


The church and moral decision-making

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This article deals with the burning issue of moral decision-making by major church assemblies, such as regional and general synods. Moral decisions by church assemblies have created many conflicts in churches in the past and at times did an injustice to the prophetic testimony of churches in society. The question arises as follows: To what extent should church assemblies be involved in moral decision-making? The central theoretical argument of this study is that although the notion of a 'biblical ethic' is valid, synods and council of churches should be extremely cautious and even hesitant to formulate moral decisions because of differences in hermeneutical approaches and the principle that the church is primarily the 'local congregation of believers'. The church is not in the first instance a national, general or international social structure that should pass conclusive resolutions and that testifies by way of moderators or elected church leaders. To unfurl this central theoretical argument, the researcher refers to the current hermeneutical discourses and proposes certain ideas regarding the possible role of the church with respect to moral decision-making. In view of the information provided, a point of view is advocated regarding the way in which churches could be involved in moral decision-making today.

Introduction

In the past, ecclesiastical councils and synods have passed questionable resolutions to deal with the moral issues of the day. Important examples in this regard is the support given by the Roman Catholic Church for the colonisation of parts of Latin America, which led to the oppression of the indigenous populations (see Berkhof & De Jongh 1967:222; Latourette 1953:943). Walker et al. (1992:573) indicate that Roman Catholic Mission and Spanish Occupation went hand-in-hand, and the church was extremely devoted to the colonisation of South American territories and developed paternally controlled communities. Colonial enterprises were morally sanctioned by the Roman Catholic Church and moral decisions were determined by the idea of expansionism in the name of Christianity. The same happened in many colonies occupied by Protestant explorers (see Latourette 1953:978). The colonisation of the Cape in South Africa can also be seen as a clear example of ecclesiastical moral decisions that determined a particular political dispensation where the rights of indigenous people were not in any way considered (Gerstner 1997:16). Land was seized indiscriminately with the blessing of the Dutch Reformed churches.

In the history of the Christian Church, the issue of slavery is another clear example of how an inhuman practice was justified by moral decisions in various ecclesiastical traditions. The early church respected slavery as a normal social condition and part of life. The same was true for the church in the Medieval Ages, Reformation and in early modern times. Slavery was not morally questioned until the 18th century when various Christian leaders questioned the moral foundation of this way of life (see Walker et al. 1992:44, 205, 612–613). The emergence of a new wave of humanitarianism in Europe, also amongst Christian leaders, compelled churches to review their stance on slavery, especially in the colonies. Slavery is a good example of how moral decision-making by churches concurred with the spirit of the time and how churches can hold opposite views in different times regarding the same moral issues.

Questionable moral decision-making involved not only churches in the past. Many examples of the same problem can be identified in the church history of the 20th century. The most outstanding example is the quietism of churches during the Holocaust and even the support of the 'Reichskirche' in Germany for National Socialism. In the 1930s the synod of the 'Reichskirche' even voted to introduce the 'Aryan paragraph' into the church order. Afterwards the leader of the 'German Christians' maintained that Germans must purge themselves of everything that is non-German in liturgy and confession and of the Old Testament with its 'Jewish morality'. Germans should only adhere to the essential teachings of Jesus, which agree unreservedly with the

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requirements of National Socialism (Praamsma 1981:98). Barth and Bonhoeffer protested against this National Socialist theology on behalf of the confessing church with the Barmen Declaration (see Metaxas 2010:61).

Recent South African church history is also characterised by various examples of questionable moral decisions taken by synods that blemished the testimony of the church in society. In his seminal work, De Gruchy (1979) investigates the church struggle in South Africa regarding race relations and especially the policy of apartheid. He explains how churches grapple with each other's moral decisions. Churches in South Africa were on both sides of the struggle. The Dutch Reformed churches and certain Pentecostal churches supported apartheid on theological grounds, while others rejected the policy, also on theological grounds. Completely opposing moral decisions were made. This led to the ecumenical isolation of the Dutch Reformed churches and the support of the South African Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches for the liberation movements in their effort to overthrow the government of the day. Christians in South Africa were deeply divided along the lines of the opposing moral decisions taken by their respective synods regarding race relations. The tension in the Dutch Reformed churches increased when these churches overturned their initial position in favour of apartheid by declaring the theological support of apartheid a heresy. The question arises of how it can be possible that a church can officially come to a moral decision based on the theological grounds and later denounce the decision on theological grounds? As a result, moral decisions of synods in these traditions lost a fair amount of credibility.

A clear recent example of this dilemma and the fading of the credibility of ecclesiastical institutions was the Dutch Reformed Church's handling of same-sex marriages in 2015 and 2016. In 2015, the general synod of this denomination resolved that gay relations (civil unions) characterised by love and faithfulness are morally acceptable seen from a culturally sensitive reading of the biblical texts dealing with the issue of homosexuality (DRC 2015). Ministers are allowed to solemnise such relations when they concur with this decision and are prepared to act in this regard. This decision was loudly applauded by the broader society because it concurs with the *Civil Union Act* passed in 2006 (Republic of South Africa, no 17 of 2006). However, the resolution was also fiercely criticised by members of the Dutch Reformed Church and several local congregations refused to implement the decision. Eventually, the executive church council undertook to arrange an extra-ordinary session of the general synod in 2016 to review the resolution of 2015. In the face of several threats of legal action, the synod repealed their decision in 2016 and reaffirmed a decision of 2007 that entails that civil unions cannot be founded on Christian morality (DRC 2016). This shift of positions where both sides claimed that their decisions honour the authority of Scripture and correspond with reliable biblical hermeneutics, led to new questions about the reliability and credibility of synods and ecclesiastical

councils where moral and even doctrinal decisions are taken by a mere majority vote and are deeply influenced by the composition of the particular assembly. The same confusion and questioning of the reliability of a synod are apparent in the Reformed Churches in South Africa (GKSA) following its continuous debates on women in offices (see Vorster 2016a; 2016b).

The above-mentioned examples indicate that moral decisions by synods and councils at ecumenical level can be problematic and they have led to much confusion in the past and the present day. The question arises to what extent synods and councils should venture into moral decision-making in the case of moral discourses to avoid contradictions and superficial answers to complicated moral questions. This investigation focusses on the subject of moral decision-making by churches in view of the question phrased above. The central theoretical argument of this study is that although the notion of a 'biblical ethic' is valid, synods and council of churches should be extremely cautious and even hesitant to formulate moral decisions for two reasons: firstly, the current hermeneutical discourse in theology impedes the formulation of absolute ethical norms. Secondly, the church is essentially the 'local congregation of believers' and not a national or international social structure that could pass conclusive resolutions and that should testify by way of moderators or elected church leaders. In an effort to unfurl this central theoretical argument, the research refers to the current hermeneutical discourse and proposes certain ideas regarding the function of the church with respect to moral decision-making. The point of departure is the classic reformed tradition as it impacts on hermeneutics and ecclesiology. In view of the information provided a point of view is advocated regarding the way in which churches could be involved in moral decision-making today.

The current hermeneutical discourse

The concept 'biblical ethic' has become a highly contentious issue in current theological discourse because of the new hermeneutical theories that emerged over the past two centuries and especially over the past five decades. Is it even possible to speak of a 'biblical ethic' applicable to all situations?¹ The answer to this question depends on the hermeneutical theory the ethicist prefers. Hermeneutics, in the words of Thiselton (2009:1): 'explores how we read, understand, and handle texts, especially those written in another time or context of life different from our own'. Hermeneutical research since Schleiermacher and Heidegger, the higher criticism of the various schools of thought in the 19th century with its rationalist and positivist approach, and Bultmann's influential model to 'demythologise' Scripture all stimulated new hermeneutical approaches in the

1. In another research article titled: 'Hermeneutics and ethics: the quest for a 'biblical ethic' this author deals with the relation hermeneutics and ethics in view of the hermeneutical debate over the past five decades. The article has been accepted for publication for a book intended to commemorate the Reformation. The chapter has not yet been published, but a copy is in the possession of the author. Some of the research material and findings of the chapter are revisited, repeated, extended and referred to in this article' (see Vorster 2017).

understanding of Scripture (see Bultmann 1967; Dunn 2003:65; Thiselton 2009:124; Van der Walt 1962). These approaches have manifested in the emergence of historical criticism (see Barton 1998:9), literary criticism (see Jasper 1999:21), form criticism (Bultmann 1967), the radical liberal 'theology of secularism and the death of God' (Cox 1965), the contextualism of liberation theologies (Fierro 1977) and the contemporary postmodernist paradigm (poststructuralism) (see Carrol 1999:50; Thiselton 2009:185–305).

Postmodern hermeneutical theories continued to develop over the past five decades. Late-20th-century philosophers such as Gadamer (1976), Ricoeur (1981) and Derrida (1997; 2004) debated, from different angles, on communication theory and the quest for the deconstruction of language, the function of context in the interpretation of texts and the role of subjectivity and prejudgement in understanding. Influential nowadays is the 'hermeneutics of suspicion', a phrase coined by Ricoeur (1981:6–8, 34) in his notorious discussions on the challenges posed by the science of interpretation and the role of ideology (see also Herholdt 1998:451; Stewart 1989:296). Hermeneutics of suspicion entails that the current reader has to treat the ancient text not as divine text, but the same as any other historical text embedded in ideological, socio-historical, cultural, political and economic contexts and that these contexts are the only determinants of the meaning of the text. Especially, the ideological foundation of the ancient text should be analysed and the present connotation should be developed through the filter of the ideology underpinning the text. In this respect the reader should be suspicious about the power interests underlying the ancient text, for example, androcentrism or patriarchy and should endeavour to fill the shoes of the vulnerable and the powerless behind the text. By identifying with the powerless, the message of the text should be revealed.

Two examples of the application of the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' on traditional biblical ethical notions can be mentioned. Firstly, the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' regards the idea of a monogamous heterosexual marriage as a creational institution of God as invalid because this idea springs from a patriarchal text. Marriage was conventionally seen as an institution of God, but the hermeneutics of suspicion lead scholars to regard this traditional idea as invalid because in their view, marriage is merely a social construct, determined by the socio-historical context (see Dreyer 2008). The view of marriage as a creational institution of God and a monogamous heterosexual union was, according to this viewpoint, feasible in certain times in history but can no longer be considered as a model for marriage today. According to this approach, alternative forms of a marital relation, such as cohabitation and civil unions between gay couples, are ethically acceptable as long as they are not destructive or harmful to human relations. Secondly, the same line of thought can also be observed in the ethical debate pertaining to life issues such as pro-choice and the legal termination of pregnancies, the propagation of active euthanasia on request and the need for moral limitations on stem cell research and genetic

manipulation. Instead of searching for biblical ethical norms, ethical guidelines are drawn from secular philosophical ethics such as the views expressed by various scholars in the publication by Gruen, Grabel and Singer (2007), as well as modern-day interpretations of constitutional bills of human rights. These examples indicate that the theory of a 'biblical ethic' in the traditional sense of the word is under immense pressure in theology today because of the 'hermeneutics of suspicion'.

The various contemporary theories of interpretation in the development of hermeneutics are accepted by many theologians today and can be seen in them questioning the plausibility of the classic reformed notion of the divine authority and inspiration of Scripture and the Barthian idea of a biblical theology based on the revelation of God in Jesus Christ (Barth 1932:114).² Due to their philosophical understandings of the preconditions for interpretations of Scripture and their strong emphasis on decontextualising and decolonising the text, they question the feasibility of a 'biblical ethic' for a modern society (see Desilet 2009:152; Knight 2003:311). It is fair to state that some of the contemporary theories of interpretation that emanated from the discourses mentioned are exceptionally critical of the notion, as confessed in many Christian ecclesiastical traditions, that Scripture is a holy divine text inspired by the Holy Spirit. As a result these theories also question the relevance of a 'biblical ethic' applicable to all times and societies and the notion that Scripture provides authoritative ethical norms for modern-day ethical questions. Supporters of these theories regard the notion of an 'ethic of the Bible' as outdated because 'biblical norms' are deemed as time-bound and embedded in cultural, religious and philosophical contexts. 'Biblical ethic' can only be relevant if it is reduced to the morality of the pre-Easter historical Jesus as he expressed ethical codes in the Sermon on the Mount and in his own lifestyle of love, humaneness and altruism. Therefore, churches should refrain from passing 'absolute ethical resolutions' for human conduct in a postmodernist society.

Over and against the 'hermeneutics of suspicion', the classic reformed tradition approaches the biblical text from an opposite perspective. The biblical text is understood in this tradition as a text inspired by the Holy Spirit. Although the text comprises a number of literary genres and was written in various different cultural and historical contexts, it presents the ongoing revelation of God by way of continuous main themes, such as amongst others the theology of the kingdom of God, the reign of Christ, the covenant, death and resurrection, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. These theological topics and others are the foundations of a 'biblical ethic' (see Vorster 2017). The divine authority of Scripture is expressed in the various creeds formulated in the classic reformed tradition and which were advocated by prominent reformed theologians such as Bavinck (1895); Barth (1932)

²The variety of hermeneutical approaches to theology becomes clear in the Hays' (1996:207) survey where he describes and discusses the hermeneutic approaches of Niebuhr, Barth, Yoder, Hauerwas and Schüssler Fiorenza. Even amongst these eminent ethicists the theories of biblical interpretation differ even though they are practising theology in well-known theological and ecclesiastical traditions.

Berkouwer (1967) and Van den Brink and Van der Kooi (2012). This suggestion does, on the one hand, not resort to a fundamentalist or literalist interpretation of Scripture, and on the other hand refrains from devaluing Scripture to a mere historical text without any divine authority. This research aims to defend a hermeneutical model that holds the idea of 'biblical ethic' in high esteem and that can be utilised to develop a biblical ethic for modern-day society to deal effectively and convincingly with the challenges of this time and age. This model can be termed a 'hermeneutics of trust'. A 'hermeneutics of trust' views Scripture as the divine revelation of God, coming to the reader as the unfolding of various biblical topics by way of taking into account the several literary genres that are embedded in numerous historical, literary and cultural contexts. The theological unity of Scripture and the testimony of the genres and the contexts should be taken into consideration in the development of a 'biblical ethic'.

Having said this, a 'biblical ethic' should not be seen as an assemblage of absolute norms based on a biblicist or literalist interpretation of the biblical text. Some of these norms are influenced by the cultural and historic contexts. Furthermore, it is fair to say that the biblical ethicist has to distinguish between higher and lower principles, as Dreyer and Van Aarde (2007:641) propose. They contend that the love of Christ should be seen as the highest principle and the canon behind the canon. Jesus himself summarised the Decalogue in the Great Commandment and this teaching resonates in the apostles, especially in the writings of John. The ethic of the Kingdom of God is, in essence, an ethic of love. From this point of departure, Jesus taught his followers to love the enemy; to accommodate the outcasts; to take care of the aliens; to forgive the sinners; to take special care of children and to promote reconciliation. This principle overarches other norms regarding labour relations, marriage and divorce and social life. A norm finds its fulfilment and rich application when it ultimately answers to the commandment of love.

Other higher principles can also be mentioned. One is the honour of God. Human action is moral only when it honours God. Justice that is not executed to honour God is injustice. Therefore Christian ethics should always take a stand against human oppression, structures that impoverish people, corruption, unrighteousness, dishonesty, infidelity and blasphemy. Furthermore, human dignity founded in humankind's creation in the image of God can be regarded as a higher principle in the arrangement of human relations (see Vorster 2011:3). The principle of human dignity abolishes all forms of patriarchy and androcracy in marriage, the church and social institutions. Although Scripture does not explicitly reject slavery, the higher principle of human dignity clearly implies that slavery cannot be tolerated. The same is true of inequality, discrimination, child abuse, and all other forms of inhuman conduct and treatment. Other higher principles that can be identified are, amongst others, reconciliation, holiness, sexual morality, forgiveness, humaneness, self-discipline, responsibility and accountability, sharing, humility, self-restraint, self-denial, altruism and servanthood. Issues such as capital

punishment, corporal punishment, retribution, restoration, divorce and remarriage, land restitution, racial relations, education of children and family relations should be evaluated in view of these, and other, higher principles and not solved on the basis of selected prooftexts that may seem to address these issues on the foundation of a mere literal reading of Scripture. To my mind a hermeneutics of suspicion may neglect some of these higher principles because of an overemphasis on the socio-historical context.

Related to this principle of biblical interpretation in the field of ethics, is the distinction that should be made between descriptive and prescriptive material. What is described in Scripture, such as historical events, social structures (such as slavery and polygamy), customs and ordinary actions of people, should not be perceived as moral instructions. The invasion of the Promised Land, although on the instruction of God, is not a blueprint for colonialism. The portrayal of the widespread practice of slavery cannot be regarded as a justification of slavery, nor can the action of Phineas as described in Numbers 25:1–18 be understood as a model of religious terrorism as Cliteur (2010a:107) invalidly argues in his criticism of biblical morality regarding religious extremism (see *also* Cliteur 2010b:235). The prominence of different cultures, peoples and nations in biblical history cannot be utilised to become norms for racial separation and the protection of ethnic identities today. The same is true of the various descriptions of violent acts by God's children in the name of religion or truth. The description of polygamy and the many instructions concerning the wives of the husband and his treatment of women slaves is not a justification of adultery or of polygamy as it still occurs in certain African cultures. The same is true of the Old Testament directives dealing with a healthy lifestyle and practices or worship. The description of the conduct of the first Christian churches is, in reformed circles, often hailed as prescriptive models for liturgy and church polity. In this respect also, the ethicist should distinguish between what the narrative in Scripture describes and what is prescribed. What is prescribed is the matter of worship and evangelism and what is described is how this was done in a certain situation.

Here again the morals derived from the history of revelation, biblical theology and the various topics under the overarching message of the reign of God provides the tools that can be used to design a 'biblical ethic' for today. Prescriptions are mainly found in the synecdochal character of the Decalogue in view of the ethic of love as revealed in the reign of God. Furthermore, prescriptions can only be derived from issues relating to the core of the biblical revelation and not the periphery of unrelated matters. The prescription should also be embedded in a modern form of conduct applicable to modern societal situations. These prescriptions must be validated by the themes in Scripture and not by narratives and 'prooftexts' alone.

Hermeneutics determines biblical ethics. The formulation of ethical norms is therefore a complicated enterprise. Even approaching biblical ethics from a 'hermeneutics of trust'

should make the biblical scholar cautious to formulate absolute biblical ethical norms applicable to all times and situations. Many conditions are at stake such as differences in hermeneutical approaches, a changing reader's context, new information about the socio-historical contexts of the biblical text, differences on higher and lower principles and descriptive and prescriptive material. Therefore, it is essential that Churches should take cognisance of this fact. Overall, churches should thus be hesitant to venture into the field of moral decision-making. Due to the differences in hermeneutics and social contexts, an ecumenical debate about ethical issues should antedate their moral decision-making. This is especially true for major councils and synods whose decision-making is not only influential in society but also difficult to defend, explain and even repeal when it is controversial. Furthermore, the wheels of synods move too slowly to stay in touch with moral questions in a rapidly changing society.

But, how then should churches be involved in moral decision-making? In this respect the author proposes certain ideas about the functioning of the church in the process of moral decision-making from a classic reformed ecclesiastical perspective.

Classic reformed perspectives on the church

The use of the word *ekklesia* in the New Testament opens interesting perspectives on how the church should be viewed. An old, but seminal study of Snyman (1947) and the work of Küng (1973) can be referred to in this regard. Both theologians indicate that the word *ekklesia* in the New Testament refers first of all to the congregation of believers in a specific location, such as the church in Antioch and Jerusalem for example. Only on a few occasions is the reference to the universal community of believers. Essentially, the church is therefore the local congregation of believers. In the classic reformed tradition, the *credo ecclesiam* refers to the church as:

one Catholic or universal Church, which is a holy congregation of true Christian believers. All expecting their salvation in Jesus Christ, being washed by His blood, sanctified and sealed by the Holy Ghost. (Beeke & Ferguson 1999:188)

The universal Church has certain signs (*notae ecclesiae*) and these are according to the classic reformed tradition: *una, catholica, apostolica* and *sancta* (Berkouwer 1970:13). However, the universal Church and the local church are not two separate entities. The universal Church becomes visible in local churches and local churches bear all the signs of the universal Church. Every local congregation is in itself a complete church (*ecclesia completa*). The concept of the visible local church with the various offices of minister, elder and deacon is the starting point and the foundation of reformed ecclesiology, which holds that the authority in the church is derived from the authority of Christ and is situated in the local church. No higher authority should be vested in a council, synod or the so-called church leader.

Essential to the existence of the local church is the ministry of the Word and all that it entails. The ministry of the Word implies the explication of the Scripture and its application to the spiritual and social life of believers. No sphere of life falls outside the range of the application of biblical norms for daily life. Ministry of the Word therefore has a direct impact on Christian morality. Through the ministry of the Word, the local church is in essence a moral agent in society. The conscience of the believer is shaped by the worship and ministry of the Word. Strengthened by moral education through the explication and application of Scripture, believers can act as the proponents of Christian norms in society. In this way, the local church is the torch-bearer of moral decision-making. It should thus be stated that the church 'speaks' first and foremost in the local ministry of the Word and believers' implementation of the moral principles derived from Scripture in their social environment. This prime task of the church cannot be belittled or replaced by the moral decisions of councils and synods. The church is the local church and the voice of the church is the ministry of the Word and the calling of all believers to put into practice the moral norms drawn from Scripture.

However, preaching of the Word has certain limitations. Preachers are heavily influenced by their own presuppositions in the explication and application of Scripture. Various hermeneutical theories lead to different exegetical results. Differences of opinion on moral norms were, are and will always be the order of the day. Two preconditions are necessary to deal with this dilemma. Firstly, ministers of the Word should always be part of intensive ecumenical debate and honestly revisit their own paradigms and presuppositions by engaging in the study of other meta-theoretical views (see Vorster 2016c). Secondly, ministers of the Word should refrain from 'simplistic' or 'cheap' answers to modern ethical answers. Defining a moral norm must originate from a thorough exegetical process based on a scientifically convincing hermeneutical theory and view of Scripture. This article chooses a 'hermeneutics of trust'. However, adherents to this theory should be cautious of fundamentalist or 'biblicist application' of biblical material based on a Sola text approach. Moral decisions must be founded in a solid revelation history and biblical theology and not be the result of certain 'prooftexts' without any consideration of the genre of Scripture, canonical and the socio-historical décor of the text.

In the classic reformed tradition, the idea of a synod as a 'higher' assembly with more authority than the local church was rejected over and against the Roman Catholic view of the authority of the papacy. Consistory meetings were held from the very beginning of the Reformation. The word *consistory* is derived from the Latin *consistorium*, meaning *place of meeting*. In the South African reformed tradition, this assembly became known as the 'church council', while the Presbyterian churches refer to this body as the 'session'. The authority in the church is situated in the consistory and this is, at least in principle, still the position of the various reformed traditions.

However, the churches of the Reformation soon felt the need for gatherings of local churches, partly because of the persecutions. A meeting of reformed ministers at the church of Poitiers in 1558 discussed the advisability of and need for synodical gatherings. The first synod in the reformed tradition was held in Paris in 1559 (Van Dellen & Monsma 1954:131). This synod adopted a church order that stated the independence of churches, but provision was also made for provincial and national synods to attend to mutual affairs. The churches in Southern Netherlands, England and Germany also held regular meetings. The independence of the local church was the angle of approach, but broader and not higher assemblies were also acknowledged, such as the classes and synods. The word *classis* indicated a division or class of people or of other objects and was used to describe a meeting of churches in a certain region or city. The word *synod* comes from the Greek *sunodos* and denoted 'a coming together' and described the broadest assembly of reformed churches. The term 'general synod' was used to indicate the gathering of all the churches in a particular ecclesiastical tradition. The expression is used synonymously in Netherlands with national synod (Van Dellen & Monsma 1954:131).

In the classic reformed tradition, the gathering of churches (*classis* and *synod*) is called a 'major assembly'. It is not a higher assembly with a 'higher authority', like in the collegialist systems. In the Presbyterian system the various assemblies are broader assemblies. The authority in the church is dealt with according to a 'bottom-up' approach and not a 'top-down' approach. The local church maintains its own authority as a true manifestation of the body of Christ (*ecclesia completa*). The various local churches do not dissolve themselves into a classical church or into a national synodical church (Van Dellen & Monsma 1954:133). The necessity of major assemblies is determined by the agenda. Major assemblies convene to discuss and resolve matters of mutual interest. The principle of such an assembly is defined in Acts 15. It is important to note that a major meeting assembles *in* church fellowship and not *as* a church fellowship. However, resolutions of local church councils bear the same authority as resolutions of major assemblies.

What should the foundation of major assemblies be? The major assemblies in the reformed tradition are based on the acceptance of the same confessions and church order by every local church represented in the major assembly. Cooperation and promotion of each other's welfare would be impossible without confessional unity (Van Dellen & Monsma 1954:132). Although the major assembly is not a 'higher authority' it does to some extent have a binding authority over the churches. This binding authority regards all matters that concern the churches in general and that have not been specifically left to the individual churches. At major assemblies the churches act in unison by common consent (Van Dellen & Monsma 1954:133; Vorster 2000). The authority of a resolution of a major assembly is founded on the agreement of local churches on a certain matter. This unison is a clear expression of the spiritual and confessional unity of the churches. When differing with the resolutions that

a major assembly passes by common consent, any individual or church has the right to appeal or to submit a petition of protest in an effort to convince the churches in fellowship to change the resolution.

Article 30 of the Church Order of the Synod of Dortrecht 1618–1619, which forms the foundation of the church orders of churches of the reformed tradition, states:

Church assemblies shall deal only with ecclesiastical matters and shall do so in an ecclesiastical manner. Major assemblies shall deal only with matters that could not be finalised in minor assemblies or that concern all the churches in question collectively. (Vorster 2000:55)

But what is the scope of 'ecclesiastical matters'? The ecclesiology of Kuyper (1892:134; 1909:205) was highly influential in the definition of ecclesiastical matters in the classic reformed tradition. He distinguished between the church as organism and the church as institute. The church as organism is the universal body of believers and their testimony in all the spheres of social life. It is the unorganised presence of believers in daily life where they are obliged to fulfil their calling as Christians. The church as institute is the organised, visible church that has to deal with the official ministry of the Word and the sacraments. Kuyper's view was also promoted in reformed circles by the Calvinistic philosophy in the Netherlands (Dooyeweerd 1936:451). According to this view, moral decision-making cannot be regarded as part of the calling of the instituted church, but rather the task of believers in society. The instituted church should deal only with 'spiritual matters'. This ecclesiology for some time had the effect of a lack of social involvement of churches in the reformed tradition. However, in the history of the reformed churches, it became evident that many reformed churches were not always consistent in their respective definitions of 'ecclesiastical matters'. In various historical instances, political circumstances were closely linked with the churches. Bouwman (1970:29) mentions several examples where churches dealt with political and social issues in consistory meetings and major assemblies. In other instances, major assemblies refrained from dealing with social issues because they did not regard them as 'ecclesiastical matters'.

The question therefore still remains: What must be seen as ecclesiastical matters, especially in view of the fact that the ministry of the Word demands a clear effective application of biblical principles in social life? The answer to this question determines the way in which churches should be involved in moral decision-making. This author contends that the answer must be sought in the concept of the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is a 'futurist-presentist' reality (Küng 1973:56). As a present and future reality, the kingdom presents an own morality, which Harvie (2009) and Moltmann (2012) term as an 'ethics of hope'. The principles of the kingdom are not only spiritual and do not exist in a vacuum. They deal with human life. This ethic is applicable to the whole of society. The concept of the kingdom presents a unique social ethic. The church is a manifestation of the

kingdom and should as such convey the principles of the kingdom of God to the world. Therefore, social ethics can be seen as an ecclesiastical matter.

In the light of the ecclesiology developed in the reformed tradition, moral decision-making and prophetic testimony of ethical matters is above all a question that should be dealt with by the local congregations. By way of the ministry of the Word in the local congregation, Christians should be equipped to act as moral agents in society. Differences of opinion may occur because of differences in exegesis, but in such a case the reformed principle of 'freedom of conscience' should be adhered to. Churches should always be hesitant to bind the conscience of believers by moral codes that are inadequately founded or built on a superficial application of 'proof texts'.

Local churches can agree to come to moral decision-making in church fellowship. In other words, an assembly of churches such as a synod can be involved in moral decision-making. Two conditions must precede such an attempt. Firstly, the matters regarding the social ethics of the kingdom should be resolved in an ecclesiastical manner. Ecclesiastical assemblies do not work in the same way as secular assemblies, which decide based on a majority of votes. Christ is the head of the church and in every assembly people should convince and persuade each other in the light of Scripture. The Word of God must rule. Therefore, ecclesiastical matters should be debated until there is a general consensus on the Biblical principles involved and of the necessity of the particular decision of the assembly. Secondly, the issue in discussion should be examined comprehensively and thoroughly by local churches to ensure that general consensus (common consent) is a realistic possibility. However, in view of the fact that the local congregation is the proper moral agent, moral decisions by major assemblies (synods) should be exceptional.

Conclusion

The church should be involved in moral decision-making if it wants to act as a manifestation of the kingdom. This involvement should first and foremost be realised in the local ministry of the Word where the consciences of believers are shaped to act morally and to promote the social-ethical norms of the kingdom in all spheres of society. Preaching is the most potent 'voice' of the church. Therefore, the ministry has to be the result of thorough discourses about ethical norms and must not deviate into cheap moralism. Furthermore, assemblies of churches can, in exceptional instances, also be seen as moral agents and should be proficient to pass resolutions on social-ethical questions. However, in this process, churches have to be alert of the differences in hermeneutical approach and their bearing on moral decision-making. In this respect, ecumenical discourses on social-ethical norms must be held in high esteem. In theological discourse, the ethicist should be able to revisit, and if necessary, correct his or her own hermeneutical presuppositions. Therefore, theological ecumenical discourse should precede moral decision-making. This condition may convince the

major assemblies of churches to be less outspoken on public issues, and when they speak, to speak with one voice and with authority if they have to provide moral guidance on a contentious issue. Due to the danger of contradictions in their testimony on social-ethical issues, official moral decision-making by major assemblies must rather be the exception than the rule. It will be more beneficial to leave the moral guidance of believers in their endeavour to act as responsible moral agents in society to the real voice of the church – the preaching and teaching of the local congregation.

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