

Responsible Bible Reading

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Introduction

The vitality of the Word of God

Jimmy is six years of age. He has a cat with the name of Sweetie. They love each other dearly. One day Mommy observes how Jimmy has caught Sweetie by the tail and drags him into the bathroom. What on earth are you doing, she asks. We have been playing in the mud, Jimmy says, so I want us to go to the bath together. Obviously Sweetie has a different opinion about the matter and struggles to get away.

We love the Bible dearly. This is where God speaks to us. But it may just be that we try to pull the Bible in one direction while the Bible wants to pull us into the opposite direction. We may want the Bible to be the perfect and eternal Word of God that will never change. We want to be at home in heaven already now. In contrast, God may want to take us along on a journey through time and space towards his ultimate fulfilment. I want to convince you that this is indeed the case.

According to the Bible, God has a vision of comprehensive well-being for us and our world. It is called shalom in the Old Testament and the Kingdom of God in the New Testament. God's Word enters human reality to change it from within. God picks up humans exactly where they are – in their specific situations, their limited insight, their provisional worldviews and their less than perfect motivations – and leads them a few steps in the direction of where he wants them to be. God's Word is at all times God's creative and redemptive response to human needs.

This has always been the case. Redemptive experiences, such as the promises to Abraham, the exodus from Egypt, the gift of the land, the law, the gift of a central authority (the king) to overcome Philistine aggression, the healing of lepers, blind and lame people by Jesus, his acceptance of outcasts, his forgiveness of sins – all these historical occurrences are interpreted by the biblical witness as God's redemptive actions on behalf of his people. Such redemptive experiences become collective memories that reassure anxious and suffering people that God is with them and for them and not against them.

As situations change, God's response changes accordingly. In time insight into God's redemptive intentions moves towards ever greater approximations to God's vision of comprehensive well-being. It becomes more focused, more profound and more comprehensive in scope. Assumptions of an earlier time are superseded by insights of a later time. Each insight found in the Bible is provisional. This process reaches its culmination in the Christ-event and is heading towards God's eschatological future.

In their endeavour to proclaim God's power and benevolence in ever new ways to their contemporaries, biblical preachers and authors have no scruples in changing the traditions they have inherited. Nothing is static in the Bible; everything is in flux. This fact authorises us to do for our times what the biblical authors did for theirs. The fact that all these ancient believers were fallible human beings with limited insights and questionable motivations releases us from the illusion that the Bible is perfect as it stands. If God has been able to use fallible human beings and erroneous worldviews to make himself known in biblical times, we can be confi-

dent that he will also be able to use us with our limited insights and fallible motivations today.

We must do that boldly. In Christ we are no longer slaves and children, but adult sons and daughters of God (Gal 3:23-4:7). In biblical times, "Son of God" was the title of the king. He was believed to be the authorised representative of God on earth (Ps 2). We share the sonship, thus the kingship of Christ. We are granted God's own Spirit. We are meant to be involved in God's creative authority, God's redeeming love and God's vision of comprehensive well-being. The interpretation of the biblical witness is entrusted to us.

As adult believers, *we are called upon to be responsible Bible readers*. Not every moral guideline found in the Bible is acceptable from a Christian point of view. Not every assumption about the nature of God's creation has withstood the test of time. We have to sort out what we think we can say in the name of God today. As Paul said, we must test everything and keep what is good.

We have to follow God's vision of comprehensive optimal well-being as it unfolds before us. It is like a horizon that retreats as we approach it, always opening up new vistas, challenges and opportunities. We are to be the light of the world and the salt of the earth today. We are to be witnesses of the limitless power and benevolence of our God in Christ. It is with this authority that the biblical authors addressed their readers and it is with this authority that we transmit the Word of God to our contemporaries today.

Chapter I

Imposing modern principles on the Bible

I began with the possibility that we want to pull the Bible in one direction while the Bible wants to pull us in another direction. Before we continue I want to try and account for this strange phenomenon. Why do we do that? I also want to my readers that it is we who have it wrong rather than the Bible.

Since the so-called Enlightenment about 300 years ago there have been two entirely new ways of thinking about reality. The first was to accept as truth only what makes sense in terms of logical thought. We call it *rationalism*. The second was to accept as truth only what can be shown to exist in terms of human observation. We call it *empiricism*. Everything else is discounted as fantasy or superstition.

These two criteria of the truth have led to the phenomenal achievements of science and technology. We witness miracles today that surpass the miracles recorded in the Bible by several orders of magnitude. We can talk to a friend in Los Angeles. We can access a whole university library from a computer screen. We know the composition of rock formations on the moon. We should not discard such achievements too readily. None of us is prepared to do without modern cars, telecommunications and antibiotics.

But they present us with problems when we want to understand the Bible. The Bible was written long before these principles were accepted as self-evident. Of course we are living in the same world as the biblical authors did. But our interpretation of reality and our approach to reality have changed fundamentally. The danger is that we apply modern criteria to the biblical witness. Then we get a distorted picture of what the Bible actually wants to say.



Rationalism and the inerrancy of the Bible

Rationalism departs from an assumption or an axiom that is deemed to be beyond doubt and draws conclusions from that. This method was applied to the Bible by the Protestant theologians of the 17th century. Remember that Catholics believed that the Bible and the doctrinal tradition of the church were both infallible revelations of divine truth. Protestants realised that the tradition had gone astray. So they confined the criterion of divine truth to the Bible. The Bible alone was taken to be the inspired Word of God. It formed the foundation of a new dogmatic system that could hold its own against its Catholic alternative.

Well done. But this assumption was now taken as point of departure from which a number of very problematic conclusions were derived. If the Bible is God's Word, it was said, God must be its author. God is perfect and cannot lie. So the Bible cannot contain any errors. It can also have no moral imperfections. The human instruments that have written down the Word of God must have been passive so that none of their limitations, problematic assumptions or sinful motives could have

entered into their work.

Because God is eternal, God's Word as found in the Bible must also be eternal. Because it is the Word of the Creator it must be universally valid. Because God never changes, there can be no further developments or contradictions within the Bible. So the Bible must be the one Word of God for all times, all places, all cultures and all human situations. It must be entirely clear, sufficient and without factual and moral imperfections whatsoever.¹

Let us turn this logic into reverse gear. If it could be shown that the Bible was in fact not entirely clear, sufficient and without imperfections whatsoever, we would have to say that its author could not possibly have been the perfect being that we take God to be. In fact he would have to be a liar. Then nothing found in the Bible could be true and valid. There would be no Word of God, thus no revelation of God. We would not even know whether such a perfect being existed.

"Starting out with the proposition that God is the Most Perfect Essence, we endeavour to enumerate all his perfections: by ascribing to him all the perfections we can discover in his creatures, by removing from our conception of God all the imperfections which we observe in creatures, and by ascribing to him all the perfections which necessarily must have belonged to one who was able to create and accomplish what God has done" (H. Schmid 1961:117f, see footnote). "God is liable to no change, either as to his existence, or as to his characteristics, or as to his location, or as to his purpose" (Schmid 1961:118f).

God said: 'Let us make humankind in our image ... and let them have dominion ...' (Gen 1:26). Yahweh was sorry that he had made humankind on earth and it grieved him to his heart (Gen 6:6). Yahweh said in his heart: 'I will never again curse the ground because of humankind for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth' (Gen 8:21). Yahweh went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night (Ex 13:21). When God saw how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamities that he had said he would bring upon them (Jonah 3:10).

How would you describe the difference in theological approach between the doctrinal statements of the 17th century and the biblical texts quoted above?

The Bible's own witness about itself

These propositions of 17th century Protestant theology have reached us through the revivalist, evangelistic and missionary movements. Even today many Evangelicals consider Biblical inerrancy the most fundamental doctrine of Christianity. While there have been numerous adaptations and qualifications to the inerrancy doctrine, the basic argument has been maintained. But it is neither biblical nor Lutheran. Its line of reasoning is based on logical deductions from untested assumptions, not on analysing biblical texts or observing the world. You can follow the logic without having read a single verse of the Bible. In fact both the assumptions and the logic are highly questionable.

Once you have bought into this series of arguments, you will no longer be able to see what the Bible itself says about the matter. While philosophers debate the

¹ Heinrich Schmid 1961 (1875). Doctrinal theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. Philadelphia: United Lutheran Publishing House, 38-80.

merits of rationalism and empiricism, practical scientists simply establish a regularity within the phenomena found in this world (empiricism), make inferences from them (rationalism) and then try to verify or falsify them by looking at the data (empiricism). So you begin with observation and you end with observation as far as data are available. Deductions are only valid if they can be substantiated; otherwise they remain theories. New evidence alters scientific theories. The process of gaining insight is open-ended.

We have to do the same with the biblical witness. The endeavour to establish the character and content of the Word of God has to remain open-ended. We cannot insist that it must be what we discover it is not. According to the Bible, God is not a static, immutable entity removed from earthly reality, but the active Lord and Creator of reality. He enters into human history. He establishes a living relationship with living human beings. He prods humans to move on towards their destinies. He becomes angry when they are stubborn. He changes his mind when they repent. He makes plans to rescue them when they get lost.

All along God uses problematic people to make himself known. According to the Bible, those whom God entrusted with the Word of God have themselves been the first targets of God's transforming action. Israel is a fallible and sinful nation. The greatest heroes of faith in the Old Testament – Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David, Solomon, Elijah – are all fallible and sinful human beings. The New Testament testifies to the fact that the disciples of Jesus did not understand the mission of Jesus, that they fled when he was in danger, that one denied him, that another betrayed him, that Paul, the most vigorous apostle, had persecuted his church.

Paul explicitly states that all humans are sinners, including himself (Rom 3:23). He says that it is the Lord, present in the Spirit, and not the letter engraved on stones, that liberates and transforms us (2 Cor 3:5ff). He says that we see a blurred picture in a mirror, which in his time did not give a very good reflection (1 Cor 13:12). He says that apostles are not supposed to lord it over the faith of their congregations (1 Cor 1:24). He says that his listeners should test whether what he says was the truth (1 Cor 1:15).

He quotes the Old Testament saying that the ways of God are unsearchable (Rom 11:34). He says that he did not think he had reached the goal but was striving towards it (Phil 3:10ff). He allows for the possibility that his listeners come to conclusions different from his own, except that the gospel should not be lost (Phil 3:15f). He says that believers are no longer slaves or children, but adult sons and daughters of God (Gal 3:23-4:7). He says that we each have to account for what we believe and that in the end it is nothing but participation in God's redeeming love that matters (Rom 14:10-23; cf also Mat 25:31ff).

If Paul does not agree with the contention that the Scriptures cannot contain imperfections, who is wrong, Paul or the doctrinal theology of the 17th century?

The claim that there are no mistakes in the Bible is not borne out by the Bible itself. In two places in the New Testament it is indeed said that the Old Testament is inspired. But inspiration does not imply inerrancy. We also hope to be inspired when we preach the Word of God, but that does not make us infallible. The Bible testifies to the fact that God uses precisely us fallible, erring, sinful human beings to communicate his Word. Transformation does not bypass the preacher of God's Word but happens through this transformation.

Inner-biblical critique

We should not be surprised, therefore, that we find biblical critique within the biblical witness itself. The prophets attacked the priestly assumption that sacrifices, rituals and observances rather than justice put us right before God (Is 58). Jeremiah attacked the notion that Yahweh could not possibly abandon his anointed king, the holy city of Jerusalem, even his own temple to his Babylonian enemies (Jer 25:9; 27:6; 43:10). Deutero-Isaiah proclaimed that the exiles would be liberated not by a Jewish king, but by a pagan king, who was anointed by Yahweh, although he did not acknowledge him (Is 45:1ff).

The body and the conclusion of the Book of Job questioned the validity of the assumption that our misery is necessarily the consequence of our sins. Isaiah 53 claims that the Servant of God is not a glorious and victorious king but a suffering, despised and rejected misfit, which was quite an outrageous idea at the time. We find a number of subsequent renditions of the creation in the Bible, Gen 1 and 2 being the most prominent. We find two different stories of the Israelites passing through the Reed Sea that were later combined into one (Ex 14:19-31).

In the New Testament this ancient tradition continues even on a more powerful note. Jesus dares to question the absolute validity of the Sabbath law. He transgresses the purity laws. He disrupts the old establishment of the temple cult. Being a lowly Rabbi from Galilee, he claims to be the Son of Man who has come from God as promised in Daniel 7. He sends out his disciples with the same kind of authority (compare Mt 9:35f with Mt 10:1-8 and Jn 14:12). We may argue that as the Son of God he had the authority to do so. We must not forget, however, that the 'true believers' of his time did not agree. His preaching and his actions were so radical that the Jewish authorities of his time thought that they had to get rid of him before the entire Jewish tradition was misled into apostasy.

Paul redefined the function of the Jewish law and was persecuted for it by orthodox Jews of his time. The Letter to the Hebrews redefined priesthood and sacrifice, abolishing both in the process. Colossians and Ephesians reformulated Paul's theology for a later period. John rearranged and changed the Synoptic gospel tradition. For a long time the compilers of the Christian Bible were not sure whether this Gospel should be part of the Canon.

These transformations did not happen out of disrespect for God's Word, or by following arbitrary whims, but out of a sense of responsibility for the vitality of the Word of God. The Word of God had to be proclaimed again and again in a form that hit home into the situation of the listeners, that made sense, that created faith, reassurance, hope and love. God was not resting on his laurels. New insights were forthcoming all the time. That such a Word of God could not be reformulated to address new situations apparently would not have made sense to these ancient preachers and authors.

Responsibility for the truth of God

Yes, we do have a criterion of truth, namely the creative and redemptive love of God in Christ. However, this criterion is not a static principle, but a versatile and powerful motivation. We are invited to become part of the creative and redemptive project of God in Christ. We are meant to love above all things a God who is characterised by loving care, and our neighbours like ourselves.

This insight gave Christians the freedom to abandon the sacrificial law found in

the Old Testament, and with it the priesthood and the temple. It gave Paul the authority to claim that the Jewish law came to an end in Christ. Luther could say that the truth of God is whatever promotes Christ (*was Christum treibet*), which for him meant whatever expresses the redeeming grace of God. Luther could also say that, if Scripture moves against Christ, we have to move Christ against Scripture.

All this calls for responsible Bible reading. The Bible itself gives us the authority and the courage to deal responsibly with the biblical and the dogmatic tradition that we have inherited. We have to dig up the priceless treasure of the message of God's creative authority and redeeming commitment to humanity from under the ruins and rubbles of history. We have to proclaim it in a fresh and powerful way to our contemporaries. Only if we do that are we really true to the intrinsic character of the Biblical witness.

Empiricism and the historicity of biblical statements

The second criterion of truth observed by modernity is empirical evidence. What cannot be shown to be true by observation or experiment is not accepted as being true. Again this principle has led to the phenomenal insight of science and we should not dismiss it too readily. But the scientific approach deliberately excludes any notion of a supernatural reality. It assumes that there is only one reality and that this reality is accessible, in principle, to human investigation and comprehension. And so faith assumptions have become problematic to modern humans. Our concern is no longer whether God is angry or merciful, but whether there is such a God in the first place.

Of course, scientists know that humans can only access a tiny fraction of reality, that all scientific insight is provisional and subject to constant revision, that our insight is determined by our human tools of observation, that our personal and collective interests interfere with our research. But all that does not imply that there is another reality beyond the reality we try to understand and control. There is no evidence for such a reality.

Being modern people, we have all bought into this approach to reality, at least to some extent. Christians fully participate in the scientific, technological and commercial enterprise of modernity. The criteria of scientific evidence and technological efficiency have just proved to be too powerful to discard. So faith has been driven into the defensive. If one does not want to abandon faith altogether, one has to believe that the biblical statements are all based on empirical, historical facts, otherwise we could not accept them as true.

If God did not create the world literally in six days, or in six thousand years, then the Bible would tell a lie, God did not exist and faith would fall apart. If Jesus did not heal an epileptic by driving out a demon, then the New Testament could no longer be trusted, and our faith in Christ were nothing but self-delusion. And so a hostile attitude has developed among many believers towards modern scientific insight – and that precisely because of the scientific criterion of empirical evidence they unwittingly adopted.

The American movement of creationism, especially, claims that the biblical account of creation must be proved and can be proved in scientific terms. Is this not strange? We use a scientific criterion to assert that science is wrong! I regularly caused consternation among my students when I told them that the narrative of the prodigal son never happened, but was made up by Jesus. If that was the case, they thought, the story was not true, thus Jesus was a liar, thus the entire Bible must be rejected as being the Word of God.

Jesus himself obviously had no problem with formulating a narrative to express a divine truth. The story indeed never happened because it is a parable. Yet it is true because what is described here happens all the time: all of us have been entrusted with the property of God; all of us are prodigal sons; all of us are accepted by the Father when we repent. Of course, we have to accept being accepted, otherwise we exclude ourselves.

The same can be said of Genesis 2. Of course, the ancient Hebrew believers knew that snakes don't speak, that trees do not give life, that God does not take a walk enjoying the evening breeze under the trees of the garden. *Adam* is the Hebrew word for human being, *adamah* is the word for earth. Adam is the prototype of human existence. We are all Adam, we are all created by God, we all fall into sin, we all spoil our chance to live a carefree life, we all have to suffer, toil and become frustrated, we all have to die and return to dust.

The metaphorical language of the Bible

The biblical authors themselves did not have the empirical hang-ups that modern people have. For them it was the message that counted. They had no qualms using any linguistic tool they could find to express their insight into the truth of God: historical accounts, legends, parables, poetry, pictures, metaphors, fables, myths – you name it.

Most importantly, they had no qualms in speaking of God in metaphors taken from human life. All our concepts used for God are metaphors taken from human experience: father, son, spirit, creation, redemption, covenant, law, wrath, grace, forgiveness, truthfulness, righteousness, kingdom, majesty, power, love, smoke, fire, light. There is nothing strange about this because God transcends our reality. We have no choice but to express our perceptions of God in this-worldly, human terms. We have no other language. There is also nothing wrong with this because God explicitly uses human language to communicate with us.

But we must understand that our statements about God are metaphors and not something that is real in the sense that the things of this world are real. In referring to God, our metaphors always only go so far and no further. If Charles calls his sweetheart "honey", this does not imply that she is a kind of sticky stuff that you better not touch. Metaphors can also contradict each other while referring to the same thing. Christ is called Son of God, Son of David, Son of Man, messianic king, the way, the truth, the life, the logos, the door, the shepherd, the vine, the head, the lamb. How can a door be a shepherd? That is not the point, because both concepts are metaphors referring to the same person.

More important is the fact that the biblical authors had no scruples in revising and transforming the traditions they had inherited from their predecessors. They used the insights of their times to express their faith in God. They freely changed the tradition when they thought such change would make the message more powerful. They even invented stories, as Jesus did. Many key narratives are rendered in more than one version, for instance the narratives concerning the resurrection of Jesus. That is why you find a whole series of different creation narratives in the Bible. You also find deep going changes in theology, for instance between Deuteronomy and the Book of Job.

Gospel writers also adapted the words of Jesus to communicate better with their audiences. That is why we have such vast differences between the Gospel of Matthew, for instance, and the Gospel of John. John took the story of the cleansing of the temple from the end of the ministry of Jesus to its beginning (Jn 2:13ff). He re-

duced the number of women at the empty grave from three to one (Jn 20). He applied the idea of the virgin birth to all believers (Jn 1:12-13). He substituted the washing of the feet for the Last Supper (Jn 13). The entire book has a different style and character. No problem!

The message always had to be fresh, always formulated in such a way that it responded to the needs of the listeners or readers, never bogged down by the demand for scientific evidence or historically reliable records. That kind of criterion was unknown in biblical times. Historical precision was not the primary concern of biblical believers. Their concern was to proclaim God's power and love in ever new situations and in terms of ever new interpretations of reality.

Yahweh said: "I have installed my king on Zion, my holy hill ... You are my son, today I have become your father. Ask of me and I will make the nations your inheritance (Ps 2:6f).

I saw one like a son of man (= a human being) coming with the clouds ... and to him was given authority, glory and power over all peoples ... (Dan 7:13f).

Joseph, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son and you shall name him Jesus (Greek for Yehoshua = Yahweh is salvation), for he will save his people from their sins (Mat 1:20f).

He was born from the seed of David according to the flesh and installed Son of God in power according to the Spirit of sanctification in the resurrection from the dead (Rom 1:3f).

To all who received him ... he gave the authority to become sons (and daughters) of God, who were born, not of blood or the will of the flesh or of the will of a male, but of God (Jn 1:12).

Flesh gives birth to flesh, Spirit gives birth to spirit (Jn 3:5f).

Melchizedek (= king of righteousness) was without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life, like the Son of God, he remains a priest for ever (Heb 7:3).

How does the concept "son of God" change in these texts? What do these references to divine origin have in common?

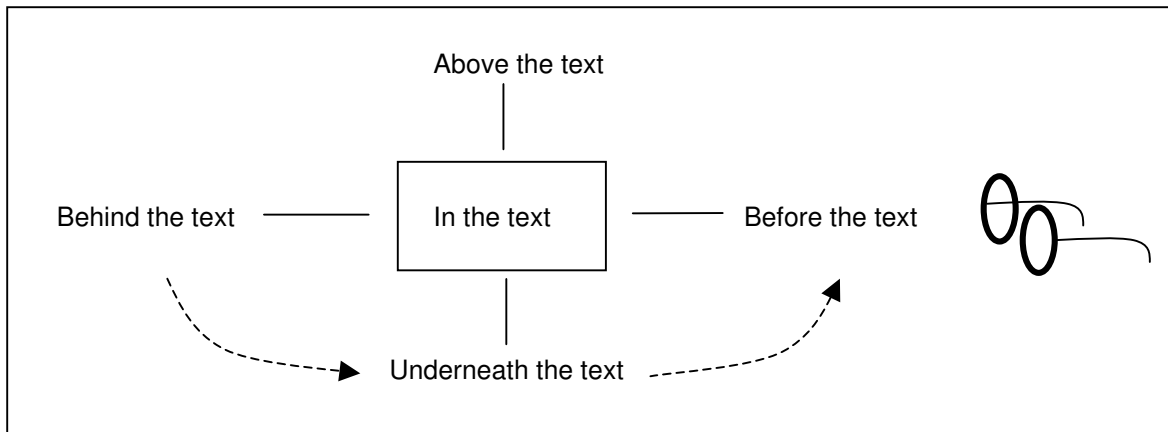
Let us summarise

Christian rationalism derived the doctrine of the inerrancy of Scriptures from the assumed axiom that a perfect God could not have written an imperfect text. It is not based on the analysis of texts or on observation of the real world. This kind of reasoning is foreign to the Bible itself. It is also theologically wrong. According to the Bible God enters fallible human reality to transform it from within.

The application of empiricist and historicist criteria has led modern believers to assume that the literal wording of biblical texts must represent empirical and historical data otherwise they cannot be true. But the biblical authors themselves make liberal use of metaphors, parables, poetry, legends and myths to proclaim the message of God's power and love to their contemporaries. They also feel free to change the traditions they inherited to make them speak more powerfully. It is the proclamation of God's mastery and benevolence rather than historical precision that mattered most to them.

Chapter II – Five ways of reading the Bible

Once we realise that God uses fallible human beings to convey his message, we can be much more relaxed concerning problems we have with biblical texts. Heavens will not collapse if we discover that some statements are now obsolete, have been superseded by other statements or contradict each other. We also become aware of the fact that the *readers* of the Bible are at least just as fallible as the authors. Let us therefore look at different ways of reading the Bible. I want to suggest that there are at least five:



Before the text

I sit in my room and read a passage asking myself what God wants to tell me through this text. Revelation did not happen in ancient times, when the Bible was written, but it happens here and now as God speaks to me. Most of us read the Bible in this way. But if I do not take the circumstances into consideration that led to the text, I may read into the text what I like to hear. I may interpret it in a way that was never intended by its authors. I may come to wrong conclusions. I may ignore texts that do not appeal to me. I may feel that much of what the Bible says does not apply to me. I may feel that some biblical assumptions are obsolete.

(When you enter the promised land) I will make all your enemies turn their backs and run ... little by little I will drive them out before you ... Do not let them live in your land, or they will cause you to sin against me ... (Ex 23:27-33).

Do not ill-treat an alien or oppress him, for you were aliens in Egypt (Ex 22:21).

Christ is our peace ... he has broken down the dividing wall ... he has abolished the law with its commandments ... that he might create in himself one new humanity (Eph 2:14f).

Which of these texts would have appealed most to white settlers when they moved into the interior of South Africa? Which would have appealed to black converts at the time?

Behind the text

In this approach I assume that God has revealed himself in biblical times through what the biblical authors have to say. I become interested in who these authors were, for whom their words were written, under which circumstances they

formulated their message, which worldview they presupposed, what exactly they wanted to communicate. In other words, I try to get behind the text and understand the developments that led to the text. Critical scholarship works with the Bible this way. The problem is that this method is not readily accessible to the laity and that even experts cannot always agree, because the historical evidence for such research is very limited and messy. But if we want to be responsible Bible readers we have to try anyway.

Abel was a keeper of sheep and Cain a tiller of the soil ... Yahweh looked with favour on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favour. ... (Gen 4:2-5).

Why should God want to discriminate between the two? Could the clash between invading Israelite nomads and Canaanite peasants defending their land make this difference comprehensible?

Above the text

If the biblical material is too complex, diverse and inaccessible for everyday readers to understand in its entirety, what must we do? Ancient church leaders drew up creeds so that those who were baptised could confess their faith. The ancient Ecumenical Councils determined what was to be acceptable teaching. Doctrines were formulated and agreed upon. Confessional writings were compiled. Preachers are trained to make sense of what we believe. Revelation is authoritatively expressed in doctrine.

We have all listened to sermons preached by trained theologians for a long time. These theologians invariably follow a particular doctrinal tradition, be it Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed or Pentecostal. They concentrate on certain texts and ignore others. They interpret the texts with this set of presuppositions in mind. To put it bluntly: they do not necessarily derive their theological statements from an unprejudiced reading of the Bible, but use the texts to confirm their theological assumptions. We cannot do otherwise because the Bible as a whole is far too complex to be used as a basis for a consistent theology. Yet we must be careful that we do not overrule the texts or cast our faith into a static set of propositions.

I will put enmity between you (the snake) and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head and you will strike his heel (Gen 3:15).

Does this text really refer to a conflict between Christ and Satan, as classical dogmatics taught?

In the text

Here you assume that the Canon of the Bible as we have it today is the inspired Word of God. It was compiled by the Church to be used by the Church as its foundational document. What the authors wanted to say to their audiences long ago, what the compilers had in mind, what we want to read into the text, what the doctrinal tradition tells us – all this is irrelevant. It is the Canon alone that is decisive.

The Scriptures interpret themselves. Every text must be seen in the context of the whole Bible. So revelation actually happened with Canon formation.

This is a powerful approach, but for a critical mind it poses problems. Why should the view of a compiler of given texts be more important than the view of the authors who wrote the originals? Can the reasons and circumstances that led to certain statements be ignored? Do contradictory texts always augment each other? Are they all equally valid? How can we avoid reading our own preconceptions or desires into the Bible? Why discard the insights of the theological tradition if it can enrich the biblical witness?

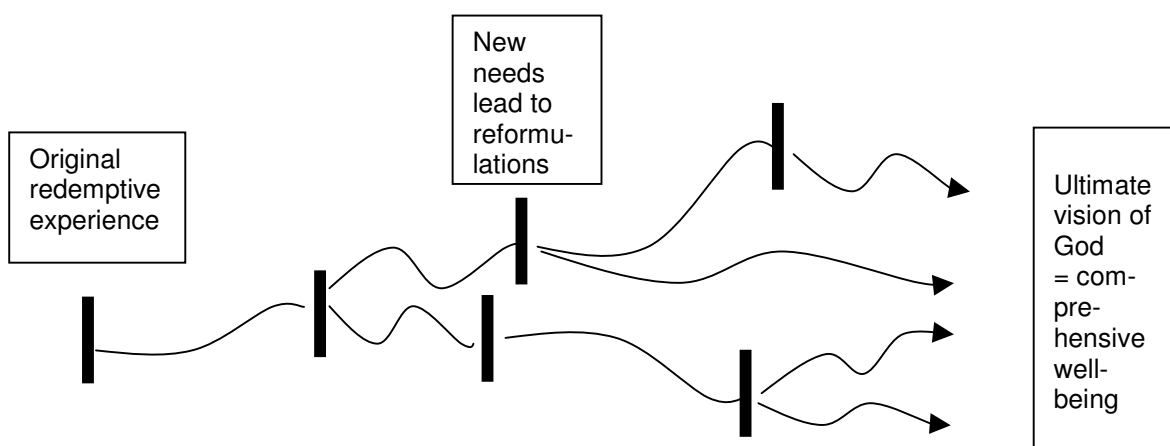
Thus says the Lord of hosts: I will punish the Amalekites for what they did in opposing the Israelites when they came out of Egypt ... do not spare them, but kill both man and women, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey (1 Sam 15:2f).

You have heard that it was said, You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good ... (Mat 5:43f).

Can these two texts really be equally valid? Do they really augment each other? Or has there been a progression of insight?

Underneath the text

In this approach we assume that texts are like fountains springing up from an undercurrent of evolving insight that moves through time. God's Word is always God's response to human needs in particular situations. Abraham needed a male heir. Israel needed liberation from Egypt. It needed a social and moral order, a country to live in, a central authority that could defeat hostile neighbours. God responded to these needs. Or rather, the redemptive experiences were proclaimed to be God's redeeming acts on behalf of his people. Such redemptive experiences were remembered, formed traditions and were applied to ever new circumstances.



As they adapted to new situations they fanned out into sub-traditions. But they also slowly developed into a certain direction – the direction towards God's vision of comprehensive well-being. The Word of God has always been on its way through human history, taking human beings along. Human perceptions of this vision have also unfolded in time. It has been like a horizon that retreats as one ap-

proaches it, that opens up ever new vistas, new challenges and new opportunities, that lures us to move on into the future. Of course, this method presupposes that we gain some insight into the circumstances under which some texts have been formulated and what they wanted to say to that situation. So we cannot do without behind-the-text reading.

On the seventh day, God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day ... (Gen 2:2).

Whoever works on the Sabbath day shall be put to death (Ex 35:2).

The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath (Mk 2:27).

Do not let anyone judge you in matters concerning food and drink, observing festivals, new moons or sabbaths (Col 2:16).

A sabbath rest remains for the people of God; for those who enter God's rest also cease from their labours as God did from his (Heb 4:9).

Do you discern a progression of insight in these texts?

If God is indeed the Source and Destiny of the evolving reality we witness today, is it appropriate to say that God had ceased to create and rested?

Once you accept that such a dynamic process has happened in biblical times, that it continues to happen today and that this is in line with God's redemptive intentions, you will approach the Bible with new eyes. Then you can say with confidence what Christ said: You heard that it was said to our fathers in the faith; but I say to you now ... (Mt 5). Neither Jesus nor his followers said such things arbitrarily; they said them because they were responsible stewards of the truth of God. They formulated a version that seemed to approximate God's vision better than the inherited version. All this presupposes that the Bible is a historical document.

Chapter III

The biblical witness is embedded in human history

That the Bible is part of our earthly, historical reality should be self-evident. What else? But many believers treat it as if it belonged to another world. Of course, we believe that God speaks to us through the Bible. But that does not mean that the Bible is not part of human reality. It only means that God in his grace uses human instruments to communicate with us as humans. The Word of God is of necessity always also a human word, thus part of human history. It is one of the most fundamental assumptions of the biblical faith that God entered human reality, established relationships with concrete human beings and accompanied them on their way through human history.

History means flux, change, development, unfolding. During the initial phases of human history this change was very slow. In more recent times it has begun to accelerate. Today its pace is breath-taking. Let us assume with some modern scientists that humans, as we know them, have been around for about 120 000 years. That is the tip of the tail end of cosmic history of a 14 billion years or so, about 0.0008% of the time the world existed. Humans began to till the soil and build fortified cities to protect their crops only about 10 000 years ago. That is only 8% of human history. Industrial society emerged only over the last 300 years, personal computers over the last few decades.

Whether these figures are entirely reliable or not is unimportant for our argument. The point is that we are talking of vast stretches of history and that God somehow got involved in this history. Perhaps Paul's statement that God's eternal power and divine nature was known since creation from what is created is an overstatement (Rom 1:19ff). But as far as we can establish, humans have always attempted to come to terms with the vast constellation of forces that determined their lives. They have developed perceptions of transcendent powers and ways of relating to them, even if in very rudimentary and primitive forms.

The biblical faith is a relative latecomer in this history. The Hebrews learnt the art of writing about 3000 years ago, which is no more than the last 2.5% of human history. The claim that the full revelation of God in Christ only happened at the end of time, as the New Testament claims, is not entirely out of place when we look back over the vast sweeps of history. Of course, we have not the slightest idea of what time spans may still lie ahead.

During the millennium of biblical history dramatic changes in insight have taken place. It was the time of political developments such as the establishment of the Israelite kingdoms and their subjugation under the great empires of the time. The Canaanite, the Assyrian, the Babylonian, the Persian and the Greek cultures impacted the Israelite faith. The suffering of the 'people of God' was intense and had to be dealt with in theological terms.

From the end of biblical history to the present day close to another 2000 years have elapsed. Christianity emerged and was translated into Greek worldview assumptions. Germanic invasions destroyed the Roman Empire. The so-called 'dark ages' with their superstitions and cruelties, the conflicts with Islam, the Renaissance, the Reformation, the establishment of worldwide empires, the beginning of capitalism, the first great scientific discoveries and technological inventions, the collapse of the feudal system and princely absolutism followed upon each other.

Modernity as we know it, has only been around for about 300 years, which is again the tail end of the time since David ruled over Israel. Yet during these last 300 years phenomenal developments have taken place. They have not only revo-

lutionised human insight, but also posed the very question what it means to be a human being. In cultural terms, the distance between the Bible and modernity is larger than the distance between the Bible and the time when humans began to invent stone tools and learnt to till the soil.

Is it conceivable that believers have learnt nothing during this entire stretch of history, that the Word of God had dropped from heaven ready made, and that it is equally applicable to pre-historic cave dwellers, Hebrew nomadic tribes, Roman conquerors, medieval knights and modern computer scientists? Humans are historical beings. Nothing human is eternal. Everything is in accelerating flux. It would be very strange if only the biblical witness was an exception. In fact, it is not.

Greek timelessness and Hebrew time consciousness

That reality is in flux was clearly seen both by biblical authors and Greek philosophers. But their reaction to this fact was different. The Greeks wanted to have a foundation for our lives that is stable and predictable. Plato, the ancient Greek philosopher, tried to get out of time into eternity, out of space into universality, out of power games into harmony. And so he abstracted the idea of a thing from the thing itself.

The idea of a chair is eternal; a concrete chair is only the weak and fleeting manifestation of the idea. You could destroy all chairs on earth; but if you still have the idea of the chair you can build any number of new chairs. For Plato, God is the ultimate idea. He is beyond time, beyond space, beyond earthly power plays. He is perfect. The problem is that the idea is an abstraction from reality; it is not real as such. Reality is in flux. Reality is specific. Reality is marked by power plays.

The Bible has a different approach to the divine dimension of reality. For the Bible, God is not an abstract and static idea but the dynamic, personal Lord and Creator of reality in its historical flux. The Israelite faith begins with a personal relationship between God and Abraham, an ancient nomadic patriarch. At that stage it was a family religion. Then it became a tribal religion, then a national religion. In Christ it became a universal religion.

The condescension of God culminated in Christ. John says that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. Jesus was a particular human being, embedded in a particular culture, living in a particular country and for a particular period within human history. If that had not been the case, we would know nothing of the revelation of God in Christ. Departing from that particular set of circumstances, the power of God's redeeming love in Christ spread and is still spreading to other times, places and cultural settings, including our own.

Christians have often bought into the Platonic idea of timelessness. We tend to treat not only God but also his Word, and therefore the Bible, as something beyond change, valid for all times and all situations. But if we do, we lose the most important message of the biblical witness, namely the transforming power of the biblical faith. On every page the Bible is a witness to the wild dynamics of human history and God's involvement in it.

God is not a static idea of perfection, but a motivational powerhouse with a will and a vision. The Hebrew language does not even have a word for "eternity". *Ad olam*, which is usually translated as 'eternity', means 'in all ages to come'. The assertions that God cannot change or that his Word is everlasting do not mean that God cannot act or change his mind. They only mean that God's commitment to humanity is reliable.

Change is built into the biblical witness

We should not be surprised, therefore, that we encounter monumental developments within the biblical witness itself. Human insight into God's intentions has not remained static. According to orthodox Islam, the Qur'an was composed in heaven, written down by one man, in a holy language. In its authentic form it cannot even be translated. You must know Arabic to be able to read it. It is fixed like a monument. The biblical message, in contrast, is highly dynamic in its development and wonderfully rich in its diversity. Just compare the Levitic law with the prophetic pronouncements, or the Gospel of Matthew with the Gospel of John.

This dynamic and this diversity have an underlying rationale. The Word of God has always picked up people precisely where they were in their particular situations, their worldviews and their specific needs, and led them forward another step towards God's future. Abraham did not first have to become a computer scientist to be able to relate with God. A computer scientist does not first have to roam the desert with his flock like an ancient Hebrew nomad to relate to God. God's Word always finds you where you are.

The lesson to be learnt is this: We must always ask what a particular text wanted to express, for whom it was formulated, to which situation it responded, where it is situated in the long history of increasing discernment, and especially, *which previous insights it left behind and by which later insights it was superseded*. A text can never be God's final word. According to the biblical witness this process will only reach its fulfilment in the eschatological future of God. As Paul put it, now we see a distorted picture in an inferior mirror, then face to face (1 Cor 13:12).

A few examples

As the insight of God's people into God's purposes gained in depth, fundamental changes occurred within the biblical witness. Here are a few prominent examples that I have discussed in my book *Biblical Theology in Outline*:

The importance of *Abraham* changed from that of the prime ancestor of the Jewish people, who received God's promises of progeny and land for his offspring, to that of the father of faith for all people (Rom 4).

The *exodus* of the Israelites from Egypt, which defined the identity of Yahweh as God of Israel and Israel as Yahweh's people, made way for a new kind of liberation based on the cross of Christ. It is accessible to all people and defines the identity of all people who wish to belong to Christ.

In Deuteronomy 7 and Exodus 23 the Israelites are supposed to drive out the *pagan inhabitants* of the promised land because they did not follow the law of Yahweh and would mislead his people. In Ephesians 2 God removed this "fence of division", which is the law, so that Jews and Gentiles can form one new humanity in Christ.

In Psalm 2 the *king*, who is deemed the adopted *Son of God*, that is, God's representative on earth, is entitled to conquer and oppress all nations on earth. In Mark 10:35-45 Jesus calls this model of leadership "pagan". The leadership of the Son of Man is one of selfless service.

In ancient Phoenicia *first-born sons were sacrificed to God* as the most precious belonging of a family. The practice was taken over by the Israelites, but then rigorously opposed by the prophets. In the New Testament it is God who sacrifices his only Son, his most precious possession, to sinful humanity (Is 43:23ff; Jn 3:16; Rom 3:25).

In Deuteronomy we have *conditional acceptance*: those who fulfil the law will be blessed, those who transgress it will be cursed. In Eph 2 we have unconditional acceptance: our moral achievements cannot save us; we have all died in sin and are all raised into a new life in Christ.

In Genesis 1 God looks at the world he has created and finds that it is “very good”.

In Revelation 20ff we find the vision of a recreated world that *will* be very good.

There are countless other such changes. Some have occurred gradually, some abruptly. A text can never be taken as the last word of God. We must always ask what has gone before and what has followed after. Although it culminated in the Christ-event, this process is still in progress and is heading towards the eschatological future of God.

Seeing that such dramatic developments happened already during biblical times, can we reasonably assume that nothing has changed since then? Christians accept the Bible as Canon, that is, as guideline to the truth. But that does not mean that the Bible is not part of human history. I have found an appealing metaphor for the relation between the Word of God and the Canon. The Word of God is like a bullet; the Canon is like the barrel of a gun. The bullet has to travel towards a distant target, say a kudu. The barrel is limited in length and open in front. Its function is to give direction to the bullet. But it cannot fulfil the function of the bullet.

If you treat the entire dogmatic tradition as canonical you prolong the barrel up to the kudu, as it were. If you believe that the barrel is the bullet, you try to throw the barrel at the kudu instead of allowing it to stay where it is and guide the bullet on its way. Of course, pictures are limited. The Word of God does not kill but give life. It witnesses to God’s creative authority, God’s redeeming love and God’s vision of comprehensive well-being. This is its essential content. If we take this content as our criterion we shall not go wrong very far in our doctrinal and ethical reflections when it comes to finding our way in modern times.

Chapter IV

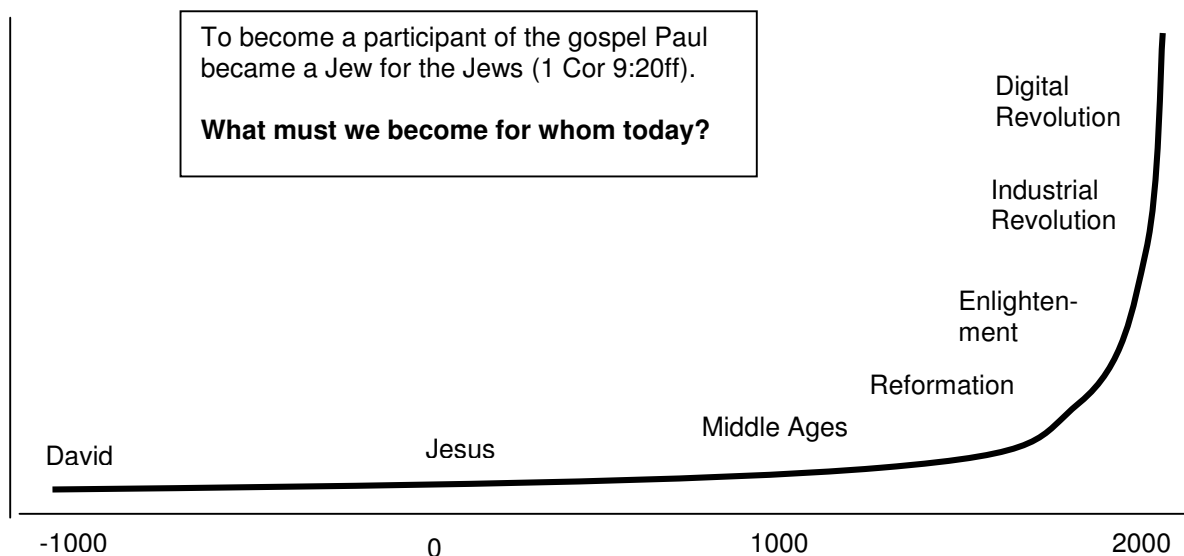
Witnessing to the gospel in the modern world

Where are we today?

In Christ God became a Jew for the Jews. Paul believed that if he wanted to become a participant in the gospel, he also had to become a Jew to the Jews and a Greek to the Greeks (1 Cor 9:19-23). That means that we have to translate the biblical message for every new age, into every new language, into every new culture, into every new human situation, into every new worldview - including our own. Where are we today in this process?

In the Letter to the Romans Paul translated the gospel into *the legal language of Jewish theology*. The outcome was his message of justification by faith rather than by works of the law. Well done. Our Nicene Creed is the outcome of translating the gospel into the *ontological language of Greek philosophy*. Well done. The problem is that in the 21st century we no longer think in terms of Jewish law or Greek philosophy. We have to concede that the Bible does not make sense to most modern people as it stands. Modern people have their own way of thinking. If we do not manage to translate the gospel into a modern frame of reference, we may render the biblical message incomprehensible for modern people.

The task of translating the gospel into the *modern mindset* is an enormously demanding task. Before we tackle this task, we have to get some clarity on the basic assumptions of modernity. The deepest motivation of modernity is *emancipation from authority* – from the authority of the Bible, of the ecclesial hierarchy, of church doctrines, of classical philosophy, of traditional worldviews, of the patriarchal system, of the dictates of a feudal state. For the purposes of this paper, I will consider post-modernity to be a radical form of modernity because it is powered by this very thrust towards emancipation.



See for yourself (empiricism). Think for yourself (rationalism). Develop your own gifts (technology). Pursue your own interests (free market). Enjoy your own life to the full (hedonism). Find your own personal Saviour (pietism). Have a say in how your country is being run (democracy). Safeguard your human dignity (human

rights). Demand the freedom to develop your gifts (female emancipation). These have been the motivators of modern people since the Enlightenment. Modern humans want to be in charge of their lives.

Let us concentrate on three major aspects. Modernity is determined by *science*, whose criterion is evidence, *technology*, whose criterion is efficiency, and *commerce*, whose criterion is utility. The Bible was written long before the age of modernity. So we should not be surprised to find that all three criteria are foreign to the biblical witness.

Science observes facts (induction), draws out consequences (deduction), which are again confirmed or falsified by experiment (verification). Faith assumptions are not amenable to scientific inquiry because they deal with the transcendent foundations of reality, which are beyond observation. They also deal with what reality *ought to become* if it is to become authentic. God is not part of the reality we experience but its *ultimate Source* and its *ultimate Destiny*. Science can say nothing about these two dimensions of reality. Honest scientists will readily concede that.

Conversely believers have to concede that faith assumptions, as found in the Bible, are not scientific statements about the nature and composition of reality, but want to witness to its ultimate Source and Destiny. The witness to God has always used existing perceptions of how reality is put together and adapted to new insights as they emerged. That is why there is not only one creation narrative in the Bible but a whole series of them.

However, faith assumptions constitute the transcendent dimensions of the reality we concretely experience and not an altogether alternative reality. According to the biblical witness, God's world is *this world* as it *ought to be*. God's world is this world as it is *supposed to become*. It is the very world that science investigates, that technology manipulates, that commerce exploits, that consumerism abuses. Faith assumptions therefore do not belong to the imaginary world of the fairy tale, but to the realm of values and visions. Rightly understood, faith assumptions do not contradict scientific evidence but establish the connection between reality and its transcendent Source and Destiny (Rom 11:36).

God made a dome in the middle of the primeval ocean that separated the waters above the dome from the waters below the dome (Gen 1:7).
You, God, stitched me together in my mother's womb (Ps 139:13).

How would you explain the relation between scientific insight and faith assumptions in these two texts?

The criterion of **technology** is efficiency. This too is a modern criterion unknown to the biblical writers. The biblical Canon is notoriously 'inefficient'. The Bible is not comparable to a mathematical set of formulae, the plan of an architect, or the taxonomy of a biologist. The collection of sources follows no clear-cut temporal sequence and no logically constructed system of thought. The creation narrative found in Genesis 1, for instance, was written long after the creation narrative found in Genesis 2. The three parts of the book of Isaiah were written at completely different periods of history. The Gospels were written after Paul's letters, not before. And so we can continue.

There is also no consistent worldview in the Bible. Texts written before the exile, such as Deuteronomy, breathe a different kind of atmosphere than texts written

under the impact of Babylonian, Persian and Hellenistic imperialism. The New Testament breathes a different atmosphere than the Old Testament and classical Judaism. Within the New Testament, John's Gospel differs substantially from Mark's Gospel; Paul's theology is different from the Letter to the Hebrews. Revelation does not seem to fit in with Acts of the Apostles.

This characteristic is not a weakness, but the strength of the Bible. It witnesses to the vitality and flexibility of God's Word. God's Word is not fettered to a particular set of human insights. Its thrust is derived from God's creative authority, God's redeeming love and God's comprehensive vision. It penetrates the jungles of this world in ever new forms to transform them from within. If you assume that the Bible, because it is the Word of God, must be as streamlined as a computer programme you are out of step with what it wants to be and be disappointed.

Yahweh drove the sea back by a strong desert wind all night and turned the sea into dry land (Ex 14:21b).

Moses stretched out his hand over the sea and the waters were divided ... the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left (Ex 14:21a, 22b).

Must we harmonise these two traditions (that were later merged into one) or can they both witness to God's power and benevolence as they stand?

Which one would speak more persuasively to people informed by modern science?

The criterion of **commerce** is utility. This criterion is even more powerful in modern life than evidence and efficiency. What does not satisfy our needs and desires does not really interest us. Production depends on consumption. Consumption depends on the usefulness of articles for the needs and whims of clients. Where there is no market demand, there is also no market supply. Modern people tend to ask, therefore, what benefit things like faith in Christ, going to church, reading an ancient collection of manuscripts like the Bible and prayer would bring. Again such a question misses the biblical truth. In which way?

Of course, the Word of God is God's response to human needs. It deals with the agony of *guilt and failure*. Guilt and failure lie in the past, which we can no longer access and rectify. It deals with *anxiety about the future*, which we cannot foretell. It deals with our *dependency* on relationships and forces much greater than our own. It deals with *spiritual and ideological enslavements*. Its message of divine love and salvation *motivates people* to get out of despondency, disease, poverty and oppressive social systems – and to help others to get out.

The Word of God leads to *freedom* from the world and *responsibility* for the world. It brings *reconciliation* between warring people and factions. It broadens our horizons to embrace *God's world as a whole* and not only our personal or collective self-interests. It leads us beyond the insatiable desires of consumerism. It opens up *the future* even where every hope seems to be lost.

But the Word of God is not a product of human inventiveness or a tradable commodity stored in supermarkets. It is always a gift of God's grace. It is never at our disposal. We can ever only become its recipients and instruments. We can only proclaim the Gospel and allow the Spirit of God to do the rest.

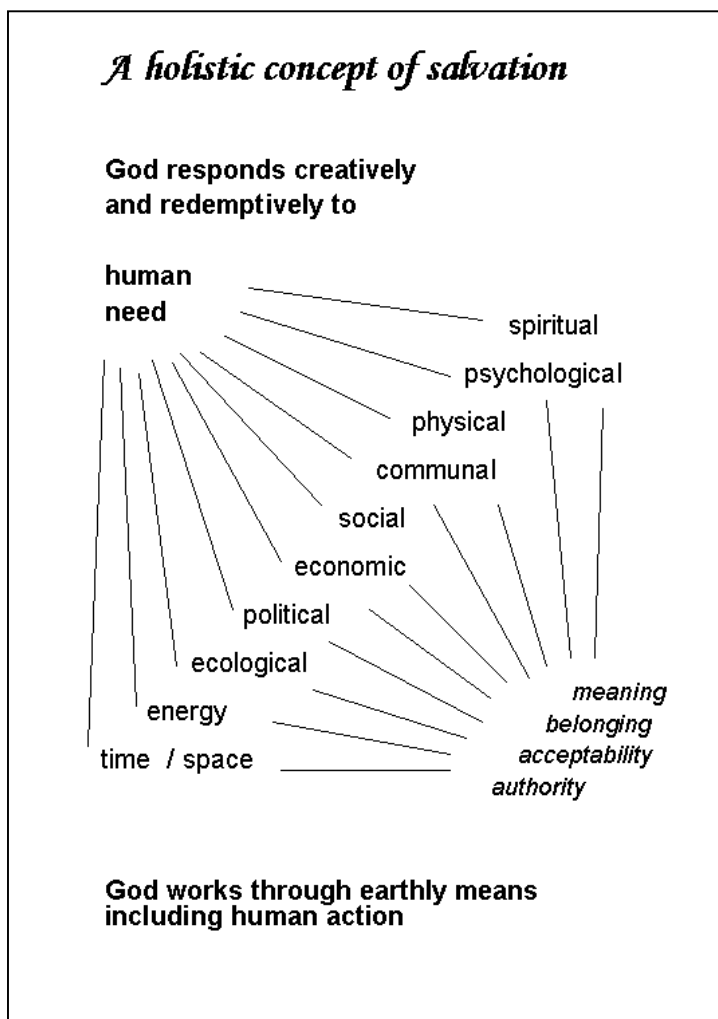
While we live, we are always given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh (2 Cor 4:11). Let my grace be sufficient for you, for my power comes to full fruition in weakness (2 Cor 12:9).

Do you think that taking up the cross of Christ can be a popular message today?

A holistic concept of salvation

Every situation is characterised by a constellation of human needs. Some needs are urgent and must be prioritised. As they are being fulfilled, other needs gain prominence. We have seen that in biblical times some believers prioritised progeny, then liberty, then economic resources (land), then political stability, then national prosperity and glory, then health – and so we can continue. God’s vision of comprehensive well-being (called *shalom*, love, or kingdom of God) covers all these aspects of life.

It is not good enough, therefore, to restrict the Christian concept of salvation to survival in the last judgment. The spiritual dimension of human needs – meaning, belonging, acceptability and authority to act – manifest themselves in all other creaturely needs. When we look back not only over biblical history, but also over the entire stretch of human history including our own our concept of salvation will be more inclusive and holistic than our tradition suggests. Here is a sketch that indicates some of the most important needs.



Chapter V

Ethical intuitions and pre-historic necessities

The human condition in pre-historic times

God's Word is God's response to human needs. In what follows I take community structures, family values, gender roles and sexual norms as examples. I will argue that all these have not fallen ready made from heaven, but had an initial historical rationale and a further history. The commandment to honour one's parents so that one would long live on earth, for instance, may have originated in a nomadic culture. Here the elderly who could not continue with the journey and became a nuisance were often left behind in the desert to die. This is still the case in some nomadic cultures. Obviously your children will have been informed by what you did with your parents in their old age when they have to deal with you in yours.

Let us trace some of the other circumstances during those times. To begin with humans were the most vulnerable and defenceless mammals on earth, the favourite food of predators, as a biologist told me recently. There were only a few thousand of them. They had no built-in weapons, such as the teeth of lions or the agility of antelopes. Their offspring took an extra-ordinarily long time to become fully operative. They were exposed to dangers from wild animals, poisonous snakes, bacteria, viruses and hostile neighbours. Many women died at childbirth, many children did not survive for long, many men perished through conflicts.

It was probably in these long times of extreme vulnerability that the basics of our gender roles and our sexual morality became ingrained. Women had to be protected during pregnancy and lactation. Children had to be protected during infancy and childhood. In comparison, men were relatively dispensable. Their task was to hunt and defend the group. When too many men died, polygamy assured the continued generation of progeny.

Pregnancies had to be maximised. A great number of children were a source of pride and wealth. Childlessness was a catastrophe. It was an offence to spill one's semen on the ground, the most ancient form of birth control. It was an offence not to take care of the widow of a deceased brother and raise children for him. Homosexuality was a crime because it thwarted the raising of progeny. It was the fertile womb that counted, not erotic love. Women were bartered between families. A barren woman could be sent home to her family and replaced with her sister. Females were virtual slaves of their fathers until they were handed over as slaves to their husbands. We still find this kind of approach in Ex 21:2-11.

One did not know that women contribute to the genetic makeup of a foetus but believed that the male placed his semen into the womb of the female like a seed in a pot. After death one continued to live in one's children. Therefore childlessness meant that your family was dying out. Genealogies always went along the male lineage. As in higher animals men were violently possessive of their women. The promiscuity of a man with non-integrated prostitutes could be tolerated, but adultery with a married woman carried the death penalty.

Vulnerability to a hostile environment was not the only problem. One also did not understand nature very well. Reality seemed to be determined by uncanny forces that could be influenced and kept at bay through ritual, or by roaming spirits that could be exorcised. The world of pre-historic humankind was exceptionally precarious. It demanded close cooperation, discipline and solidarity. Clans and tribes

were based on a patriarchal hierarchy in which every individual had his or her pre-defined status and role. One was not allowed to move beyond one's competence. Obedience to the ancestral traditions and the tribal authorities was imperative.

Early humans roamed about in small groups as hunters and gatherers. In time they invented a few stone tools, utilised fire, and domesticated a few animals. They began to till the soil only about 10 000 years ago. Agriculturists built fortified cities to keep the accumulated grain safe from nomadic attackers. In Jericho they have excavated the oldest known city wall found so far. In time centralised power emerged and led to the establishment of empires. David's kingdom was a modest attempt to build such an empire. It followed earlier Egyptian and Mesopotamian examples. Soon it was divided, then crushed and replaced by one superior pagan power after the other.

In spite of the emergence of these great empires, the mixture of nomadic, pastoral and agricultural activity was still the mainstay of humanity when the Bible was written. Yet even during the millennium of biblical history ethical assumptions changed dramatically. This can be observed most clearly in the field of family ethics. Jesus never married. He advised a potential follower who wanted to fulfil his filial duties to let the dead bury the dead (Mt 8:22). He told his own mother and brothers that those who do the will of God are his family (Mt 12:46ff). Paul also never married. He had no antenna for the importance of raising progeny (1 Cor 7:25f). For him the essential role of Abraham was no longer considered that of the prime ancestor of the Jewish people, but the father of faith (Rom 4). All this was breath-taking when compared with previous injunctions. Let us look at two pairs of texts to demonstrate the importance of these shifts.

If a man commits adultery both the man and the woman shall be put to death (Lev 20:10).
The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman (who) was caught in the act of committing adultery ... He said to them: Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her ... Has no one condemned you? No one, sir. Neither do I condemn you. Go your way and sin no more (Jn 8:3ff).

If someone has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey his father and mother ... all the men of the town shall stone him to death. So you shall purge evil from your midst (Dt 21:18-21).
While the (prodigal) son was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion. He ran, embraced him and kissed him ... "for this son of mine was dead and is alive, he was lost and is found" (Lk 15:20ff).

Can you pinpoint the theological reason for these shifts in approach to family ethics?

Are our ethical instincts still functional today?

Now, where are we today? Just think of it: It is no more than a century and a half ago that people trekked with their ox wagons from the Eastern Cape into the interior. If you had told them that we would soon be able to fly through the air from East London to Johannesburg within 90 minutes, they would have thought that you were crazy. The time when they tortured and burnt witches at the stake is only 500 years away. The time when Jesus lived is 2000 years away. The time when David reigned is 3000 years away.

Is it likely that the ethical imperatives that we have inherited from that time – in fact from pre-historic times – are still functional in all respects? At least Christians

have to ask this question. Orthodox Judaism and fundamentalist Islam have opted for a static, eternally valid law that has to be followed meticulously whether it makes sense or not. It is still forbidden for Jews to mix milk and meat products because of an ancient law, probably directed against the Canaanite fertility cult (Ex 23:19). The cult died out millennia ago, but the law still stands. Orthodox Jews use two sets of crockery and cutlery to ensure that milk molecules do not get into contact with meat molecules. Pure observance for no apparent reason – that is not how the Christian faith ought to function.

The God Christians believe in is not a tyrannical lawmaker that imposes his will by violent means, that is not willing to respond to changing situations and needs and that is not involved in the flux of human history. The Sabbath is made for the human being, Jesus said, not the human being for the Sabbath (Mk 2:27). This is true for every moral and social norm. Love is the supreme meta-norm over against which the validity of all norms must be judged. Let me reiterate that we have a very clear, yet very flexible guideline: God's vision of comprehensive well-being for all people within the comprehensive well-being of their entire social and natural environment. It is a dynamic guideline, that moves forward like a shifting horizon as we move forward. Let us look at a few issues.

A man who lies with his father's wife (or daughter-in-law) both of them shall be put to death.
 If a man lies with a male as with a woman both of them shall be put to death.
 If a man takes a wife and her mother also they shall be burnt to death.
 If a man lies with an animal he and the animal shall be put to death (Excerpts from Lev 20).
 Onan spilled his semen on the ground whenever he went to his brother's wife so that he would not give offspring to his (deceased) brother. This angered the Lord and he put him to death also (Gen 38:9f).

Which of these commandments would you want to be incorporated into the constitution of your country?

Democracy has proved to be a more functional system than authoritarianism or tyranny. Each citizen is responsible for social order and invited to contribute to economic prosperity. So is it imperative that the authorities that God has placed above us (Rom 13) must be obeyed under all circumstances, even when Hitler begins to exterminate the Jews, or when the South African army moves into Angola? Nuclear warheads that can destroy the earth a couple of times over have replaced the 'sword' that Paul speaks about in Romans 13. If the sword has a lethality index of 20, a modern fighter bomber has a lethality index of 150 000 000. Is war between nuclear powers still an option under modern circumstances?

"Populate the earth and subdue it" (Gen 1:28) was an apt encouragement when collective survival enjoyed highest priority. Estimates say that as late as the time of Jesus there were only about 1 million people around. We are now 6 billion and the earth is groaning under our weight. There were about 5 million people in South Africa in 1900; now we are more than 40 million. Surely today the injunction would have to change from fertility and the subjugation of nature to family planning and environmental conservation! The entire situation has been stood on its head.

So the ban on artificial birth control, still in force in the Catholic Church, has become obsolete. What about other ethical norms? In a modern society, external

threats from predators and hostile tribes have vanished. Diseases have been brought under control to a considerable extent. We no longer fear uncanny forces and roaming spirits. So the major constraints and necessities that have forged the solidarity of the extended family have fallen away. Family bonds can be wonderfully enriching, but traditional family obligations were so inhibiting and frustrating that they have largely been abandoned.

When a (Hebrew) man sells his daughter as a slave, she shall not be free (after six years) as the (Hebrew) male slaves are (Ex 21:7).

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:28).

Which historical-cultural reasons do you think existed for the subordination of women in the ancient past?

What has changed through the gospel?

What has changed through modernity?

In a modern society female emancipation has led to equality between the sexes. The patriarchal hierarchy with its male domination and female subservience has become positively counterproductive. It is an incredible advantage of modern society that it can utilise all gifts of both genders to the full. To demand that women keep silent in the congregation, that they cannot be ordained and become pastors has become irrational, hurtful and detrimental to the healthy development of all available gifts in the church.

Then Jesus said to the women (who saw and worshipped the risen Lord): Do not be afraid, go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me (Mat 28:10).

Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent (1 Tim 2:11f).

Is it responsible to exclude half of humanity from the ministry today just because they have an inborn sexual characteristic?

Can you formulate an appropriate stance towards the status and ministry of women in the church today?

Infants and children still need the economic, social and emotional security and nurture of both their parents for their healthy development. Spouses still need the assurance of unconditional, suffering acceptance of each other for a sense of belonging and emotional strength. As far as I am concerned, therefore, the integrity of the nuclear family and marital fidelity are still entirely indispensable. But where they break down to such an extent that common life has become impossible, we no longer find it necessary to insist that spouses remain together.

Certainly adultery can lead to most painful emotional upheavals and family disruptions, but we no longer believe that we should impose the death penalty. Because of its medical and emotional consequences, sexual promiscuity among the youth is certainly not a healthy development. But we must conscientize the youth about these consequences, rather than pestering them with a moralistic attitude. The latter may have nothing but nuisance value for them. Pre-marital sex has become so widespread that the practice no longer registers alarm bells in the con-

science of the youth. Even extra-marital pregnancies have become socially acceptable. What would be an appropriate response given the assumption that human beings should be both free and responsible?

Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman but she does not please him ... he writes a certificate of divorce ... and sends her out of her house, she is married to another man who does the same, the first one is not allowed to take her back (Deut 24:1-4).
 Anyone who divorces his wife, except on grounds of adultery, causes her to commit adultery and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery (Mt 5:32).

Is the dismissal of a wife by the husband an acceptable practice?

Keeping the meta-norm of love in mind, is it obligatory that even couples that cannot manage to live together and agree to separate must stay together, or if they separate, cannot remarry under any circumstances?

Whatever we decide, we must witness to the fact that the gospel of Christ proclaims God's suffering and transforming acceptance of the unacceptable. Those who have been accepted by God are invited to be involved in God's liberating, healing and transforming acceptance of others. That is the bottom line for any Christian. Becoming a Christian does not imply climbing out of one's genetic predisposition, one's embeddedness in a network of relationships, or one's cultural formation. It implies sharing God's creative authority, God's redeeming love and God's comprehensive vision. It implies channelling processes from dangerous and detrimental into healthy and beneficial directions.

Homosexuality as a case in point

Homosexuality is a particularly sensitive issue. It is clearly forbidden in both the Old and the New Testaments and we should not try to massage the texts until they say something different. The point is, however, that we have practically abandoned a whole bunch of ancient biblical prohibitions that no longer seem to be appropriate. Yet in this case we hesitate. Why that? Partnerships, friendships and "blood brotherhoods" between men have been around since times immemorial. There were monastic orders for women and for men in the Church. Nobody is against two women or two men sharing a flat. What we probably find repugnant is the sexual element.

This seems to be a very deeply ingrained instinct in heterosexual persons, including myself. We must take it seriously as such and work with it. We must concede that a certain percentage of humanity is born with this predisposition and cannot climb out of it. For all we know, it is a genetic mutation in some and a social conditioning in others. We may perhaps see homosexuality as an abnormality, on par with certain other hereditary and circumstantial handicaps. Some are born as left-handers or albinos. Some are born with physical or mental defects. Some have been involved in accidents. But that should move us to sympathy rather than to condemnation or condescension.

We must also concede that, just as in the case of the prohibition of contraception, the primeval necessities that led to prohibition of homosexuality have fallen away. What may have been a benefit to primeval society may be a curse in modern times. We have so many orphans today that we should be grateful if a couple wants to adopt children, whether the couple is homosexual or heterosexual. Some time ago Christians began to question the biblical acceptance of slavery. More re-

cently we have begun to understand that racial and gender discrimination as found in the Bible is wrong. Do we now need to question the validity of the ancient prejudice against homosexuals that is also found in the biblical witness?

We must further concede that to discriminate against homosexuals in society is unloving in communal terms, counterproductive in economic terms and unjust in social terms. In South Africa it is against the law. We can certainly discern that promiscuity and infidelity are detrimental to human well-being, whether among homosexuals or heterosexuals. But can we argue with the same force of validity that a loving partnership between homosexuals is morally wrong? It may be true that homosexual relations tend to be unstable. But heterosexual marriages have also become unstable of late. Nevertheless this does not make us abandon them.

In a state based on human rights, can we deny such a partnership the legal protections that we grant to heterosexual marriages? Perhaps we should not call formalised relationships between homosexuals “marriages” because this concept has a particular meaning in our culture. Surely we could find names and institutions that are specifically geared to the needs of such relationships and that would perhaps be more appropriate for them than conventional marriages.

One thing should be entirely clear: just as the church cannot exclude foreigners, certain race groups, females, Jews and slaves – or whatever other apparent social misfits – it cannot possibly exclude homosexuals if it wants to be true to the gospel of Christ. And if we have finally allowed females to be ordained and to preach, can we prevent homosexuals from ordination and preaching? Are they second class members of the Body of Christ?

These questions need to be discussed. But before we do so, we must try to adopt a factual attitude, inform ourselves thoroughly in medical, social and theological terms and get rid of prejudices that we have internalised. Due to my instinctual predisposition, I find that difficult to do. Yet I am constrained as a Christian and a modern person to overcome a predisposition that is in conflict with the love of Christ. Looking at Romans 1 (see the box on the next page) we may conclude that even Paul was not entirely factual in his approach to this problem, nor always consistent in following his norm of creative and redeeming love.

Certainly I have met the most wonderful, committed and dedicated Christians among homosexuals and I would not want them to be excluded in any way. The book *'n Kas is vir Klere* by Pieter Cilliers has deeply moved me and I cannot wish that anybody would have to go through such agonies. What has the church done to all these people over the years? Would Jesus have condemned a person of such integrity, who did his utmost as a Christian and pastor to overcome the inclination, but simply could not? Maybe it is time for us to discern that God wants to take us a step forward, as he did in the case of slavery and female emancipation.

What can be known about God ... can be known to them ... through the things he has made. They did not honour God or give thanks to him, but became futile in their thinking. Claiming to be wise they became fools. They exchanged the immortal God for images ...

Therefore God gave them up to impurity ... because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped the creature rather than the Creator.

Therefore God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural ... their men gave up natural intercourse with women and were consumed with passion for one another.

They did not acknowledge God, so God gave them up to ... every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice ... envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, gossip, slander, God-hatred, insolence, haughtiness, boasting, inventing evil, rebellion towards parents, foolishness, faithlessness, heartlessness, ruthlessness. They know God's decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die – yet they do not only do them but applaud those others who practice them (Rom 1:18-32 in excerpts).

Is it true that the invisible power and divine nature of God can be recognised by every human being merely by looking at creation?

Is it true that all atheists and all people of other faiths fall into all the enumerated vices?

Is it true that it is God who gives them up into such evil intentions and passions?

Is it true that only heterosexuality is 'natural'?

Does homosexuality necessarily fall into the same category as murder, strife, deceit, heartlessness, ruthlessness?

Owe no one anything, except to love one another. For the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet, and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, Love your neighbour as yourself. Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law (Rom 13:8-10).

Must homosexuality necessarily and always be in conflict with genuine love? Is it loving to exclude or to discriminate against homosexuals?

Let us summarise

God in his mercy entered human history to transform it from within. God picks up people where they are and leads them in the direction of his vision of comprehensive well-being. The fact that there are imperfections in the Bible shows that God has utilised fallible humans in the past and can therefore use us in our limited insights and questionable motivations.

We can read the Bible in at least 5 ways. Behind the text reading tries to establish which circumstances led to a text and what it wanted to say to its contemporaries. Before the text reading applies biblical statements directly to the situation of the reader. Above the text reading imposes doctrinal propositions on the text. In the text reading assumes that the Canon as it stands is inspired irrespective of the motives of its authors or its readers.

Under the text reading assumes that the Word of God is God's redemptive response to human need. A redemptive experience becomes a tradition that is applied to new situations of need and changed in the process. This is how human insight into God's intentions becomes more focused, more profound and more comprehensive in scope. The direction towards God's vision of comprehensive well-being becomes visible and can inform us in our new situations. All this means that the Word of God is embedded in human history. History is in flux, human situations change and God's redemptive responses change accordingly.

Dramatic shifts have occurred over the millennium of biblical history. The ancient tradition of the king as the representative of God on earth is a case in point. While the original model, gleaned from Egyptian examples, was maintained, its content changed from the legitimation of tyrannical rule to the assertion of selfless service as characteristic of a true leader. Christ himself, the suffering Servant, is proclaimed to be the ultimate ruler of the universe.

Another example is the history of the tradition of God's creation and reconstruction of the universe. Because the biblical authors did not presume to write a scientific textbook but wanted to reassure believers that God not only has the will to redeem but also the power to redeem, a long series of creation narratives emerged in the cause of time, each one utilising and transforming the most plausible world-views of its time.

In Christ God became a Jew for the Jews and, to become part of the gospel, Paul had to do likewise. Today we have to become modern people for modern people or fail to communicate the gospel. Modernity is based on the rejection of authority and the urge for emancipation. The criterion of science is evidence; that of technology is efficiency; that of commerce is utility; that of consumerism is unrestrained enjoyment. The biblical witness is pre-modern and cannot be expected to share these criteria. We must therefore do our own homework.

Ethical precepts are a case in point. The millennium in which the Bible was written comes to stand at the tail end of a human history of about 100 000 years. Our ethical instincts have been formed when our ancient forebears were few and vulnerable. Procreation, patriarchy and family discipline were essential for survival. Even within biblical history ethical assumptions underwent dramatic changes.

The last 300 years have revolutionised the situation of humanity in a way that even the biblical authors could hardly envisage. We have to ask, therefore, to which extent biblical moral precepts are still essential for human well-being today and which have become counterproductive. The abolition of slavery and female emancipation are precedents that may lead us to a reappraisal of other norms we still take for granted but which may have become obsolete.