world. These frontiers may be ethnic, cultural, geographical, religious, ideological or social. Mission takes place where the Church, in her total involvement with the world and the comprehensiveness of her message, bears testimony in word and *deed in the form of a servant*, with reference to unbelief, *exploitation, discrimination and violence*, but also with reference to salvation, *healing, liberation, reconciliation and righteousness*’ (my italics).

1.3 The formulation of Alan Neeley (1996):

Communicating the Gospel to the world involves much more than verbalising the salvation story. The mission of the church is an inclusive, holistic calling that involves *transformation* not only of individuals, but of *social contexts* as well (my underscoring italics).

From my underscoring it will be clear which aspects of the mission of the Church I wish to emphasise. By underscoring the social, contextual and public aspects of the mission of the Church, I do not want to ignore the personal dimension of mission. If the personal or faith dimension is deleted from the way we understand mission, the Church becomes only yet another NGO involved in community development and social welfare. It loses its identity and in the process perhaps also its effectiveness.

However, if the social, contextual and practical dimension is deleted from our understanding of the mission of the Church, the most important problem is not that the resulting pietistic and individualistic mission will be irrelevant and a form of escapism. The more serious problem is that forms of right wing ideology are smuggled in and social and economic practices that are actually to the detriment of people, are unconsciously or consciously being promoted by the Church (Gifford 1989:39). In this paper I will thus focus on Biblical perspectives *on the social, contextual and public dimensions of the mission of the Church*. More specifically I want to talk about the role of the Church to promote respect for human rights and a culture of human rights.

2. THE CHURCH AND THE PROMOTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

Max Stackhouse is an American Christian ethicist who has been arguing for a “public theology” in many of his publications (cf 1984, 1985, 1987, 1996). His 1984 book, *Creeds, society, and human rights: A study in three cultures*, stands as a landmark in his drive for the recognition of the importance of a public theology by the churches. In this book Stackhouse traces both the secular and the religious influences on the development of human rights. He argues that the values that underpin the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are inextricably linked to major tenets of the Christian religion (Stack-

house 1984:31). Obviously nobody can or wants to deny the foundational influence of secular theorists (like John Locke) on the development of human rights. Nevertheless, the existence today of numerous bills of human rights and a whole spectrum of human rights instruments (internationally, regionally and in most modern specific states), is to a significant extent a legacy of the Christian church.

I believe (with many others, see Stackhouse 1985:13-21; De Gruchy & Villa-Vicencio 1994:193-197; Villa-Vicencio 1992) that it remains a fundamental element of the mission of the Church today to nurture this legacy. The need for this becomes clear if we consider assessments of the state of human rights in the world today. For example, Warden (1993:988) writes:

... while much has been done, we are in no way within sight of the target of a world where the scrupulous upholding of the UDHR is the rule rather than the exception. Without investment of *vastly increased resources into the development of human rights consciousness on a global scale*, the likelihood is that deprivation and abuse will become more pronounced rather than less, and that dignity and respect will be the preserves of the small elite even more in future than it was in the past.

In his message in the January 1997 issue of *HSHR News*, the newly appointed UN High Commissioner of Human Rights, Jose Ayala-Lasso, lists a number of accomplishments in the area of human rights promotion since 1948 as well as a number of the significant accomplishments of the office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights since its establishment in 1993. Notwithstanding all these accomplishments, he concludes (Ayala-Lasso 1997:1):

Nevertheless, the day when torture and hunger would be eradicated and when there would be no more victims of human rights violations is still far off. The potential of the international community is much greater than the results achieved, that is why it should recommit itself to the principles expressed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to usher in a new century of human rights.

Van der Vyfer (1994:815) recognises the existence of what he calls the “world’s human rights dilemma” but he assesses the state of human rights today more positively. He is encouraged by governments and NGO’s and many concerned people all over the world are deliberating and planning strategies for doing something about the dilemma. Van der Vyfer lists four foundations for this optimism which are present in various contributions to the book *Human Rights in the Twenty-First Century: A global challenge* (edited by K E Mahoney & P Mahoney 1993):

- *The ability of humans to look after themselves.* Esquivel & Keene (1993:980) maintain that “people have the capacity to understand their oppression and to act to transform it.”
- *Human altruism.* Leuprecht (1993:965) speaks of the calling for solidarity which “requires us – all of us, individuals, groups, NGO’s, States and the international community – to pay special attention to those regions, countries, groups and individuals who are weak, exposed and vulnerable.”
- *Religiously inspired activism* (Czerny 1993:33-39). This is singled out as one of the major reasons for the measure of success already achieved in the human rights crusade in the world.
- The realisation of the influence of political ideologies (Axworthy 1993:721-727).

It is significant that “religiously inspired activism” is specifically mentioned in this context by international human rights scholars and activists. There is clearly an expectation that an institution such as the Church will continue to play an important role in creating a consciousness of human rights, in promoting respect for human rights and in nurturing a culture of human rights.

The activities of the Church in this regard in the past are numerous. Churches all over the world have organised and are maintaining soup kitchens, safehouses, activist groups, ministries in prisons, housing projects, educational institutions, monitoring

groups, child support groups, women's groups, clinics for rape victims, refugee support groups, hospitals and clinics, and so on; in fact, far too many activities to list.

Given the role of the Bible as foundational document of the Christian Church (cf Van Huyssteen 1987), Christians are always looking (again and again) at the Bible for *inspiration* and *orientation* for all these activities. The Bible is indeed one of the most significant bases for value persuasion and the shaping of the ethos of the South African population.

Christianity is the religion of the majority of the South African population (between 60%-70%). Apart from the direct influence of the Bible in churches, more or less 100 000 matriculating pupils took Biblical Studies as examination subject in 1994 and at about 70 Teacher's Education Colleges Biblical Studies or Religious Studies is a compulsory subject for thousands of students. In 1994 about 10 000 University students were enrolled in Biblical Studies or Religious Studies and Biblical Studies at 16 universities. In addition to this, millions of school pupils in primary and secondary schools are receiving Religious Instruction, in most cases based on the Bible (cf Müller 1995).

Unfortunately, as in the case of any great power and source of such tremendous influence, its effect can be ambiguous. It can do very good but it can also do very badly. The *use* of the Bible but also the *Bible itself* can indeed be a serious stumbling block in the way of the promotion of respect for human rights. In the rest of this paper I will deal with both sides of this ambiguity. First I will briefly discuss four preliminary issues, namely, (i) important general distinctions in our understanding of human rights, (ii) the complexity of the Bible (iii) the complexity of the contemporary interpretation of the Bible and (iv) the issue of the use of the Bible in public discourse. Following this, I will discuss *the dark side* of the use of the Bible to promote human rights and possible strategies to deal with this dark side. I conclude with a few remarks about *the bright side* of human rights and the Bible.

3. HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE BIBLE: CONCEPTS AND COMPLEXITIES

3.1 Two important elements in our understanding of human rights

Firstly, whenever we talk about human rights it is very important to distinguish between

- human rights as the legal protection of the individual against possible abuses by the state – which is a relative recent phenomenon in human history (namely as result of the American and French revolutions of the 17th and 18th centuries), and
- the moral and religious notions of human dignity and a just human society. These notions go back to ancient times and are present in almost all religions and cultures.

This distinction is important when we talk about human rights and the Bible. Although the Bible and Christian tradition contributed to the fact that human rights are today legally protected in most countries in the world, human rights as such can not be read from the Bible. Secondly, it is significant that the foundational norms or *Grundnormen* of various human rights conventions differ in different countries and regions because they are deeply influenced by the specific history of those countries and regions.

- In the USA the *Grundnormen* are the “*freedom clauses*” of the First Amendment (namely, freedom of religion, freedom of speech, etc.). This is due to the suppression of these freedoms of the early European settlers in North America
- In Germany the *Grundnorm* is *human dignity*. This can be understood against the background of the violations of human dignity during World War II in Germany
- In South Africa the *Grundnorm* is formulated in our 1996 Constitution (Art 7/1) as “the democratic values of *human dignity, equality and freedom*”. Against the background of all the discriminatory practices of governments in our country’s history, it is clear why these three elements are singled out and it is also clear why equality has priority over freedom.

However, it is exactly on the issue of equality and non-discrimination that we run into problems when we bring the Bible into the discussion. If we want to promote equality and non-discrimination in South Africa, an uncritical and literalistic use of the Bible can be much more of a hindrance than a helpful ally. But what are we talking about when we talk about “the Bible”?

3.2 The Bible as complex phenomenon

In various respects the Bible is a very complex phenomenon.

- In the Bible we find *a wide variety of genres and perspectives: there are stories, laws, annals, prophecies, letters, wisdom literature, instructions for rituals, apocalyptic literature, et cetera.* This spectrum of writings has come into existence in a variety of cultures in different geographical locations over a period of more than a thousand years. Some of these writings are explicitly religious and some of them are the result of normal everyday human social interaction without any explicit religious connotation.
- Different Christian churches have *different Bibles.* The Bible of the Roman Catholic Church, for example, contains more writings than the Protestant Bible. The Bible of the Ethiopian Church, on the other hand, contains even more books than the Roman Catholic Bible. The word “the Bible” thus has different references for different Christian communities.
- As *products of ancient societies* the writings of the Bible reflect the languages, cultures, worldviews and perspectives of the societies from which they originate. This is so very different from anything that is known to us today. In the words of the Wayne Meeks (1986:181):

What Paul’s letter to the Galatians ... or the Gospel of Mark meant to the Christians gathered to hear it read aloud ... we can only imperfectly reconstruct and can never duplicate. The reason is that what the Gospel or letter meant – the work it did – belonged to a specific cultural-linguistic complex, which no effort of translation however fine and no act of will however faithful can call again into existence in our so different world. The ways in which the

symbolic universe we inhabit differs from that in which the writers and first hearers of our texts lived are so many that they defy cataloguing.

Due to this complexity and due to the variety of perspectives in the Bible it is not possible to superimpose a monolithic vision of human rights on the Bible as a whole. As interpreters of the Bible we have no other option but to devise a *construction* or *frame* to guide our interpretation. This is unavoidable and it also confronts us head-on with the complexities of contemporary Biblical interpretation.

3.3 The complexity of contemporary Biblical interpretation

In our post-modern intellectual and cultural epoch the ideal of one final and correct method of interpretation has irrevocably been discredited (cf Aichele 1995). Biblical interpretation (and indeed the interpretation of any written text) has developed into a highly technical and complex science and form of art without any final answers, certainties or fixed points of reference. In Biblical interpretation today there are so many different valid approaches and methods to follow, so many things to keep in mind, so many things to do or not to do, so many different and conflicting views on the nature and location of meaning, the nature of textuality and contextuality, the relation between text and reality², et cetera, that it has indeed become a question whether generally accepted interpretations of the Bible are in any sense attainable.

However, the plurality of presuppositions, methods and theoretical conceptions of the interpretation process is not the only problem. In recent times the authority of the traditional institutions of power that used to determine the validity of specific interpretations of the Bible – such as the pope, the bishop, the synod, the priest, the minister of religion, the theology professor, the Biblical scholar – has diminished significantly. How many members of the Roman Catholic Church obey the Pope's Bible-based prohibition of the use of contraceptives? In my church, the Dutch Reformed Church, many people are especially disillusioned. Many Afrikaners would agree today (at last!) that apartheid was wrong. It is well known that various synods, theologians and biblical scholars of the

² Introductions to contemporary approaches to Biblical interpretation abound. Noteworthy are Lategan (1978, 1984), McKim (1986), Thiselton (1992), Anderson & Moore (1994), Conradie et al (1995), Aichele et al (1995).

DRC have for many years used the Bible to justify apartheid. Since the 1986 Synod of the very same church, however, the very same Bible is now used to say that apartheid was wrong (Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk 1987:47). This 180 degrees turn-around is the cause of tremendous confusion for many people.

3.4 The use of the Bible in public discourse

The use of the Bible in public discourse is a highly contentious and complicated issue. Many examples of the use of the Bible to legitimate all sorts of political agendas can be cited. To refer to one example beyond our own situation: More than a decade ago President Ronald Reagan pronounced the year 1983 as "The Year of the Bible" and went on to claim that the Bible provides a specific blueprint for balancing the budget, for the foreign policy of the USA, et cetera (cf Siker 1986:171). In various speeches he used the Bible to secure the support of conservative evangelicals and to link the Bible to their social-policy goals. In those times the USA was actively involved in Nicaragua trying to subvert and overthrow the Sandanista-government. In this context an American Presbyterian minister used the Bible to argue for the opposite, using the story of 1 Kings 21 to refer to the US government as the aggressive oppressor "Ahab" and the Sandanistas the powerless victim "Naboth" (Siker 1986:171).

It is well known from history that the Bible was used to justify or even to promote slavery, colonialism, apartheid, chauvinism, sexism, et cetera. Unfortunately not all these issues are matters of the past. This has led many people to conclude: keep the Bible out of politics! Or in the American situation: maintain a consistent separation of church and state (cf Heideman 1986:222-230). On the other hand, again in the American situation, somebody like Sarah Grimké³ found her very motivation to work for the abolition of slavery in the Bible (cf Shriver & Shriver 1986:389). In our own context the following story told by Dr Desmond Tutu at in his opening lecture at the International Conference on Global Religious Rights in Atlanta in October 1994 is important enough to retell again and again:

³ Sarah Grimké (1792-1873) was a well known American feminist and abolitionist. She and her sister Angelina Emily Grimké (1805-1879) were among the first American women to speak publicly against slavery and the repression of women.

There is a story that is fairly well known, about when the missionaries came to Africa. They had the Bible, and we, the natives, had the land. They said: "Let us pray," and we dutifully shut our eyes. When we opened them, why, they now had the land and we had the Bible. It would, on the surface, appear as if we had struck a bad bargain, but the fact of the matter is that we came out of that transaction a great deal better than when we started. The point is that we were given the priceless word of God: the gospel of salvation, the good news of God's love for us that is given so utterly unconditionally. But even more wonderful is that we were given the most subversive, most revolutionary thing around. Those who may have wanted to exploit us and subject us to injustice and oppression should really not have given us the Bible, because that placed dynamite under their nefarious schemes.

(Tutu 1999:ix)

Thus, it is not so simple to try to limit the Bible to the church or to the private sphere of the individual's spiritual life. For many centuries the Bible has had both a very positive and very negative influence in the public sphere. The American ideal of the separation of church and state is only to a certain extent successful (cf Woods & Davis 1991).

Due to the fact that literalistic interpretations of the Bible are still very commonly found in various churches and in society in general, it can happen that values and practices which are in conflict with the ideals of human rights and democracy may continue to have significant influence in our country. However, the Bible is not only a problem in the public discourse of society in general. The Bible is also a problem for the church. In the words of Scroggs (1993:109-110):

The Bible is always causing trouble in the church. Written to speak to ancient cultures, in a far different time and space than our own, its canonisation means that it lays claim on the church for loyalty and obedience in whatever century it finds itself. For the literalist, what the New Testament said – or seems to have said – in the first century settles the issue immediately in the twentieth. For the radical or liberal, she or he knows enough to realise that church

discussions of the Bible have to be addressed if only to *deny* its relevance and validity.

It will lead us too far on a sidetrack to dwell on all these problems in any more detail. Suffice it to say that, whenever we want to talk about human rights and the Bible, we must be well aware of a whole range of problems and controversies. I now want to move on to a consideration of a number of specific Biblical passages which may be considered – anachronistically, of course – as advocating, justifying or tolerating serious human rights violations.

4. HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE BIBLE: THE DARK SIDE

The Scottish Old Testament scholar, Robert Carroll has recently written a book with the title *Wolf in the Sheepfold. The Bible as problem for Christianity*. As one of the reasons for writing such a book, Carroll (1991:5) maintains: “ ... the world is overflowing with books praising the Bible. There is room for a book about its more negative aspects – hence this one on the Bible as problem for Christianity.”

Since the Bible reflects the values and practices of ancient societies so very different from our own world of today, many things in the Bible are in conflict with those values and practices associated with human rights and democracy. To quote Carroll (1992:5) again:

Whatever the Bible may say about oppression, it has in its time served the interests of the oppressor... not just the *use* of the Bible, but also some of the substantive things in the Bible itself. The Bible, in whatever version, may make a good servant; it can be a bad master. Treating it as the divine word exempt from criticism can blind eyes to that truth. Also, the Bible contains some appalling practices of an uncivilised nature and nobody should treat these as normative.

Let us now list a number of these “appalling” and “uncivilised” practices. I will not reflect in any detail on any of these examples while I list them. After I have

completed the list, I will come to the problem of how to deal with these issues in the Bible.

4.1 Violence

- **Genocide:** The Lord gives a command to Saul, “go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass” (1 Sam 15:3). After Saul and his army have killed all the Amelekites he was severely chastised by Yahweh (through Samuel) because he did not kill all the animals as he was instructed to but used them for sacrifices. Yahweh is angry about Saul’s disobedience. However, no word of condemnation *of the genocide* can be found in this Biblical story. To the contrary, the very point of the story is that the genocide was the explicit wish of Yahweh himself.
- **Murder of children:** “Elisha went up from there to Bethel; and while he was going up on the way, some small boys came out of the city and jeered at him, saying, “Go up, you baldhead! Go up, you baldhead!” And he turned around, and when he saw them, he cursed them in the name of the LORD. And two she-bears came out of the woods and tore forty-two of the boys” (2 Kings 2:23-25). It seems that the jeering of children for the baldheadedness of the prophet is considered by the Bible as sufficient justification for a curse and the killing of quite a number of children.
- **Infanticide:** “Happy shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock” (Ps137:8).

4.2 An immoral and sadistic God?

- The Israelites have angered Yahweh and He issued an order to David to hold a census (2 Sam 24:1). When David obeys the Lord and holds the census, the Lord sends pestilence upon Israel and seventy thousand people died (2 Sam 24:10-25). The Lord does this to punish David for holding a census – which was an explicit command of the Lord himself. Is that not an act of an immoral God?
- The radical feminists Brown & Parker (1989:26) maintain that if we accept that the cross was part of the plan of God, the Biblical God is a sadistic God. They write: “Christianity is an abusive theology that glorifies suffering ... Is it any wonder that there is so much abuse in modern society when the predominant image or theology of culture is of ‘divine child abuse’ – God the Father demanding and carrying out the suffering and death of his own son?”

4.3 Hate speech, demonising, name calling and stereotyping

- Listen to the words put in the mouth of Jesus by the *Gospel of Matthew*: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you traverse sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves” (23:15) or “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within they are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness” (23:27) or “You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?” (23:33)
- Another Biblical example of hate speech can be found in 1 Timothy 1:18-20: “By rejecting conscience, certain persons have made shipwreck of their faith, among them Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have

delivered to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme.” In short, what the author of this letter says to his opponents in public is: “Go to hell!”

- Judas (12-13) writes about his opponents: “These are blemishes on your love feasts, as they boldly carouse together, looking after themselves; waterless clouds, carried along by winds; fruitless trees in late autumn, twice dead, uprooted; wild waves of the sea, casting up the foam of their own shame; wandering stars for whom the nether gloom of darkness has been reserved for ever.

4.4 Discrimination against women

The Bible abounds with texts which the feminist Biblical scholar, Phyllis Trible (1984) calls “texts of terror”. Trible refers specifically to four Old Testament stories

- The story of Hagar which she calls “The desolation of rejection” (Gen 16:1-16; 21:9-21).
- The story of Tamar, which she calls “The royal rape of wisdom” (2 Sam 13:1-22).
- The story of the unnamed woman in the *Book of Judges*, which she calls “The extravagance of violence” (Judges 19:1-30).
- The story of the daughter of Jephta, which she calls “An inhuman sacrifice” (Judges 11:29-40).

In the New Testament we find instructions for women to be silent and submissive (1 Cor 11:1-10; 1 Cor 14:38-40, Col 3:18 and Eph 5:22-24) as well as the remark in 1 Timothy 2:8-11 that women can only be saved through bearing children.

4.5 Slavery

“Slaves obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but in singleness of heart, fearing the Lord. Whatever your task, work

heartily, as serving the Lord and not men” (Col 3:22-23. See also 1 Cor 7:20-21; Eph 6:5-8). Slave-owners and their ministers or priests often referred to these texts or used them in sermons to justify and maintain the system of slavery (cf Clarke 1988, 1993, Elliott 1994:1-18)

4.6 The glorification of ethnicity and triumphant nationalism

Zionist Psalms such as Psalm 48:1-5 are examples of this phenomenon:

Great is the LORD and greatly to be praised in the city of our God! His holy mountain, beautiful in elevation, is the joy of all the earth, Mount Zion, in the far north, the city of the great King. Within her citadels God has shown himself a sure defence. For lo, the kings assembled, they came on together. As soon as they saw it, they were astounded, they were in panic, they took to flight; trembling took hold of them there, anguish as of a woman in travail.

4.7 Racism and anti-Semitism

- Perhaps the most notorious anti-Semitic pronouncement in the Bible is Matthew 27:24-25⁴: “When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. “I am innocent of this man’s blood,” he said. “It is your responsibility!” All the people answered, “*Let his blood be on us and on our children!*” At various stages in the history of Europe (e.g. in Spain during the 12th century, in Russia during the 19th century, in Germany during the 20th century) this text has been used as justification for the oppression and murder of Jews. Zealous Christians shouted at Jews: “You killed our Lord!” and then went on to kill Jews.
- In similar vein Paul writes about the Jews: “For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus which are in Judea; for you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews, who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out, and displease God and oppose all men ¹⁶ by hindering us

⁴ Incidentally, Matthew is the only gospel that contains this passage.

from speaking to the Gentiles that they may be saved – so as always to fill up the measure of their sins. But God’s wrath has come upon them at last!” (1 Thes 2:14-15).

4.8 Homophobia and discrimination against homosexuals

- Lev 20:13: “If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death, their blood is upon them.”
- Romans 1:24-27: “Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonouring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever! Amen. 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.”

More examples can be cited. I do think, however, that it is clear enough that various examples of the advocacy, justification or tolerance of serious violations of human rights can be found in the Bible. Over against these Biblical pronouncements, stories, commands and practices, the South African Constitution (1996, Chapter 2, Art 9) states: “The state may not unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth.” If the state is so clearly prohibited to discriminate on all these grounds, what can and should we in the Church do with this dilemma? We can not deny the presence of these and other uncomfortable passages in our Holy Book. We have to deal with it.

It is very important to deal with this dilemma because literalistic interpretations of these texts coupled with absolutist notions of the authority of the Bible as divine word can indeed perpetuate various practices detrimental to the promotion of respect for human rights and a culture of human rights.

5. POSSIBLE STRATEGIES TO DEAL WITH THE DILEMMA OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE BIBLE

Feminist Biblical interpreters propose various strategies to deal with the androcentric texts of the Bible and the authority of Scripture. Although these strategies have been developed specifically with reference to discrimination against women in the Bible, I submit that they are just as relevant for the consideration of the broader spectrum of human rights violations, which can be found in the Bible.

Ogden Bellis (1994:17-20) summarises the various strategies used by feminist critics as follows:

- There are those (like Mary Daly) who can find *no way of resolving the tension* between feminism (human rights) and the Bible. For them the Bible is irremediably androcentric and irredeemably sexist (and thus not even to be mentioned in human rights talk). Although they do not wish to renounce religion entirely, they find spiritual nourishment in the worship of goddesses (such as Gaia) for which they draw inspiration from various ancient sources, *excluding* (obviously) the Bible.
- Those who *do not want to reject the Bible altogether*, deal with the dilemma in a number of ways:
 - The *loyalist approach* boils down to using a “hierarchy of truth” method; for example the command to women to subject to men (Eph 5:22-24) must be understood and relativised in the light of the higher truth of the unity of men and women in Christ (Gal 3:28).
 - The *universalist and essentialist approach* holds that certain texts are timeless (e.g. Gal 3:28) and take priority over texts that speak to a particular historical situation (e.g. 1 Cor 11:1-11)
 - The *compensatory strategy* seeks to balance the androcentric nature of scripture with emphasis on stories of strong women, feminine imagery, et cetera.

- The *contrast strategy* emphasises the contrast between biblical culture and contemporary culture. For example, “to compare Abraham’s action of passing Sarah off as his sister, with all its attendant sexual danger for Sarah to the insights of modern feminism on rape, is to compare not just apples with oranges but apples with camels” (Ogden Bellis 1994:18).
- The *redemptive strategy* (propagated by, for example, Phyllis Trible) seeks to redeem Scripture from patriarchal confines by gathering texts that show signs of feminist strength and by retelling the stories in memory of the victims.
- A third group chooses for a “*canon within a canon*” approach
 - They seek a liberating theme, tradition, text or principle as *the* hermeneutical key to interpreting the whole Bible; for example “God’s promises for mending creation” (for example, Letty Russel)
 - They argue that the Bible becomes authoritative only in the interplay between the world that produced the text, the literary text itself, and the modern self of the reader. This position rejects any criteria extrinsic to the biblical text for evaluating the various biblical texts, believing that the Bible contains its own critique (for example, the principle of “no harm” can be gleaned from Isa 11:6-9 (for example, Sharon Ringe)
 - They plead for a “hermeneutics of correlation” by recognising that the Bible does not explicitly articulate a critical feminist norm. Theologians have to express such a norm, for example, “the full humanity of women” (Rosemary Radford Reuther), and then correlate it with a biblical principle such as the prophetic dynamic in the Hebrew Bible
 - They canonise women’s experience as a kind of “third testament”

- An alternative to the various conservative “canon within canon” approaches listed in (c) who locate authority in the text, is the critical feminist hermeneutics of liberation that sees authority in the “woman-church” (that is, the feminist women and men) who seek or experience God’s liberating presence in the struggle for liberation. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1992) is well known for her advocacy of this view. She argues that a critical feminist hermeneutics of liberation abandons the quest for a liberating canonical text and shifts the focus to a discussion of the process of biblical interpretation. This process should grapple with oppressive as well as the liberating functions of particular texts in women’s lives and struggles. She argues that a critical feminist hermeneutics of liberation has four elements (1992:57-76).
 - a hermeneutics of suspicion – it scrutinises the presuppositions and interests of interpreters, and those of biblical commentators as well as the androcentric strategies of the biblical text itself
 - a hermeneutics of historical interpretation and reconstruction – it attempts to reconstruct history in such a way that marginalized and subordinate “others” can be visible
 - a hermeneutics of ethical and theological evaluation – it assesses the oppressive and liberatory tendencies inscribed in the text as well as the functions of the text in historical and contemporary situations
 - a hermeneutics of creative imagination and ritualisation – “retells biblical stories and celebrates our biblical forefathers in a feminist/womanist key.”

Not all these approaches to deal with our dilemma are equally helpful. Various conflicting ideological concerns and theoretical conceptualisations of the nature of textuality and the locality of meaning determine the validity of some of these approaches. For example, I do not think it is a realistic option (especially for bishops of the Church!) to go the way of Mary Daly and simply reject the Bible altogether!

Obviously it is not possible to do any justice to this whole spectrum of approaches in a discussion within the confines of this paper. I will rather move on to state my own preference and then, on the basis of that, enter into a discussion of the bright side of the human rights and the Bible theme.

6. A CRITICAL, FAITHFUL AND RESPONSIBLE HERMENEUTICS

I am convinced that

- it is indeed possible to enlist the tremendous persuasive power of the Bible in the service of the promotion of respect for human rights and a culture of human rights
- this can indeed be done in such a way that justice is done to the Bible as ancient book, taking seriously and respecting the implications of its antiquity and strangeness
- this can indeed be done in a plausible and sensible way in the context of our efforts to establish and maintain respect for human rights and a culture of human rights

This vision and ideal calls for a critical, faithful and responsible interpretation of the Bible.

- It is *critical* insofar as it is willing to question biblical texts vigorously for their religious coherence and moral appropriateness, without special pleading. This implies that critical historical and literary approaches are used in the interpretation of the Bible. This presupposes a certain view of the Bible. In such a view the Bible does *not* simply contain unique and direct divine revelations expressing propositional truths about reality. Rather, the Bible contains "human writings generated by specific social and historical circumstances and expressing truths of experience and conviction that possess revelatory value for subsequent readers

only indirectly and through mediation of interpretation” (Johnson 1995:81). Such a reading of the Bible will resist Biblicists Christians whose allegiance to a “literal meaning” as the basis of Christian identity is absolute, and who regard any historical or literary contextualization as an attack on the authority of the text.

- It is *faithful* because it chooses to continue rather than close the conversation, because it has faith that this process of discernment will enable texts to speak more authentically “according to the mind of Christ” (Johnson 1995:73).
- It is *responsible* because it implies that we with our interpretations of the Bible *participate* on equal foot with other discussion partners in the public sphere of our society. Long gone are the days of theology as the *regina scientiae* where theologians and church people can act prescriptively with assumed absolute authority in every conceivable situation. This implies that our interpretations of the Bible must be guided by a scale of the highest and best religious and social values which we nurture as the building blocks of our vision of a humane society – and obviously, here I have the values associated with human rights specifically in mind (cf Botha 1996:340). This implies that we participate in the public discourses of our time and that we take responsibility for our interpretations of the Bible in these contexts.

To put this ideal of a critical, faithful and responsible interpretation in more practical terms in the context of the theme of human rights and the Bible I suggest three courses of action:

- Let us follow feminist critics like Schüssler Fiorenza (see also Aichele et al 1995) and take our starting point for contextual and practical interpretations of the Bible outside the Biblical texts, namely in the vision of the full realisation of a human rights culture in South Africa.
- Let us expose and critique those Biblical stories and passages that function as stumbling block in the way of this vision. Let us frankly reject the cultural values presupposed by these stories as

inappropriate and harmful in our current context. In this regard historical-critical Biblical scholarship has an important contribution to make. It is our public responsibility to do so (cf Schüssler Fiorenza 1988).

- Yet, there is a very important other side to this coin. I submit that we should continue to be faithful, to re-tell Biblical stories and reinterpret Biblical texts – those stories and texts that are suitable – to make our own and unique constructive contribution to the promotion of respect for human rights and a human rights culture in South Africa.

In the Dutch Reformed Church there is an old tradition (and it is in fact still officially required of ministers) to “preach through” the Heidelberg Catechism. In some Reformed Churches ministers are required to devote one sermon each Sunday to the exposition of the Heidelberg Catechism. In other Reformed Churches at least six catechism sermons are required per year. Other denominations have other similar traditions and liturgical practices.

My question would be, can we not build on this custom and require a number of “human rights sermons” to be preached every year? Is it not an important aspect of the mission of the Church today to “preach through” our country’s Bill of Rights? This brings me then to the final part of this paper. I will make a number of general remarks and conclude with and one concrete example.

7. HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE BIBLE: THE BRIGHT SIDE

7.1 Linking specific human rights with specific Biblical passages

To look for *direct* and *explicit* references to (or justifications of) the modern concept of human rights would be an anachronism. I have pointed out that the modern concept of human rights and its legal status is a product of specific secular and religious impulses of the 17th and 18th century. The Bible is much older than that.

Nevertheless, the development of foundational human rights conceptions such as human dignity, equality, freedom, justice, the value of life, opportunities for people to live out their full potential, respect for the environment, and so on, can indeed be traced back to, *inter alia*, the very significant influence of the Bible and Christianity.

I have listed a number of “human rights violations” in the Bible. There can be no doubt that we can also make a long list – most probably *an even longer list* – of Biblical passages that could serve as justifications and support for human rights. Issues related to human rights and Christianity have not been researched on a wide scale by *Biblical scholars* in South Africa (see Domeris 1989, 1991; Draper 1991; Wittenberg 1991; Breytenbach 1991; West 1991). Systematic or practical theologians tend to be more interested in doing this and usually they do refer in passing or in a short chapter to the Bible in the context of their discussions of Christianity and human rights and democracy. However, since they have a broader, systematic theological aim, the Bible itself is not their primary focus (cf Villa-Vicencio 1992; De Gruchy 1995).

I therefore believe that much more needs to be done both by Biblical scholars and systematic theologians, practical theologians and especially also by those in active ministry in the Church, *to link our reflection on specific human rights to specific Biblical passages* – and, on the other hand, *to link our interpretations and sermons on specific Biblical passages to specific human rights*. By doing this, I believe, we can enlist the tremendous persuasive power of the Bible as a valuable and very efficient ally in our ideal to promote respect for human rights and a culture of human rights.

Obviously this calls for a *creative process*, taking into account hermeneutical principles such as those that I have discussed earlier in this paper. However, I would like to point out two potential problems:

- To use the Bible as a kind of “hall stand” (*kapstok* in Afrikaans) onto which one simply and superficially hangs “justifications” for specific human rights, would not be plausible or helpful. It could even be dangerous, since doing that would be exactly similar to a direct and simplistic application of those other Biblical passages, which can actually be to the detriment of our ideal of the promotion of a

human rights culture. Aware that I am running the risk of overstating this point, I want to give you yet another quote in this regard to consider:

Gone is the day when a statement of Jesus or Paul could be interpreted independently of the network of societal factors of which the statement is but a part. That is, the uniqueness of those historical moments has been recovered. The conclusion is clear, if very difficult for all of us: the context is unique, and thus analogy between then and now seems virtually impossible ... The more we learn about the New Testament and its contexts, the more impossible it seems to be to use its statements in any specific way for today's reflections on faith and morals.

(Scroggs:1994:276-277)

- To use only those few Biblical passages where direct references are made to issues possibly related to specific human rights, would severely limit the scope of this process. For example, if we reflect on children's rights it does not mean we can use *only* those passages where children are explicitly mentioned – although it is significant that there are as many ten passages in the New Testament where the words “Jesus” and “children” are used in the same verse (Mt 19:14; Mk 10:14, 24, 29; Lk 18:16; 23:28; John 8:39; 21:5; Acts 13:33; 1 John 2:1). These passages can obviously be a *point of departure*, but I believe we need work much broader with the Bible as a whole. On the other hand, when you look up these passages it will immediately become clear to you that not all of them are relevant or suitable for reflection on children's rights.

Let me conclude with a reference to one specific example.

7.2 The right to assembly, demonstration, picket and petition (Art 17)

How can the Bible be used in a sermon on this human right? Let us consider a specific case: On 6 September 1992 an unarmed protest march took place in Bisho with the aim to remove the Ciskei military ruler, Oupa Gqozo, from his throne. After restrictions were

placed on the protest march, the crowd was to proceed from King William's Town to the Ciskei Stadium and not to Gqozo's Bisho headquarters. However, after breaking through a gap in the stadium fence, a column of people following Ronnie Kasrils began running towards Bisho. The soldiers of the Ciskei Defence Force acted on their orders. A barrage of gunfire lasting several minutes left 30 people dead and more than 200 wounded.

One week after this event, the Annual Meeting of the Institute for Contextual Theology was held in Johannesburg. The programme of the meeting was suspended for one morning and about 100 members of the ICT held a prayer service at the SABC studios in Auckland Park. The aim of the service was to show solidarity with the bereaved families of the Bisho massacre and to spell out the ICT's view on mass action from a Christian perspective. During the service a statement "Mass Action in a Christian Context", drafted during the previous two days at the ICT meeting, was read out publicly and later it was also published in *The Weekly Mail* (18 September 1992) and *Challenge* (Oct/Nov 1992). I quote a few excerpts from this statement:

- (6) By now it has been well established that the people have a right to engage in mass action... Christians would want to uphold this right and support all those who choose to exercise their right to protest action. We would also uphold the right of those who choose not to march, or participate in strike action, stay-aways or any other protest action.
- (7) Above all, we believe that Christians have a special responsibility to engage in public witness for justice and peace.
- (8) Protest has been a very important part of our tradition since the days of the great biblical prophets.

- (9) It is quite wrong to believe that Christians should never protest against the wrong-doing of a government ... or should not go into the streets to protest through mass action.
- (10) Action is not foreign to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus took action by riding as Messiah together with many marchers into Jerusalem even though the authorities tried to stop him (Luke 19:39-40). He took action by overthrowing the tables and driving out the moneychangers and exploiters (Mark 11:15).
- (11) Christian faith without action, according to the letter of James, is dead (2:26).

Participating in the public discourse of the time on the issue of mass action, a political leader, Carl Niehaus (1992:27), made the following remark: "Christians have often been deeply involved in peaceful forms of protest, and the churches have encouraged and led marches especially in South Africa. Was Jesus himself not taking part in a demonstration when he led the cheering crowds into Jerusalem on the first Palm Sunday?"

From this brief retelling of a very tragic episode in our country's history, it is clear that religious as well as political leaders in South Africa sometimes do make direct appeals to the Bible when they argue matters of general public interest. It is also significant that the appeals to the Bible are made as substantiation for the immediately preceding appeal to human rights in the ICT statement. This episode is thus an interesting example of the use of specific Biblical passages in the context of the consideration of a specific right. The ICT statement only gives us the "punch line" of their interpretation of the story of Jesus' entry in Jerusalem: "Jesus has marched in protest and therefore we Christians have the right to participate in protest marches."

However, we have to consider carefully *the historical context* of this story (for example, the ancient practice of the Greco-Roman entrance procession, the various examples of such processions into Jerusalem during the two centuries BCE) as well as the *literary contexts* of this story (for example, the apocalyptic vision of the march of the

Divine Warrior in Zechariah 14, the specific contexts within which the gospels relate the story, *et cetera*) (cf Botha 1996). Such considerations and a process of careful exegesis are necessary to establish the validity and plausibility of the “punch line.”

8. CONCLUSION

It is possible to discern a variety of Biblical perspectives on the mission of the Church. In our current context in South and southern Africa, I believe the promotion of respect for human rights and a culture of human rights forms an important aspect of the mission of the Church. Yet I believe that our ideals for a culture of human rights may influence our interpretations of the Bible as much as our interpretations of the Bible through the centuries have influenced the development of the very idea of human rights.

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