Saints, disciples, friends?
Recent South African perspectives on Christian ethics and the New Testament

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ABSTRACT
Throughout the struggle against apartheid South African theologians have been deeply divided about the use of the Bible in socio-political and ethical argumentation; this dispute is briefly recounted. Three doctoral theses in Christian ethics recently completed are summarised; aspects such as narrative ethics, role-models, heroes, martyrs and saints in Christian ethics; a black theological perspective arguing the importance of discipleship and societal transformation and an ecclesial approach to ethics which encompasses fellowship, integrity and responsibility are covered. In the final section the question whether these approaches could offer new possibilities for reading the Bible within constructive Christian ethical involvement in South African society is raised.

The Church is her true self only when she exists for humanity... She must take her part in the social life of the world, not lording it over [people], but helping and serving them. She must tell [people], whatever their calling, what it means to live in Christ, to exist for others... She will have to speak of moderation, purity, confidence, loyalty, steadfastness, patience, discipline, humility, content, and modesty. She must not underestimate the importance of human example, which has its origin in the humanity of Jesus, and which is so important in the teaching of St. Paul. It is not abstract argument, but concrete example which gives her word emphasis and power. I hope to take up later this subject of example, and its place in the New Testament. It is something we have well-nigh forgotten... I hope in this way to do something for the sake of the Church of the future (Bonhoeffer 1956:180–181, italics mine)

1 THE BIBLE AS A SITE OF STRUGGLE
For many years, the Bible has been a 'site of struggle' in South Africa. Throughout the struggle against apartheid, South African Christians, church leaders, ministers, and theologians were deeply divided about the use of the Biblical documents, also with regard to socio-political and ethical reasoning.
Many of the battle lines were shared with the rest of the Christian world. Others, however, were typical of the South African context, or at least more seriously debated here than elsewhere, because of the influence of Reformed
and evangelical Christianity in apartheid South Africa as well as the religious nature of the struggle against apartheid. The Bible played a major ideological role in the conflict. Biblical readings were used as weapons in social conflicts.

All of this comprises a story with many plots. Several parts of the story have often been told. Some still need more detailed explication.¹

At present, there are many indications that some of these battles will continue in the 'new South Africa'. I mention a few examples. Fundamentalist evangelicals make strong claims for a Christian country based on biblical principles. On May 30 1995, hundreds of them marched to Parliament in a protest march, accusing the new government of creating 'a secular state' without acknowledging the Almighty God and fundamental biblical principles. A godless state is a hopeless state, they say, and they want God to bless South Africa. There are widespread conflicts about the place of religion, and specifically the Bible, in South African schools in future.² Within the academy, Biblical scholars are still very sceptical of the way systematic theologians use the Bible. Pieter Botha, a respected New Testament scholar from UNISA, has often criticised Adrio König, his colleague in systematic theology, for not taking the Enlightenment seriously in his use of the Bible—in spite of the fact that König is obviously more interested in and informed about the results of biblical scholarship than almost any other

¹ Many studies have been published on the use of the Bible in apartheid-theology (see, e.g., Combrink 1986 and Loubser 1987 on the use of the Bible in black and liberation theology and the struggle against apartheid); on the use of the Bible in church documents and declarations; on the use of the Bible in the religious broadcasts of the public media; on the ethics of interpretation and reading the Bible; on the use of the Bible in public rhetoric, e.g. concerning issues of war and peace; etc. It seems fair to say that South African theologians, particularly under the influence of biblical scholars, have been exceptionally conscious of the ways they read and use the Bible. In fact, South African biblical scholars have shown an extraordinary awareness of the history of their own developments and activities. Recently, major studies have been published by Le Roux (1993) on the history of Old Testament scholarship in South Africa; by Du Toit on the rise and current state of New Testament studies in South Africa (1993a, 1993b, 1994); and by Deist (1994) on the history of biblical interpretation in the Dutch Reformed Church. This widespread sensitivity to the question what we have been doing must be appreciated by ethicists, since it demonstrates an attitude of responsibility and therefore involves an ethical dimension.

² One could refer to an overwhelming number of consultations, discussions, and committees in this regard. All kinds of proposals are made, published and discussed. It is, obviously, a very emotional and controversial issue. Many vested interests are at stake. The extremely problematic genealogy of 'Christian-Nationalist education' and specifically of 'Biblical Studies' as subject in schools and institutions of tertiary education plays a major role in these debates, as well as the nature of religious freedom in a civil and democratic society and therefore in the new constitution still being drafted. For interesting information on religion in education in South Africa, see the different essays in a recent edition of *Scriptura* 53 (2, 1995).
South African *dogmatikus*. Recently, Isak Spangenberg, an Old Testament scholar from the same faculty, joined this debate (Spangenberg 1994). He argues that the birth of modern literary criticism has introduced yet a new paradigm switch. According to him, König, and other systematic theologians, are still, in spite of their good intentions, operating within the paradigm of the Reformation. König does not understand the implications of the historical-critical method, and still less the radical implications of the paradigm of literary criticism. He still regards the Bible as a unified whole. He still uses expressions like ‘the Bible says’ or ‘the Bible teaches’. It is futile for König and systematic theologians like him to try to read and use the work of biblical scholars working within these paradigms. No conversation or cooperation between the paradigms is possible. He should rather look for biblical scholars who also still operate within the paradigm of the Reformation. The only other solution is to undergo a (Kuhnian) conversion, like biblical scholars, who can witness that they only arrived at these insights after years of struggle and reflection, both intellectually and existentially. There is no longer anything like ‘theological science’. There is no dialogue possible between the different paradigms, only tolerance. Particularly the systematic theologians must become more modest. The sin of pride is alive and well in Afrikaner-Reformed theological circles which is why they can accuse biblical scholars of being ‘heretics, unbelievers, and atheists’—thus Spangenberg.

In the meantime, far away from the learned circles of scholarship, the African Independent Churches, reading the Bible almost like first-century Christians, are growing rapidly and the publication of spiritual literature, freely using the Bible, is becoming a million-rand industry in South Africa. Indeed, ‘Biblical interpretation in South Africa still matters’ (in Tracy’s famous words, 1987:7).

There are, however, also important indications that people are attempting to address some of these divisions and conflicts. The major role-players in this regard have come from the ranks of South African biblical scholars. They have made several attempts to overcome these conflicts in constructive ways. The New Testament Society of South Africa, for example, has undertaken several laudable initiatives. The same may be said of members of several other scholarly groups in South Africa, including Old Testament scholars and members of the Society of Biblical Studies. 4

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3 Botha 1993; see König’s (1993) response.
4 It is possible to reconstruct the self-awareness of the Hermeneutics-Subgroup of the NTSSA as a development through three phases: The first phase of the story can perhaps be called ‘Emphasizing interpretation versus method’. During this phase the conviction becomes widespread that interpretation is more than merely the application of methods. Understanding is more than exegesis. The horizons must fuse. The horizon of the reader’s existential pre-understanding meets the horizon of the meaning of the
Perhaps it is fair to say that the New Testament Society of South Africa as such has, in recent years, become increasingly aware of the problematic nature of such a situation. There are many indications of this awareness in the Society. One example may suffice: In 1992 a special session of the Annual Meeting was held to have an open and in-depth discussion on the future of New Testament scholarship in South Africa and of the Society itself. At the 1993-Meeting the Executive served a report, based on this discussion, in which a six-fold alienation (amongst others from students, from colleagues, and from society at large) was described as a major challenge to the Society.

The second phase can perhaps be called 'Acknowledging the active role of the reader'. During this phase the conviction becomes widespread that the reader plays a more important role in interpretation than most of us normally realise or readily admit. Reading is a more creative process than that which the imagery of the fusion of two static horizons may suggest. The reader actually creates meaning. The reader constructs the text, fills the gaps, produces associations.

In the third phase, much of this changes. What B C Lategan has called 'empirical reader research', 'a study of actual reception,' now becomes important. In the process, the realisation grows that (the abstract) 'contextual reader' in the singular must be replaced by (the real) 'institutionalised readers' in the plural. The expression 'contextual' hermeneutics is no longer used prescriptively, but descriptively, as an acknowledgement of what always happens, inevitably. The third phase can perhaps be called 'Becoming aware of interpretive communities'. During this phase it becomes increasingly obvious that real readers are formed in reading communities. They are primarily not creative and imaginative individuals, but they read according to conventions they have learnt in particular communities of interpretation. Reading is a discursive practice, a social act of parts of them, to describe them? Is it possible to find a suitable set of categories with which to distinguish between and to analyse and describe possible communities of real readers of the Biblical documents in the South African context? What are the real differences between diverse communities reading the Bible?

One could use Fowl & Jones's (1991) notion of 'interpretive interests' to argue that different groups or readers have different reasons why they read the texts. This suggests a threefold typology of reading communities with different interpretive interests, with different reasons why they read, interpret and use the texts we call the New Testament, with different views of these documents: The Bible as document of believing communities, the Bible as document of society, and the Bible as document of the university. The fact that we have gradually become more aware that other communities of interpretation are reading the same texts that we are engaged in, in ways that differ from what we are doing and from what we often take for granted, challenges us to respond to them.

The present challenge for the Hermeneutics Subgroup is: How are we going to respond to the existence of these other reading communities? Generally speaking, there are three types of responses possible, each of them representing a wide-ranging variety of positions: to ignore the other communities, to regard one's own group's work as somehow superior, or to enter into serious dialogue with the other. See Smit 1994.
Part of this alienation that must be faced is the alienation from other reader communities, of which the alienation between biblical scholarship and ethics is a specific instance.

2 NEW TESTAMENT SCHOLARSHIP AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS: CONFLICT OR CONVERSATION?

In a very instructive recent essay, 'The Bible and ethics', Jan Botha distinguishes between ‘ethics in the Bible’ and ‘the use of the Bible in ethics’.

The distinction between a historical description of the ethics of the communities which produced the biblical documents and the use of their writings normatively in the ethical discourse of later times is of fundamental importance. In the Bible we find many ethical directions. This could be called ethics in the Bible, which is something different from the use of the Bible in ethics. The investigation of ethics in the Bible is traditionally the concern of biblical scholarship while ethicists and theologians concentrate on the use of the Bible in ethics (Botha 1994:38).

This is clearly correct and extremely important. Birch and Rasmussen also start their well-known discussion in similar fashion, arguing: ‘There exists an important two-part consensus, held by biblical scholars and ethicists alike. The first can be stated most succinctly by saying that Christian ethics is not synonymous with biblical ethics... The second is this: the Bible is somehow formative and normative for Christian ethics’ (Birch & Rasmussen 1989).

But, there lies the rub: What does this somehow mean? How is the Bible formative and normative for Christian ethics? In what ways normative and formative? How can the Bible be used in Christian ethics?

The (immediate) task of biblical scholarship with regard to ethics is clear. It is a scientific endeavour, as Breytenbach has recently convincingly argued in his inaugural lecture at the Humboldt-University in Berlin. Whether through historical or literary methods, biblical scholars concern themselves primarily with ‘the ethics of the biblical documents’. As Botha puts it:

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5 Cilliers Breytenbach, ‘Exegese als Wissenschaft? Anlehnungen an Friedrich Schleiermacher’, Antrittsvorlesung am 31.5.1995 anlässlich der Übernahme einer Professor für Neues Testament und der Leitung des Institutes für Urchristentum und Antike an der Theologischen Fakultät der Humboldt Universität zu Berlin, still unpublished. Breytenbach’s work is important, since he has been pleading over many years both for the scientific integrity of biblical scholarship (primarily as a historical enterprise) and for the relevance of Christian convictions for public life in South Africa. He was the initiator and editor of several volumes of essays, primarily by New Testament scholars, with responses by systematic theologians, and he is actively involved in encouraging interdisciplinary cooperation within South African theological circles.
'Recent biblical scholarship has made significant progress in the investigation of the different forms of literature containing moral exhortation as well as the content and social functions of these exhortations within the wider cultural and historical contexts of the ancient Near East and the Graeco-Roman world of biblical times' (Botha 1994:39).6

Less clear, however, is the relationship between these results and contemporary ethical reflection, 'the legitimate and responsible use of the Bible in ethics', or: how to meet what is properly 'the concern of ethicists and theologians'.

It is fair to say that a sceptical attitude with regard to this question has been widespread within South African biblical scholarship for many years. Many biblical scholars seemed to think that there was no responsible and legitimate way at all of using the Bible in contemporary reflection on questions of ethics (or doctrine). While ordinary Christians and ministers used the Bible freely, many South African biblical scholars seemed to reject the legitimacy of such an endeavour in principle. The often cynical criticism of any work by ethicists and systematic theologians and of church declarations and decisions witnessed to this attitude. Obviously, the ideological misuse of the Bible in apartheid-South Africa played a major role in this, in addition to the more typical scholarly arguments.

It is, however, also fair to say that a number of South African biblical scholars have, more recently, attempted to bridge this gap and to contribute to the search for legitimate and responsible ways of using the Bible in contemporary ethical argument.

Whether these attempts have been successful is, of course, another question. While other South African biblical scholars still seem to regard these attempts almost as treason to the scientific task of historical and literary analysis, most South African systematic theologians and ethicists have been extremely reluctant to respond with appreciation and serious dialogue. To a large extent, they seem to ignore these extended hands of friendship and to continue with business as usual, using the Bible in the ways that biblical scholars find so reprehensible. In fact, South African systematic theologians and ethicists have done little to show biblical scholars that we are serious

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6 He then refers to Meeks's proposal that biblical scholars must 'reconstruct, must imagine' the world in which these moral fragments made sense by way of a threefold process: gathering all the information; analysing the grammar of the movement's morals; employing a cultural-linguistic inquiry into the moral worlds of the first Christian communities, respecting their commonality with the societies in which they lived. Meeks's work is quite influential in South Africa. He has in fact been invited to address the Annual Meeting of the Theological Society of South Africa, the organisation of South African systematic theologians and ethicists.
about conversation with them and about learning from them about the documents they study so seriously and we use so freely. And some of those who have responded, including myself, have been rather negative in our evaluations.

The nett result is that there has been almost no meaningful dialogue in South Africa between biblical scholars and ethicists on the legitimate and responsible use of the Bible in Christian ethics. This is almost incredible when one thinks about the importance of the Bible in public discourse and life in South Africa.

It becomes particularly instructive when one compares this situation with Birch and Rasmussen's experience. In the revised and extended edition of their book they say:

When the first edition of this volume was published (in 1976) its purpose was to bridge the gap between biblical studies and Christian ethics. Few materials which systematically linked the two fields existed, and most were only article-length. The scene has changed dramatically in only a decade. Numerous excellent studies have appeared. The initial purpose of that first volume, to encourage interdisciplinary work, has been largely served. What we did not anticipate, however, was the first edition's widespread use as a classroom text. That has been gratifying, even when it was not the volume's initial purpose. The response punctuates a circumstance long recognized by teachers of ethics, namely, that few scholarly but nontechnical works exist which treat both fundamental Christian moral concepts and the most important sources of the Christian moral life (Birch & Rasmussen 1989:7).

In South African theology, we still face the situation in which they found themselves twenty years ago. Few materials linking the two fields in acceptable ways exist, and almost no serious interdisciplinary courses are offered at institutions of theological training. Discussing the situation with colleagues, and studying their calendars and course descriptions show that, either ethicists are using the Bible in their courses in whichever way they want, or

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7 At the recent Annual Meeting of the Theological Society of South Africa, held in Grahamstown from 17-18 August, 1995, there was a welcome change, in that two biblical scholars, M Oosthuizen and E Mouton, were invited to speak on 'The Bible as a source for Christian ethics.'

8 One of the major attempts in this regard has been the volume of essays edited by Breitenbach & Lategan (1992). The original idea was to address the South African situation in the light of scholarly insights into the ethics of the different New Testament documents. Several ethicists were invited to respond to the contributions. Eventually, only one response was published, complaining that the authors do not read ethical works and ethical theory, that most of them are selective in the way they 'apply' a New Testament document's 'ethics' directly to an 'analogous situation', and that the volume does not yet contribute to serious conversation between ethicists and biblical scholars, in spite of its praiseworthy intentions.
biblical scholars are offering courses on 'New Testament ethics', discussing the 'ethics' of the different early Christian documents (and sometimes taking all kinds of shortcuts to contemporary moral issues).

This paper is therefore intended as a tentative proposal from the side of ethical theory to engage in a dialogue with biblical scholars. Perhaps a useful way to start would be to look for a common vocabulary. Maybe we cannot engage in meaningful dialogue, because we do not speak a common language. Interestingly, Birch and Rasmussen also have a chapter on 'the vocabulary of morality', called 'charting the moral life.'

3 'A FIRST ETHICAL DICTIONARY: SAINTS, DISCIPLES, FRIENDS...'

3.1 In three doctoral theses in Christian ethics, completed almost simultaneously at the time of the first democratic elections in South Africa in April 1994, three different approaches were articulated.

3.1.1 In *Verhaal en moraal* (narrative and morality), Robert Vosloo (1994) explores Hauerwas's narrative ethics and argues for the importance of stories, role-models, heroes, martyrs and saints in Christian ethics. He points out that recent ethical discourse is characterised by the questioning of the moral assumptions of the Enlightenment project to ground morality in rationality qua rationality. One such mode of so-called postmodern ethical discourse is the narrative ethics exemplified by Hauerwas and others. He criticises modern ethical and political theory. According to him, being is prior to doing. The Christian community is the locus for moral formation. The church does not have a social ethics but is a social ethics. Truthful moral transformation requires that the Christian community must be a community of character and virtue that serves as an alternative policy towards the violence in the world. Categories like vision, character, and virtue therefore become important. In order to communicate these and to (trans)form moral agents, the narratives of Scripture as well as those of role models or saints play important roles.

3.1.2 In *Discipleship as transformation? Towards a theology of transformation*, Russel Botman (1993) develops a black theological perspective and argues for the importance of discipleship and transformation in the construction of a new society. He dedicates the thesis to 'the children of South Africa, those who will know apartheid only by hearsay'. As mottos he quotes Proverbs 29:18, 'Where there is no vision the people perish' and Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, 'Without a dream, men and women will not mobilize themselves to trans-
form society, nor will society seek to renew foundations. Christians believe that such a dream belongs to the heart of reality, for they have seen it...in...Jesus Christ.' He argues that South African theology is in a preparadigmatic phase, in the process of moving from one paradigm to another. According to him, this movement has all the characteristics of a Damascus experience, it has vast social implications. At the heart of this phase is the quest for a theology of transformation. He then reads Bonhoeffer as a theologian of transformation. The central question of a theology of transformation, according to Botman, is the "who?" question: 'Who is the responsible person in South Africa today? The answer to this question is the same as the response to the question "Who is Jesus Christ for us today?" This is true because discipleship is transformation. A theology of transformation does not make an offer of cheap grace. Instead, it calls us to the journey of discipleship, costly discipleship. It is the making of contemporary gospels at the cost of a gospel as we have seen in Jesus Christ.'

3.1.3 In Die geloofwaardigheid van die kerk (The credibility of the church), Carel Anthonissen (1993) contrasts Bonhoeffer's and Berger's notions of credibility and, in an ecclesial approach to ethics, argues for communities of fellowship, integrity, friendship, and responsibility. According to him, the church in South Africa has always been involved in the problems of society, either in legitimating a political order or in critical protest aimed at bringing about change. In future, he says, such involvement will necessarily be continued. The crucial question is not whether, but how. How can the church be involved in public life in such a way that it remains true to its own calling? Or in his words: Can the church command credibility on the basis of being truly authentic? In order to reflect on this question, he also appropriates perspectives from the life and work of Bonhoeffer. He argues that the problem of credibility was a central motif in Bonhoeffer's life and work. To Bonhoeffer, the church occupied a central place. He conceived of the church as the embodiment of God's intention with humankind. In the life of the empirical church the revelation of God becomes palpable. For Bonhoeffer the church is Christus als Gemeinde existierend. The essence of the church must take concrete form in the real life of the empirical church. The key to the credibility of the church is to be found within this unity of essence and form. True theology should advance this unity, should narrow the gap between confession and everyday life, between truth and the shape of the church's life. Anthonissen then traces Bonhoeffer's life-long struggle for the credibility of the church, in the face of changing threats, challenges, and temptations. He concentrates on Bonhoeffer's concept of revelation, providing the criteria for the credibility of the church. To this day Christ, through his resurrection,
attempts to take form in the lives of people. As the body of Christ the church is the first undeniable manifestation thereof. The life and work of the church must remind human beings of their true destiny. Only where the life of the church is in conformity with Christ can the church fulfil this calling. This means that the church's primary concern cannot be to strive to be modern or relevant, and in that sense credible. Its primary concern should rather be its loyalty to Christ. In the last, critical phase of Bonhoeffer's life, Anthonissen argues, a culmination in his thinking about an authentic form for the church can be detected. It is documented in his Ethics and the letters and papers from prison. Credibility is now seen as responsibility: the community of Christians has to be prepared to carry the blame for the national crisis vicariously, thus making its intimate relationship with Christ apparent; it will have to act forcibly to heal the scarred community, taking action to the point of civil disobedience; it will have to take responsibility for the future, in humility and modesty confessing its share in the injustice of the past and returning to its most basic values: prayer and doing what is right. A church like this gains credibility and like Christ is there for others. On the basis of this, Anthonissen stresses the importance of so-called base communities. The spirituality of such small groups of friends and fellow believers, with whom contemplation and social responsibility supplement one another, can help the church in South Africa to overcome the problem of credibility, he says.

3.2 It is immediately clear that these three theses have much in common. In fact, they share a common moral language: the language of an ethics of being, rather than an ethics of doing; the language of saints, that is, of role models, of inspiring significant others, of identity; the language of discipleship, that is, of commitment, of formation, of engagement, of responsibility, of vision, character, and virtue; the language of friends, of community, of communities of character, of base communities, of small groups, of mutual encouragement and support, or credible forms of human life in communion, of 'the congregation as hermeneutic of the gospel' (Newbigin). In a sense, they are all related to the language of narrative ethics.

In contemporary ethical discussions all three these forms of moral language are in fact very popular. They seem to fit a so-called postmodern Zeitgeist. In almost every theological bookstore, library, index, or journal, one finds ample evidence of this renewed interest in 'saints and society' or 'saints and postmodernism', or in 'discipleship' and 'responsibility' and 'virtue', or in 'friendship and the moral life'.

9 See, e.g., Wyschogrod 1990; Weinstein & Bell 1986 (a historical study, but with extremely valuable insights for ethical theory: 'We study saints in order to understand piety; we study piety in order to understand society...'), 26; Cunningham 1980; Wood-
Perhaps a single illustration can suffice. Wuthnow, the well-known Princeton sociologist, recently published a major study called *Christianity in the 21st century: Reflections on the challenges ahead*. He distinguishes five important challenges that Christianity faces on the way to the 21st century: an institutional, an ethical, a doctrinal, a political, and a cultural challenge. Commenting on the institutional challenge, he asks the question whether the church can sustain community, and discusses the church as a community of memory and the place of the Christian in this remembering community. Commenting on the cultural challenge, he asks the question whether faith offers possibilities for constructing personal lives, and discusses the quest for identity (again using the notion of narrative), the maladies of the middle class (including materialism and discontent). Commenting on the ethical challenge, he specifically focuses on ‘role models, stories, and learning how to care’. He discusses this ethical challenge on the way to the 21st century under three headings, namely ‘Stories to live by’ (including the question on how to move from stories to action), ‘The saints in our world’ (including questions on who embodies compassion, how to identify with the saints, and how the saints function as role models) and ‘The symbolic value of contemporary saints’ (including some of the dangers and the ethical ambivalence of contemporary saints, making learning how to interpret stories and a supporting community once again important).

It should not surprise anyone that this kind of moral language, the language of an ethics of being, of narratives, of saints, disciples, and friends, is also becoming increasingly popular in South Africa.

In fact, in the circles of the people who struggled against apartheid and for the radical transformation of South African society, the language of an ethics of being has always been common. It is therefore no wonder that Bonhoeffer has been so popular and influential in these circles. In his life and work, all three the themes come together in a truly remarkable way.\(^10\)

\(^{10}\) All three themes can be detected throughout his whole career. It is remarkable how they are drawn together at the end of *Letters and papers from prison*. In the famous ‘Thoughts on the baptism of D W R’ he makes very interesting remarks on the importance of friendship, and in the equally important ‘Outline for a book’, where he discusses Jesus as the human being existing for others and the church as existing for humanity, he says: ‘The church must not underestimate the importance of the human example, which has its origin in the humanity of Jesus, and which is so important in the teaching of St. Paul. It is not abstract argument, but concrete example which gives her word emphasis and power. I hope to take up later this subject of example, and its
And yet today the awareness of the importance of an ethics of being for the future of South Africa is perhaps even more widespread and stronger than ever. The challenges facing our society on our way to the 21st century can definitely only be faced in terms of an ethics of being, an ethics of role models and inspiring characters, an ethics of commitment and responsibility, an ethics of mutual acceptance and living with the other. We have a new South Africa. We now need new South Africans. A good constitution will not be enough. We need a good citizenry, transformed people in a civil society (for an extremely valuable study for our present purposes, see Rasmussen 1993).

The overall ideological vision for South Africa accepted by almost everyone is called the RDP, the Reconstruction and Development Programme. At its heart, this is a programme about people, about the formation, the empowerment, the development of people. It is an attempt to reconstruct South Africa through the strengthening of civil society. It speaks for itself—although the official documentation still seems to overlook the fact!—that the churches and the religious organisations of the country will play a major role in this process.

The most urgent challenges that Christian ethicists are facing in South Africa today can also be located and described within this framework. Our question is: Can we somehow use the Bible in this endeavour? In fact, there can be no doubt that the Bible will be used! The question is whether and how it can be done with the approval of biblical scholars...

4 CAN WE LEARN TO SPEAK THE SAME LANGUAGE?

The question that occupies me is whether these approaches to ethics and this form of moral language ('saints,' 'disciples,' 'friends') could offer new possibilities for reading the Bible within constructive Christian ethical involvement in (South African) society, possibilities also acceptable to biblical scholars, from whichever paradigm, as legitimate and responsible.

I started thinking about this paper with a lot of optimism. It seemed to me that it was indeed possible for biblical scholars and ethicists to engage in meaningful dialogue about the use of the Bible in contemporary Christian ethics. One hears so many similar sounds coming from the circles of New Testament scholars. It often seems as if biblical scholars are using the same language: of narrative, of characterization; of roles; of discipleship, of place in the New Testament. It is something we have well-nigh forgotten.' See also the very instructive recent essay by Bethge 1994.
‘biographical stories serving ethical development’, of vision; of virtue; of ‘the function of role-models in strategies of persuasion’, and so forth. Many South African biblical scholars have also started inquiries into the biblical documents using categories like these. In particular, the narrative and the rhetorical-critical approaches, employed by several prominent South African biblical scholars, seem promising for a dialogue with ethicists. Under inspiration of Johannes Vorster and Jan Botha, a subgroup for rhetorical studies has been established in the New Testament Society of South Africa. Vorster and Pieter Botha organised an international conference in Pretoria in 1994 on ‘Rhetoric and Religion’.

However, I gradually lost some of this optimism, for several reasons. A first reason is that so many of my colleagues in ethics regard the language of an ethics of being as less important than the language of an ethics of doing. According to them, using the language of an ethics of being, even in its post-modern variations of ‘saints, disciples, and friends’ implies an evasion of the real and the difficult ethical questions, namely those of a proper modernist ethics of doing. What we ought do is to them the serious ethical question. They want to know how to make moral decisions and what the right choice or correct action is. In such an approach, the concrete issues and deeds in particular circumstances on specific moral issues and problems are the topics of ethical thought. It is precisely in the context of these questions that the tensions between biblical scholars and ethicists arose and where they still prevail. These ethicists would regard the language of an ethics of being as a dialect, as an almost pre-modern form of uninformed moral babble, and not as Standard Ethical Discourse. According to them, an ethics of being can easily degenerate into a sectarian continuation of ingroup mentalities, virtues, and values.

A second reason is even more important. It is clear that all three approaches to using the Bible in contemporary ethical discourse harbour their own problems and tensions.

Particularly for South African systematic theologians and ethicists from a Dutch Reformed background, it is difficult to become enthusiastic about a reading strategy interested in ‘characters’, ‘roles and role-models’, ‘saints’, ‘exemplars.’ We have been trained to avoid all of this and to read the Bible not in an ‘exemplary’ but in a ‘redemptive-historical’ way. Greidanus (1970) provides a careful and very instructive survey of the controversy in the Netherlands that later on dominated our own theological training in South

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11 This paper was read during the International Meeting of the Society for Biblical Literature, Budapest, Hungary, 1995. At this Meeting, papers on similar and relevant themes were offered.
African seminaries. He discusses all the objections against 'the Bible as a source of illustrations', seeing the biblical persons and figures as 'examples', 'illustrative interpretation', 'fragmentary interpretation', 'atomistic interpretation', 'biographical preaching', 'anthropocentric preaching', preaching in which 'the Bible becomes optional', 'historical equation marks', 'psychologizing', 'spiritualizing', 'typologizing', 'subjective preaching' and that greatest one of all: 'moralization'. We know them only too well. According to Greidanus this is quite different from the English-speaking world, where exemplary preaching is quite common so that 'One can pick up English works on homiletics almost at random to find the exemplary approach either advocated or presupposed.' In fact, Dutch theologians used English books to illustrate for their Dutch students the rejected exemplary approach (Greidanus 1970:14-15)! To us, Bonhoeffer's complaint that we have well-nigh forgotten the place of example in the New Testament comes as no surprise and as no problem either!

Reading the Bible from a perspective of commitment, of discipleship, offers similar difficulties, in spite of its appeal to some of us. Both the provocative and challenging power and the ambiguity of the pluralities and distortions of the notion of discipleship have been wonderfully demonstrated in Strunk's Nachfolge Christi (1981). Liberation ethics and liberation hermeneutics, in which advocacy and discipleship are key categories, often illustrate the same.

Even reading the Bible within a particular community of character, a base community, a particular community of interpretation, that is, between friends, is obviously not without its problems. Reading the mischievously radical conclusions in this regard by Hauerwas, the well-known exponent of a language of an ethics of being and of reading the Bible in communion, the difficulties become clear. In his recent book Hauerwas argues that only the church has the right to read the Bible properly. 'No task is more important than for the Church to take the Bible out of the hands of individual Christians in North America... Let us rather tell (the children) and their parents that they are possessed by habits far too corrupt to be encouraged to read the Bible on their own.' He argues: 'North American Christians are trained to believe that they are capable of reading the Bible without spiritual and moral transformation. They read the Bible not as people set apart ... They feel no need to stand under the authority of a truthful community to be told how to read.' He attempts to show that 'the 'right' reading of Scripture depends on having spiritual masters...' From this perspective 'the current controversies between fundamentalism and those that approach the Scripture using the methods of biblical criticism are a parochial debate. Indeed, literalist-fundamentalism and the critical approaches to the Bible are but two sides of the same coin, insofar as each assumes that the text should be acces-
sible to anyone without the necessary mediation by the church. The reformation doctrine of sola scriptura, joined to the invention of the printing press, and underwritten by the democratic trust in the intelligence of the 'common person,' has created the situation that now makes people believe that they can read the Bible 'on their own.' That presumption must be challenged, and that is why the Scripture should be taken away from Christians in North America.' For hermeneutics this means: 'I suspect that hermeneutics becomes the preoccupation of theology when the text of scripture is divorced from particular practices of the church that make it make sense in the first place... I believe that the battles between literalistic fundamentalism and critical approaches to the Bible are the result of the abstraction of the text of the Bible from such practices. The fundamentalist and biblical critic share the assumption that the text of the Bible should make rational sense (to anyone) separate from the uses that the Church has for Scripture. Fundamentalism and biblical criticism seek to depoliticize the interpretation of Scripture on the grounds that the text has an objective meaning. The result for both is repoliticization of scripture by giving unchecked power to some interpreters over Scripture without such power being justified' (Hauerwas 1993:18). It is clear that such a radical use of the language of an ethics of being would not make a serious dialogue with biblical scholars easier, but could in fact make it impossible.

But there is a third reason, to me the most important, for my present hesitation. I am simply not sure whether ethicists and biblical scholars using the same vocabularies are in fact speaking a common language. I am not convinced that we attach the same meanings to these expressions or that we have similar intentions. It is not clear to me whether biblical scholars using categories like 'role-models', 'disciples', and 'friends' would in fact be interested in incorporating these insights into contemporary ethical discussions, in a serious dialogue with ethicists about the legitimate and responsible use of the Bible in constructive ethical discourse. I am not sure that biblical scholars want to use narrative theory and rhetorical-criticism in the way that I do.

WORKS CONSULTED


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