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IS THERE MORE THAN ONE WAY OF USING THE BIBLE?

A DEWCOM discussion document on the use of Scripture in the context of diversity

BACKGROUND

The Methodist Church of Southern Africa says that "(W)e believe in the authority of Scripture and that the Divine revelation contained therein is the supreme rule of our faith and practise." We then, immediately after, (used here as an example) says that "(A)mong us are those who believe that the Bible is clear in its condemnation of all homosexual acts as contrary to the will of God. Also among us are those who believe that the Bible does not condemn all homosexual acts, ..." (Book of Order, page 217)

The reading and use of the Bible happens in the context of diversity which means that when theological and moral statements, documents and liturgies are produced there is a plurality or diversity of values, norms, principles and perspectives operating. Our attitudes and prejudices with regards to theological and moral issues, for example, human sexuality and marriage, reflect cultural, social, religious and other perspectives. In the context of this plurality we are called to discern the will of God by, primarily, the use the Bible. In the Wesleyan tradition we do acknowledge that the use of the Bible is influenced by tradition, reason and experience.

INTRODUCTION

The use of the Bible in the context of diversity is not primarily about applying the 'correct' exegetical method – the answer is not a particular method. We have come to understand that more than 'method,' it is our prejudices, our world-views, our theological and moral and other over-all perspectives and our attitudes, among others, which influence our approaches to the use of the Bible. It is rather about 'the appropriateness of approaches to the application of interpretations of moral and theological perspectives in the Bible to contemporary issues' in the context of diversity. The purpose here is to provide guidelines to the use of Scripture in the context of diversity: When one uses the Bible with regards to the production of theological, ethical or moral and liturgical documents within the context of diversity as described above there are certain things to keep in mind so that it is an appropriate use of the Bible. It is this which is addressed here.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE USE OF THE BIBLE

It seems that are various ways in which the Bible can be used and each approach have its advantages and disadvantages:

One approach is to argue that "God has given prescriptive laws in the form of commandments and ordinances which can be found in the Old and New Testaments. If people want to know what they should do, the laws of God stand objectively before them in written form, and they only have to refer to them." In this way what is said in the Bible is applied directly to the situation of today. There is, however, a problem with this approach,

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namely, that the cultural and historical aspect of the biblical message is lost in this approach. In other words, what might be a valid and true norm in biblical times might not be adequate today. This approach corresponds to a deontological approach in ethics which look at ethics from the perspective of duties and obligations. In this approach tradition can become more important than Scripture for layers of interpretation (the tradition) are necessary to deal with the distance between the world of the Bible and the contemporary world.

A second approach is to look at the Bible as a set of moral ideals. In other words, decisions are made based on 'moral ideals' presented in the Bible. Laws do not, as in the first approach, have binding force but are 'ideals' which really represent the direction in which the reader need to go. This approach may be likened to a teleological approach in ethics where moral action is judged as right or good by reference to a desired outcome or the consequences of one's actions. The advantage of this approach is that it does not encourage a 'blind duty' to the following of rules and regulations. The disadvantage however is that it limits the biblical witness to a few moral ideals.

A third approach focuses on a personal encounter with God. The free gift of God's Spirit to the individual to discern and thus know God's moral will. This approach is however too subjective and it must be kept in mind that the community also plays a role in the discernment of God will.

A fourth approach and one that is gaining more and more attraction is based on a living relation with God and responding in faith and action to that relationship. It is not about the revelation of some kind of biblical morality but rather the revelation of a living God. It is about a way of life which keeps or maintains a relationship with Jesus rather than about the following of laws or goals.

GUIDELINES TO THE USE OF THE BIBLE IN THE CONTEXT OF DIVERSITY

What to keep in mind when using the Bible in the context of diversity:

- 1- The original author(s) as well as the current reader stand in particular contexts – not just the one or the other. The gap between past and present must be respected
- 2 Theological and moral problems derive from real-life or every-day and historical contexts. This means that there are historically situated events contributing to the understanding of the problem and problems and answers are shaped by historical and contextual or cultural events. Moral and other principles, norms, perspectives, values and world-views come from 'somewhere.'
- 3 The tradition of the interpretation and use of the text is important
- 4 The literary genre of the texts must be taken into account
- 5 The consequences of one's reading or understanding of a text must be taken into account. In the context of diversity it is not good enough to elevate blind duty and obedience as the central motif for moral action and leave the outcome whatever it

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may be to God to deal with. We must take responsibility for our moral actions even when we say we cannot act otherwise.

- 6 The meaning of a text can never be what anyone would like it to mean because some actions of reading or use of Scripture are more appropriate than others
- 7 One's own prejudices, attitudes towards, or pre-judgments regarding the issue one is dealing with are inseparable from one's understanding of a text. It cannot be bracketed out as if the text stands before us in a pure objective way like we find in the natural sciences.
- 8 One has to take into account that not only moral and religious norms but also functional and societal and other norms and values are at play in any given situation of moral formation. Although moral norms may take precedence people often act in the 'right or good' way according to these other norms and values.
- 9 We must also look for how the problem and answer fits within God's vision called forth by the Bible as a whole.
- 10 The decision taken must be supported by the community as a whole or there must be some kind of agreement between the various perspectives
- 11 No moral action is without the possibility of dubious or immoral side effects or means to attain a goal and in this sense we may always be guilty before God for our moral actions

When we think about these guidelines they must help us use the most appropriate exegetical methods. Our exegetical methods stand in service of these guidelines and not the other way around.

One uses the more traditional approaches: Historical-Criticism, Source-Criticism, Redaction-Criticism

One also use later developments: Social-Scientific, Rhetorical and Intertextuality

It is also important to include in one's work more recent approaches like Structural Criticism or Narrative Criticism or a Reader – Response reading.

Of, course one must necessarily limit oneself to what or how much one can do taking into account all other commitments and so on and so forth but this should not detract us from the fact that the interpretation and use of the Bible in the production of theological and ethical documents is a time consuming and very serious matter in which we must do all we can to respect the historical distance between text and contemporary society.

CONCLUSION

To use the Bible in an appropriate way in the production of theological and moral statements and documents is hard work! Not any approach will do. Some are more appropriate than others. The use of the Bible is an ethical and moral action and thus subject to moral investigation. It is becoming clearer that the contemporary use of the Bible is moving away from approaching the Bible as revealing a set of Laws or Principles used in an absolute way and in which duty and obedience is the central motif. The contemporary use

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rather focuses on the distance between the text and today and acknowledges that both stand in particular contexts and this has an effect on how texts are understood and used.

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