

TOWARDS A CHRISTIAN VISION AS THE BASIS FOR ETHICAL DECISIONS

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Abstract

One of the great tragedies of the South African context has been the way the Bible was used to justify the ideology of apartheid. This South African context provides the impetus for the problematic of this paper, which examines how the misuse of the Bible could be avoided. Using the thought of Charles E Curran, it is argued that a Christian vision provides the necessary background for making any application from the Bible. Such a Christian vision can be constructed from the Scriptures to form a framework for all ethical decision making. The purpose of such a vision enables the Christian to understand the world and to view moral actions within this perspective.

1. The apartheid use of the Scriptures

One of the great tragedies of the South African context is the use that was made of the Bible to justify the political ideology of *apartheid*. Voices of protest gradually heightened in opposition to such a use of the Scriptures, culminating finally in the pivotal *Kairos* document (1986), which openly challenged such use of Scriptures as a manipulation for their own ends. However, in the beginning it is difficult to find such voices of protest. For us today, living in the aftermath of *Kairos*, it is hard to imagine how anyone could openly put forward such scriptural and theological arguments in support of *apartheid*, but nevertheless arguments were put forward with the utmost sincerity.

One example of such argumentation was the work of Du Preez (1959. *Eiesoortige ontwikkeling tot volksdiens: die hoop van Suid-Afrika*. Separate development towards worship in ethnic groups: the hope of South Africa.) I have examined this work elsewhere (1988:20-33), and drew attention to the criticism that Geysers (1960) levelled against it. Such criticism was probably the first to be issued from the context of the Afrikaans religious tradition, and Geysers's systematic rebuttal of the scriptural arguments put forward are among the finest rejections ever to have been made against the use of the Scriptures in support of the ideology of *apartheid*.

In his argument Du Preez constantly endeavoured to use the Scriptures to support his preconceived thesis that separate ethnic religious services were demanded by the New Testament. As Du Preez states the matter:

To understand my purpose with regard to this work correctly, I must mention here that I am writing throughout as a theologian and churchman in order to give an answer from the theological church side to the Christian-ethical implications of the problem in our land and to advise our people to try and solve this problem in the right relationship with regard to God en our fellow man. My conviction is namely, that whatever solution may be found, the church has a great and responsible call to fulfill the whole affair. (Du Preez 1959:13; translation my own PJH.)

Du Preez's approach is a mirror of the way in which the Scriptures were being read within the context of parts of the white community. One example will illustrate this whole approach. In reflecting upon Acts 2:6-11 (the Pentecost experience where people from different nationalities each Peter speak in their own language), Du Preez argued for the racial separation and distinction of people. He argued that it would be 'a deprivation of "God's great deeds in our own language" if other language groups were forced to be present in the same divine service' (Du Preez 1959:109; translation my own PJH). Consequently, the miracle of Pentecost is seen as a divine approval for the existence of radical and linguistic distinctions among people and these distinctions must be upheld to the extent that even in religious gatherings for worship, these racial and linguistic separations must be upheld.

How does one answer such exegesis of the Scriptures? Geysers' a solution was to examine the text itself, to subject it to a thoroughgoing exegesis and to show how exegesis has dominated the thought of Du Preez. Geysers (1960:4) concluded his examination of Acts 2 by arguing that this chapter was speaking 'about racial separation in the church'. In fact, the exact opposite was taking place where God was breaking down barriers that separated humanity. Geysers appropriated the views of Ben Marais who said: '

The dividing line of language by which God punished sinful mankind at Babel, has been broken through ... they did not lose their (language) identity, but their *apartheid* fell away (Geysers 1960:3; translation my own PJH).

This is certainly a legitimate and praiseworthy way of proceeding. However, I think there is another equally important way of proceeding, namely to subject every proposed interpretation of the Scriptures to an examination against the background of the underlying Christian vision of the Scriptures. Whatever is faithful to that vision is a valid interpretation; whatever runs counter to that vision is a distortion and is to be rejected. This is an important way of safeguarding that such horrendous uses of Scripture are not repeated as occurred in the use of the Scriptures to justify an evil system such as *apartheid*. It will be the purpose of this paper to investigate what this Christian vision of the Scriptures is. It is also the ethical dimension in which I am interested. Consequently, the purpose of this study is to answer the question: 'What is it that I am called to do, if I am to consider myself a Christian?'

2. Morality as remembering

Today the concept of narrative is gaining more and more importance among biblical scholars as an important element in the interpretation of the Scriptures. The work that is to a large extent responsible for this attention to narrative is that of Frei's (1974), in which interest was aroused anew in the theological significance of biblical narrative.

The ethical dimension of the Scriptures unfolds through the story of the community of Israel, and of the early church. These stories of Israel and the early Church are not so much details about what took place, as rather what it means to be a community in a relationship with God and with one another. The historical question is not the important one; rather, it is the significance which emerges from the narrative that is central.

One reason for the popularity of the concept of narrative is that it brackets the question of truth: accurate historical reports and the purest fictions are both narratives. Attention to narrative thus gives theologians some breathing room by allowing the literal sense of the text to come into focus without its becoming immediately confused with historical questions. (Green 1987:261)

The narratives of the Scriptures open up the possibilities for those who hear and read the Scriptures to direct their lives according to these narrative accounts. The very existence of the Scriptures presupposes that there is a community which has preserved these writings and has considered them to be authoritative. This means that these writings continue to challenge new situations and new communities 'to be the kind of people capable of recalling the stories of our fathers and mothers, on which our existence continues to depend' (Hauerwas 1984:261).

In using the Scriptures in this way, it is vital to respect the gap that exists between the biblical world and today's world. This means that hermeneutics must be faithful in allowing the texts to unfold first of all according to their world, before trying to make a direct application to today's world. But, this is not some sort of romantic hermeneutics in which one simply attempts to reconstruct the past. Ricoeur expresses this well when he says:

Not the intention of the author, which is supposed to be hidden behind the text; not the historical situation common to the author and his original readers; not the expectations or feelings of these original readers; not even their understanding of themselves as historical and cultural phenomena. What has to be appropriated is the meaning of the text itself, conceived in a dynamic way as the direction of thought opened up by the text. (Ricoeur 1976:92)

The aim of biblical interpretation, then, emerges as the opening up of the meaning of the text itself as it is now appropriated by a new context and situation. This demands, however, that the gap between the world of the Bible and the world of today must be respected. The best way this can occur is by the process of analogy. The text shows that certain problems and solutions to these problems arose from what one can term the cultural and symbolic universe of that time. What is to be

imported from the text is neither their problems, nor the solutions to their problems. These act, instead, as a sort of paradigm according to which one can draw a solution to our problems which are vastly different.

The hermeneutical rule which I see as the only operable one would be: our answers should be to our problems which the answers of the biblical writers were to the problems of their times, as we perceive them by means of biblical exegesis. This relation of analogy between the question-answer relationship of today, and the question-answer-relationship of the primitive church seems to me the best approximation to the kind of truthfulness that we expect from a Christian hermeneutical theology. (Ricoeur 1989:286)

3. The Christian vision or stance

The present community of Christians turns to the Scriptures for guidance, but not in a naïve way striving to make a one to one application between the past and the present. In remembering and appropriating this narrative for today, the process described by Ricoeur is vital. One knows that the world in which we live is different from the world of the first century. The first step is to become aware of and to respect that distance. Then, in the very act of remembering the narratives of that world, we are able to pass from the alien world to the present world in that we use them as analogies of how to act in our own world.

Using the above as a context, a further perspective needs to be taken into consideration, namely that of the Christian horizon which emerges from the sources of the Christian faith, in particular the Christian Scriptures. The notion of 'horizon' can be defined in this way:

Bernard Lonergan understands horizon as a maximum field of vision from a determinate viewpoint. Horizon thus includes both an objective pole and a subjective pole. The use of the term horizon allows one to emphasize the importance of the subject as well as the object in the question of stance. The horizon forms the way in which the subject looks at reality and structures his own understanding of the world and reality. Horizon indicates that what we are talking about is not necessarily in terms primarily of content or of object, but rather a formal structuring of the way in which the individual views reality. (Curran 174:55-56)

This means that Christians have a common view on the world and see things in a way that is determined by the narrative of the Scriptures. When speaking of Christian ethics one strives to see that the relationship-response to which all Christians are called in their lives must be implemented against the backdrop of the wider vision or horizon which emerges from a biblical narrative. To put the matter in another way: there is an all encompassing horizon which informs all ethical action. This all encompassing horizon, or stance, or vision, comprises five essential aspects as Curran states:

Christian ethic and the Christian in my judgement must view reality in terms of the Christian mysteries of creation, sin, incarnation, redemption and resurrection destiny. (Curran 1974:565)

This Christian vision acts like a flashlight onto reality, illuminating the horizons within which ethical action occurs. A brief examination of these fivefold perspectives of the Christian horizon will illustrate the importance of this vision. For these fivefold perspectives I am indebted to the writings and reflections of Curran.

3.1 Creation

The starting point for the Christian view of reality, as it emerges from the narratives of the Christian Scriptures, is that reality itself is the result of the creation of an all-good God. All things emanating from the hand of this creator are themselves good. The implications of this view of reality are such that in themselves all things are viewed as created as good, and that human beings within the context of creation are destined to achieve goodness and have within themselves the ability to achieve this goodness. This means that:

If one takes seriously the fact that all men (sic!) share the same humanity and can arrive at some true ethical conclusions, then dialogue becomes an absolutely necessary aspect of our existence as Christians. Of course, this does not imply that one blindly accepts what others or a majority of people are doing. (Curran 1974:56)

The Christian vision accepts the mystery of creation as the scene where one can discover God's way with the world. One can learn from the wisdom of what others have discovered about morality and human actions. Besides the narratives of the Scriptures, the narratives of the lives of other human beings become a source from which one can reflect and learn about morality. However, this optimistic picture needs to be tempered by a further insight into the Christian vision of reality, namely sin.

3.2 Sin

One realizes that the world is neither as God had intended it, nor as God created it. It has become distorted through the effects of human sin; through the response of a rejection of the relationship with God. In more recent years theologians have tended to speak of original sin more in terms of 'the sin of the world' reflecting the Johannine concept (Jn 1:30). To be human means to be situated in the world which has a sinful history.

Sin pollutes the air men (sic!) breathe and becomes incarnate in the very structures of human life and society so that men (sic!) are unable to avoid sin. We know from our own experience how difficult it is for an honest Christian witness in some aspects of life because of the corruption and dishonesty which seems to be taken for granted. So strong is the cosmic and social aspect of sin that theologians are now considering original sin and its passage from one generation to another in terms of the sin of the world. (Curran 1968:65)

A look at *apartheid* South Africa certainly bears out this contention. The very structures of society were so entrenched that it was impossible for anyone, however well meaning, to avoid sin. No white South African can claim innocence and purity - just as in Nazi Germany there was no excuse in saying: 'But, we didn't know'. Where one lived, worked, ate, socialized, went to school and university, whom one married, and even in some instances, where one worshipped, were all regulated by the *apartheid* structures, and one either benefited from the sin of *apartheid*, or suffered from this sin. So comprehensive was the sin of *apartheid* that no one escaped its effects and influence.

A realistic appreciation of the reality of sin in the world of creation means that the Christian endeavours constantly to overcome this sin; but, the only way this is possible is by compromise.

Sometimes the presence of sin in the world will force one to do something which, if there is no sin present, should not be done. (Curran 174:75)

In *apartheid* South Africa compromise became a way of life: good Christians were forced to compromise their beliefs in order to achieve some good. In running a business a Christian businessman was forced to compromise by working within the sinful structures of the society, but at the same time attempting to transcend them.

Christians in *apartheid* South Africa have been all too aware of the power of sin, as well as the need for compromise, but at the same time the horizon of the Christian reality incorporates a number of other dimensions and perspectives which give added hope to every Christian ethical action. This means that to the Old Testament dimensions of creation and sin have been added the narrative of what Jesus of Nazareth has accomplished through the central events of his incarnation, death, resurrection and promised return. This leads to three other dimensions of the Christian vision.

3.3 Incarnation

The incarnation embraces the act of God sending the Son to show the way to reconciliation. This becomes a reminder to humanity of its inherent goodness due to the creation in the image of God, but this image has been distorted by the effects of sin - a distortion, not a destruction. The incarnation draws attention to the basic message of the goodness of God's creation. God once more wishes to lead the creation to this goodness and away from the disastrous effects of sin. The incarnation also points to the perfect act of recreation which occurs in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

3.4 Redemption and resurrection-destiny

These are the final two aspects which are determinative for the Christian vision or horizon which emerges from the narratives of the Scriptures. Redemption embraces the communication of God's forgiveness to humanity through the death and resurrection of God's Son. On the other hand, resurrection-destiny looks forward to the future destiny of the believer in union with God (Curren 1986:84). While they

are two separate aspects of the Christian vision, they work together as two sides of one coin: '... both can be considered together with the realization that the resurrection destiny of all brings to fulfillment the work of redemption' (Curran 1974:78).

4. Importance of such a vision

While it may be open to discussion that there are other perspectives which need to be incorporated in this vision, I feel that these five aspects, as they have been specified by Curran (creation; sin; incarnation; redemption; resurrection-destiny), do capture the vital heart of the Christian horizon within which the Christian lives and works. It is in effect a 'shorthand' (Hines 1990:53) for the basic Christian story emerging from the narrative of the Scriptures. Once more morality, as narrative, is seen to play an essential role.

The purpose of such a vision is to help the Christian to understand the world and to view moral actions within this perspective. Decisions stem from the stance that we take with regard to the world and all our actions are shaped according to this stance. In making moral decisions, it is the Christian vision which enables one to assess the rightness or wrongness of actions. It is this horizon which becomes the ultimate test for one's actions.

If one returns to the context of the South African *apartheid* situation, the use that was made of the Scriptures to endorse *apartheid* and its structures succeeded when it concentrated its arguments upon certain carefully selected passages from the Scriptures. But, the question that needed to be asked was how these passages fitted into the wider horizon of the biblical narrative of God's relationship with humanity and the response that was called forth from humanity to enter into this relationship.

Values such as equality, freedom, and justice, were denied the vast majority of the population because this basic Christian vision had been forgotten. God's relationship with humanity, and humanity's relationship with one another, must operate within this fivefold vision as outlined by the narratives of the Scriptures. One can see how these values of equality, freedom and justice are fundamental to the Christian vision. Stemming from the creation of the world comes the basic insight that all people are equal. The virtue of equality emanates from the vision of creation and it calls all Christians to treat one another as human beings created as equal in the eyes of God. The basic relationship that should endure among all people is the virtue of equality. However, the entry of sin into the world has distorted and destroyed this equality among humanity. Humanity is called upon to transcend the barriers which sin has introduced into the human condition. The narrative of the incarnation of Jesus shows how this can be done. The virtue of freedom emerges from the incarnation of Jesus, where humanity is called to adopt relationships of service towards one another, as Jesus did. At the same time, true relationships among humanity can only be restored through the power of the redemption of Jesus by appropriating the effects of redemption. Redemption has liberated the Christian from the powers of slavery emanating from the power of sin. Finally, the virtue of justice emerges from

the perspective of our resurrection-hope, whereby each one of us has promised an inheritance that in fact we do not deserve.

The values of justice, freedom and equality reflect the very horizon of the Christian. I would argue that the Christian endeavours to implement these values first of all within the Christian community. Then this community, in its turn, attempts to communicate these virtues to the world and to humanity, whom it is called to serve.

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