

SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION AND BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION:

Interdisciplinary perspectives

In times of social transformation religious communities often find it necessary to respond to those particular transformation processes. In religious communities that revere certain holy, authoritative scriptures (such as the Jewish, the Muslim and the Christian communities) people normally appeal to these scriptures as sources of orientation in those circumstances. Within the Christian community, inter alia, renewed attempts at interpreting the Bible to find answers to various social issues, are normally sparked. The Bible is being used (and sometimes abused) in response to the particular social transformation process.

Within the Reformed Christian tradition it is often telling to investigate the official ecclesial statements, decisions, and even confessions. These written documents normally not only indicate which social issues were regarded as important during those circumstances, but also which Biblical interpretation strategies were followed by church communities in their response to those issues.

Numerous studies have already been done on the use of the Bible in certain ecclesial documents. Many of these studies take into account the contexts in which these ecclesial documents were formulated. However, how contexts of social transformation influence this process, has not been investigated adequately.

A research project (funded by the HSRC) has thus been registered to investigate this issue. The research problem that is being investigated in this project is: What influence do different contexts of social transformation have on the use of the Bible when Reformed Christian churches respond to social issues?

In the answering of this research problem four different contexts of social transformation (see section 4.2 in my article) are investigated in order to determine how the Biblical interpretation strategies of Reformed Christians in that contexts have been influenced in their response to burning social issues.

As part of this research project an interdisciplinary colloquium was held in September 1999 to determine how certain related areas of research could enrich our reflection on this issue. Specialists from areas, such as sociology and the interpretation of legal texts, have been requested to contribute to this interdisciplinary discussion. The articles in this volume are the results of these deliberations.

Jonker's article provides a description of the research context within which the other contributions should be understood. Groenewald, the sociologist, clarifies the concept of "social transformation" in his contribution by referring to the tension between globalization and

localization. After his article, two contributions from the field of constitutional interpretation (namely that of Du Plessis and De Ville) follow. This field shares an hermeneutical-theoretical interest with that of biblical interpretation. Three further contributions, namely that of Smit, De Kock and Botman, provide some perspectives on the research theme from different theological angles. Smit shows how social transformation influences the process of confessing the faith, De Kock discusses the stages of faith according to the description of Fowler, and Botman indicates how social transformation influences the process of ethical reflection.

The last two contributions, that of Van der Kooij and Meyer, represent progress reports on two of the four case studies that are investigated in the project. Van der Kooij deals with the Dutch debate on homophilia, while Meyer deals with the use of the Bible in the Belhar confession.

LOUIS JONKER
(University of Stellenbosch)