

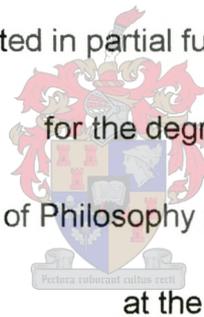
**POSTMODERNISM  
AND THE DILEMMA OF AN APPROPRIATE  
CHRISTIAN PARADIGM FOR ETHICAL DECISION MAKING.**

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Assignment presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Philosophy (Applied Ethics)



at the

University of Stellenbosch.

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November 2000

## ABSTRACT

The Church is facing a dilemma in how to apply and live out its message in a postmodern world. For many in the Church an understanding and application of morals and ethics has become bewildering. This assignment attempts to develop a Christian vocabulary and conceptual framework for morality.

This is done by firstly elucidating the milieu out of which postmodernism arose. Modernism, through universal claims of reason and instrumental rationality, believed in the ultimate mastery of the world. The failure of the Enlightenment project to develop universal morality and law led to a new perspective on reason and reality and new reflection on life, morality and meaning. Thus, I reflect on the parturition and value of postmodernism through offering an evaluation and critique of the ideology of postmodernism. Next, I propose the need for Christian ideology to be firstly separated from cultural interpretations so as to avoid ethnocentrism and cultural imperialism. After exploring the development and purpose of worldviews I argue for the building of cultural bridges and for the Gospel and Biblical worldview to be suitably encoded.

Finally, I posit an understanding of what postmodern ethics entails and how then to define and respond to ethical issues. Through case studies I apply the key principles identified in the study. These are that moderation is a virtue; that many timeless truths are customary truths that arise in a specific historical/cultural situations; that many problems are not ethical issues but are rather a comprehension and/or a misinterpretation of the Scriptures regarding what it means to be a Christian and how we are to live our Christian profession to mention a few. I reason and plead for a Christian ethical system of incarnational engaged compassion in a postmodern world.

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## INTRODUCTION

A postmodernist would say, "All interpretations are equally valid" (or equally meaningless). John Caputo said, "The truth is there is no truth" (1987:156). If so, how can Christianity's truth claims be considered when there are so many rival alternatives, and universal truth is a devalued notion? Postmodern ideology says all claims to truth are equally valid and plausible. Thus Christianity becomes acceptable because it is believed to be true by some, not because it is true.

We live in a postmodern era and the ideology of postmodernism has taken root in many aspects of society. The Church and Christians are challenged to respond but how? The central moral issue is - should the Church become relativistic in the area of morality or should she speak out with a loud voice on moral issues? And then, what should she be saying? If the Church does not speak out strongly and clearly on moral issues is she not guilty of compromising her calling?

The moral dilemma for the Church is complex. Does the Church trumpet a universalistic totalizing legalistic moral gospel and be accused of dogmatism, legalism, insensitivity and reverting to the strategies of the crusades and the inquisition or does she interpret and apply her message with love, compassion, contextual sensitivity and a learned insight to the prevailing worldviews? Is the Church forced to choose between a deontological ethic and a utilitarian moral theory? There has always existed conflict in determining the supremacy, value or hierarchy of moral actions over and against one another. May I lie or steal to protect the lives of my family?

Directing my thoughts and arguments will be my belief that many issues are not moral issues but rather an understanding (or misunderstanding) of what

the Scriptures teach; what it means to be a Christian and how we are to live the Christian faith. We also need to consider that many of our 'timeless truths' are rooted in a specific historical and sociological situation. Whilst postmodernism appears to be a problem for the Church it also has much to offer that the Church can learn from. Conceptual clarification around the metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical issues is therefore required.

This dilemma is a theological problem that can be identified, explained and explored as a philosophical-ethical problem. Philosophy can be defined as thinking about thinking and thus philosophy like theology concerns itself with reflective thoughts on formation of beliefs and claims to knowledge. Theology, like philosophy, concerns itself with metaphysics – the general nature of the world, epistemology – the justification of belief, and ethics – the conduct of life.

This assignment will not focus on critiquing approaches but highlight the development and complexity of the dilemma and provide an essential practical theological theory and riposte for approaching moral dilemmas. The methodology employed will be a study of literature to provide a broad overview and definition of the issues whilst applying independent critical and creative reflection.

To understand the present we must study the past; we must become aware of the historical rootage of many of our cherished beliefs. Thus, this assignment will briefly explore through some critical and creative reflection the intellectual movements such as the Enlightenment, modernism and the ascent of postmodernism. Postmodernism begins with a loss of faith in the dreams of modernism. Secondly, a brief study of the concept of a culture will be undertaken so that we can understand that many 'truths' are founded in a specific historical and sociological locale. This part of the study will concern itself with questions relating to the purpose of culture, and make

recommendations on how the Christian message is to be presented. Then I will define postmodern ethics and with critical reflection on the main body of research in this assignment I will proceed in chapter four to offer the principle of a practical theological theory of incarnational engaged compassion as the paradigm from which to approach moral issues.

I need to explain my understanding of Christianity and Jesus. The identity, purpose and message of Jesus is normally understood in terms of John 3:16 - Jesus is the son of God, who came to die for the sins of the world and whose message consisted of the importance of believing in him. The older image of Christian life was focused on believing and evangelism was convincing people to believe in Jesus now to go to heaven later. My understanding of the Jesus of Scripture is that his emphasis was on relationship, community and compassion. His vision of Christian life was that it is a relationship with the spirit of God. One needs to experience God. Evangelism is not telling people to believe some doctrine by mental assent. It is inviting people to enter a deepening and transforming relationship - to live within the Christian story of love, community and deepening transforming relationship. Christian life is a life of continuous transformation - a journey of change as the relationship deepens. This is what Christianity has to offer the world - the vision of a life of experience and relationship with God (as revealed by Jesus). This is experienced in a community of people being transformed by relationships - a life of incarnational engaged compassion for all and a life of purpose and meaning.

Incarnational engaged compassion is expressed and experienced when we incarnate (embody, manifest, personify) love through engaging people and situations with compassion and sensitivity to the varied circumstances such as culture, belief system, and psychological pathology to mention but a few. It entails a kind of Aristotelian virtue ethic based on compassion and

wisdom applied with a balanced perspective to a situation or person. The incarnation of Jesus is the most spectacular instance of cultural identification in the history of humanity. Jesus entered humanity's world, emptied himself for others, lived a very human life, endured human temptations, and experienced human sorrows. He made friends with social outcasts and penetrated humankind's humanness. He humbled himself to serve. Jesus' worship and spirituality, his morality reflects an incarnational engaged approach. This incarnational engaged compassion and love is not an abstract, sweeping, pious, or poetical love of sentiment, utterance, or conscience. It is an abandonment of selfishness, and it is the will to practice self-sacrifice; it is practical, specific, and courageous deeds to anyone who needs you in this world and at this moment.

My heart's cry is for a fuller understanding and experience of the grace and love of God and the resulting incarnational engaged compassion it births in people to waylay any legalistic Christian approach to moral issues. The Church does not need passion that is not regulated with obedience yet, nor does she need obedience that is not vitalized with compassion. The conclusion of this study will hopefully propose a paradigm that is sufficiently eclectic to be inclusive of all Christians yet be specific enough to provide guidelines and boundaries in ethical decision making in a postmodern world. The proposed paradigm is a practical theological theory of incarnational engaged compassion. This paradigm will rise out of the whole study in general and be illustrated in specific case studies relating to a practicing prostitute and also the issue of homosexuality. These case studies will reveal the complexity of ethical decision making and the sensitivity and humility required.

## CHAPTER 1

### THE PARTURITION OF THE MODERN ERA

This study needs to develop an understanding of the milieu out of which postmodernism arose. This chapter will focus on the origins and parturition of modernism. Foundational rationality is the rationality critiqued by postmodernists and thus some insights into the trajectory of modernity is essential. The Age of Enlightenment is often identified with the Age of Reason but it should be noted that the Age of Reason covers both the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries whilst the Age of Enlightenment covers roughly the eighteenth century. Much of the roots of the Enlightenment lie in the roots of seventeenth century rationalist thinkers such as Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz. To understand postmodernism it is essential to examine the rise of the modern world to which contemporary postmodern thinkers are responding.

#### 1.1 The Renaissance

Renaissance, a French term meaning 'revival' and/or 'rebirth', is a term used for the period following the Middle Ages. It was a time of revival of learning, the rebirth of the values of the classical spirit exemplified in the ancient Greek and Roman civilizations, expressed in literature, politics and art. Francis Bacon (1561–1626) the English philosopher and scientist was in many ways the quintessential Renaissance thinker (Grenz 1996:58).

Reese (1983: 48) says Bacon placed at the foundation of the sciences a body of truths he called 'first philosophy' which consisted of the laws of reasoning and the axioms shared by the various sciences. Bacon believed that science would provide the key to happiness. The aim of science should be to endow humans with power. For Bacon, knowledge is power,

knowledge offers the ability to alter man's circumstances. He taught that learning is for action and action forms the justification for knowledge (Wolterstorff 1984:123–124).

Bacon advocated the pursuit of knowledge to alter man's physical circumstances. But, as Wolterstorff (1984:124–125) shows, Bacon's successors sought to devise laws pertaining to human behavior and action; they pursued behavioral knowledge to acquire power to alter the actions of human beings in accordance with own goals. In the words of Shelley (1982: 331) the Renaissance had a positive estimate of human nature and the universe itself. Toulmin (1990) confirms this in his basic thesis that whilst people such as Descartes postulated the concept of 'timeless truths', all truth emerges in a specific historical milieu. He shows that people like Descartes had turned their backs on the more eclectic, humane and inductive tradition of Renaissance thinkers such as Erasmus and Montagne in the quest for certainty. This was a tragedy as in this quest for certainty many a well formulated theory was born but modernity was impoverished by the neglect of the appropriation of humanism by the Renaissance. Toulmin (1990:180 - 186) writes on "humanizing modernity." Is this not possibly what postmodernism will achieve?

## **1.2 Rationalism**

It is interesting to note that rationalism arose from a varied background – there was a nominal Catholic (Descartes), a Jew (Spinoza) and a Protestant (Leibniz) amongst others.

Deist (1990:213) defines rationalism as: "The view that the only source of true knowledge is human reason and that knowledge forms a unified system in terms of which everything can be deductively explained."

This means rationalists hold that what is knowable or demonstrable by human reason is true. In contrast to empiricists who stress the a posteriori, that which comes through empirical experience (emphasis on the senses), rationalism holds to the a priori aspect of human knowledge (emphasis on the mind).

Two important and influential thinkers are now briefly highlighted in order to reveal some of the thought process behind rationalism.

### **René Descartes (1596 – 1650)**

Descartes, a nominal Catholic educated in a Jesuit college, is often called the father of modern philosophy. He believed that doubt is a negative form of thought and that because one doubts, one is thinking. If one is thinking, he must be a thinking thing – a human being. His statement 'I think, therefore, I am' was the foundation of his philosophical inquiry. Descartes objective was to develop a unified system of reality based on mathematical principles. In a radical departure from traditional scientific theory founded on probabilities, he was determined to establish truth claims without merely presupposing such propositions to be certain or self-evident

Descartes had four rules for valid thinking and to correct errors. Errors arise not in the mind but in the will. Errors result when we judge to be true what the mind does not clearly know to be true. The corrective for error is found in four rules for valid thinking. Geisler's (1992:31–32) description of them can be summarized as follows.

First, the rule of *certainty* states that only indubitably clear and distinct ideas should be accepted as true.

Second, the rules of *division* affirm that problems must be reduced first to their simplest parts.

Third, the rule of *order* declares that humans must proceed in their reasoning from the simplest to the most complex.

Finally, the rule of *enumeration* demands that we check and recheck each step of the argument to make sure no mistake has been made.

By following these rules Descartes was confident error could be avoided and certainty attained. His intent was to devise a method of investigation that could facilitate the discovery of truths that were absolutely certain. Macdonald (1992:313) says "He (Descartes) wished to develop a system of true propositions in which nothing would be presupposed that was not self-evident and indubitable." For Descartes knowledge was an ordered system of propositions dependent on one another. His method of working from the data of consciousness has become the basis for many later subjectivist and idealist developments.

The objective of Descartes' inquiry was the search for truth and is based upon what each of us discover in himself or herself (Hamlyn 1990:136). But in trying to establish that only that which is rationally necessary can be admitted with absolutely certainty, he falls foul of his own rules because he admits to some first principles that themselves are not proven as rationally necessary (Zacharias 1994:347-352). Nevertheless it is fair to say that he was honestly endeavoring to transcend the skepticism of his time and acquire knowledge with mathematical certainty.

Hamlyn, describing Descartes' philosophy writes. "What is new about the approach to philosophy is ... its claim to secure an epistemological and metaphysical underpinning for our knowledge of the world on the basis of what the individual can construct from his own consciousness" (1990:144). Descartes defined human nature as a thinking substance and the human person as an autonomous rational subject (Grenz 1996:3). Chervin and

Kevane (1988:212) quote Descartes as saying, "I am a Catholic, I wish to remain one, and I have faith in the teaching of the Church. But I simply bracket all that out: it is in the realm of religious sentiment and emotion, whereas my universal science is in the realm of reason and knowledge." Zacharias (1994:352-353) discusses the cardinal principle of Descartes' method and sees it as the separation of religion, faith, and theology from philosophy and the empirical sciences.

### **Benedict Spinoza (1632 – 1677)**

Spinoza was born to Jewish parents but was expelled from the synagogue as he questioned Jewish beliefs. Van der Molen (1992:1040) describes Spinoza as a philosopher who alienated many religious contemporaries by removing Biblical ideas about God and many religious beliefs (such as acceptance of miracles) from the supernatural sphere.

His method was to arrive at truths from axioms by using deductive logic. He denied all supernatural occurrences as well as orthodox beliefs based on Biblical revelation. Traditional Christian explanations were replaced with rationalistic ideas about nature and reason. Reason replaced divine revelation and nature replaced God. Geisler (1992:32) points out that Spinoza's method did not begin in methodological doubt as Descartes' did. He begins with the absolutely perfect idea of an absolutely perfect being. To have essential knowledge of things we must exercise direct rational insight into the very essence of reality. This way the mind can be united with the whole of nature and be healed of the injury of error. There are four causes of error according to Spinoza.

- \* The partial nature of the human mind, which provides only fragmentary expressions of ideas.

- \* The failure to begin with the perfect Idea of God.
- \* The human imagination, which is affected by the physical senses and confuses us.
- \* The human reasoning process, which is too abstract and general.

Hamlyn (1990:151) explains Spinoza's reasoning on error by showing that for Spinoza the human mind is simply part of the infinite intellect of God and the essence of the human mind is thought. Hamlyn (1990:156) writes: "The overriding characteristics of Spinoza's philosophy are its claim to rigorous consistency and its thorough going working out of the consequences of an initial position." This means that nearly everything that follows an initial premise turns on the initial premises.

Brown (1968:55) sums up Spinoza's impact. "The idea of an all embracing system, bringing together God and man and accounting for everything in terms of a single spiritual reality, dazzled nineteenth century Idealists, just as the Lorelei bewitched the boat men sailing on the Rhine below."

The impact of Rationalism will be examined later in this study but it is appropriate to ask two questions. Firstly, can one construct reality with mere concepts and a priori definitions? Must theories not match experience to provide a metaphysical understanding of the natural order?

Secondly, is the god the rationalists created no more than a hypothetical abstraction, created and invoked to make the system work? Are their god's existence not based on arguments that were often dubious and unbalanced?

### 1.3 The Enlightenment

The Enlightenment denotes a time frame and intellectual movement that runs from England in the seventeenth century and developed later in France and Germany. The Enlightenment Age contrasts with the age of superstition and irrationality that supposedly characterised the Medieval Ages. There were many individuals that contributed to this time period. A few will be highlighted and some general comments made on their thoughts.

Immanuel Kant (1724 - 1804 ) was one of the most influential thinkers of his time. He, like so many of his contemporaries, probably believed that the Enlightenment was man's coming of age. It was man's emergence from the immaturity that caused him to rely on such external authorities as the Bible, the Church, and the state to tell him what to think and do. Brown (1992:355) says that the motto of enlightenment was "*Sapere aude* – Have courage to use your own understanding." Brown points out that people like Jean-Jacques Rousseau eulogized the myth of the noble savage. Rousseau repudiated the Christian doctrine of the fall and held that man is noble by nature. He is born free but everywhere finds himself in chains. Rousseau denounced all creeds beyond the assertion that natural religion was based on feeling and that all beliefs should be brought 'to the bar of reason and conscience.'

People like Voltaire (1694 - 1778) were influenced by deists who claimed that true religion was the religion of reason and nature. Voltaire urged religious tolerance but not towards the institutionalized Church against whom he said 'Blot out the infamous one.'

The Enlightenment was the era that emphasized the ability of human reason to discover truth. It was Descartes and other rational thinkers who had prepared the way for the Enlightenment in the seventeenth century.

They raised the questions of how knowledge is arrived at - epistemology – as the central issue in philosophy.

Seeking answers to epistemological questions men like Newton (1642 - 1727) and Locke (1632 - 1704) exalted the method of induction in philosophy. From particular cases general laws were established, and their techniques were applied not only to the natural world but, to the human world by others. The scientific method was applied to the study of humanity. Reason could discover new knowledge. The physical world had laws and regularity, which could be discerned by the human mind. Isaac Newton had a mechanistic view of a world governed by rational laws of reason, nature was a self-evident reality.

Philosophers portrayed man as not just becoming more aware of his world but he was also increasingly subduing it through new knowledge and theories. Grenz (1996:3) aptly states “The modern human can appropriately be characterized as Descartes’ autonomous, rational substance encountering Newton’s mechanistic world.”

Latourette (1975:1003–1004) believes that religiously the Enlightenment found its chief expression in Deism (belief in God is not derived from divine revelation but commends itself to the human mind by its inherent reasonableness). Deism held that God governed all by immutable law that He had created. There was no room for the supernatural. Men were being enlightened by the use of their reason and moving away from superstition. Reason was capable of telling us everything we wanted to know about God and morality.

The human intellectual quest therefore became a quest to unlock the secrets of the universe in order to master nature for human benefit and create a better world. This quest was based on certain epistemological

assumptions including that knowledge is certain, objective and good, and that progress is inevitable (Van Gelder 1991:413). The implication of this is that it became a moral duty to think rationally. This is important to understand as it was to these epistemological assumptions that postmodern thinkers so vehemently react.

### **1.3.1 Key Enlightenment developments**

The Renaissance and the revolution in science and philosophy gave birth to a new way of thinking. Reason was elevated over “superstition” and replaced revelation as the arbiter of truth. Paul Tillich (1968: 320-341) characterized the Enlightenment mind-set with the four principles of autonomy, nature, harmony and progress. These principles, together with the principle of reason signaled a fundamental change in world-view and a complete break with the medieval mentality.

The Age of Reason elevated the estimation of human capabilities. Humanity replaced God on center stage in history. Anthropologically speaking, an exalted understanding of human potential concerning intellectual and moral abilities was developed. Previously, human reason sought to understand the truth given through revelation, now human reason endeavored to demonstrate that it was the final arbiter of truth, and reason determined what constitutes revelation.

It is to these concepts of reason and truth that postmodernists will so strongly argue against. Objective reason and the resulting absolute truth derived are all nonsensical statements to the postmodern world view as will be shown in the chapter on postmodernism.

Morality rather than dogma was emphasized. The power of human reason could discover and conform to the natural moral law. This exalted sense of

human potential has a downside. Humans were now only a small part of a 'giant machine.' Medieval and Reformation cosmology positions human beings near the pinnacle of creation with an authority as stewards over creation. The Enlightenment had demoted human beings to an insignificant part of the grand order of things.

The Enlightenment period is marked by a radical departure from the world-view of the Middle Ages. People such as Copernicus (1473-1543) began this when he brought in new thinking in cosmology with his claim that the earth is not the center of the universe. This new cosmology replaced the older hierarchical ordering of reality. Now, analytical techniques were applied to natural phenomena to produce quantifiable results. The new method of research had precise methods of measurement and a strong dependence on mathematical logic.

Isaac Newton set out to explain the complexities of the Universe by developing a few fundamental laws. Newton did much to raise the prestige of natural science. Over time, Enlightenment thinkers applied the new method to aspects of the universe that are measurable. This new method was applied not only to the natural sciences but also to the human sciences such as philosophy, theology, ethics, politics etc. All fields of human endeavor became in effect, branches of natural science.

### **1.3.2 Key principles of the Enlightenment**

Whilst there are a number of principles of Enlightenment thinking that can be highlighted, Grenz (1996:68–71) has chosen the following five.

#### **a. The Principle of Reason**

Reason is often portrayed as more than just a human faculty by Enlightenment thinkers. The ancient Greco-Roman Stoics asserted that a

fundamental order and structure lay within all reality and was evidenced in the workings of the human mind. Enlightenment thinkers presupposed that a correspondence between the structure of the world and the structure of the human mind enabled the mind to discern the structure inherent in the external world. Belief in the objective rationality of the universe gives confidence that the laws of nature are knowable and intelligible, and therefore the world is capable of being transformed and subdued by human activity.

**b. The Principle of Nature**

Enlightenment theorists postulated that the universe is an orderly realm governed by the laws of nature. God was seen as the designer of the order in nature and therefore the theorists tried to comprehend the laws of God by investigating 'the book of nature.' Their goal was to bring all human life into conformity with the laws of nature as revealed and discovered by reason.

**c. The Principle of Autonomy**

Autonomous human reason dethroned any external authority as the arbiter of truth. This meant that the dictates of ancient authorities such as the Bible, the Church or Christian dogma were no longer reliable or sufficient to bring about compliance in belief or conduct.

**d. The Principle of harmony**

The belief was that the universe has an overarching order, which is inherently reasonable and orderly. Many believed that all truth is therefore part of a single, harmonious whole. By application of one true method to the hitherto disjointed and seemingly contradictory disciplines of human knowledge, irrational elements would be cleansed and they would come together into one true, unified body of knowledge.

Enlightenment ethicists moved from the Christian doctrine of depravity and embraced John Locke's assertion that the human mind begins as a blank slate. The mind is then shaped by divinely created nature (Becker 1932:65). The employment of reason brings human life into harmony with the universal natural order.

#### **e. The Principle of Progress**

The universe is both orderly and knowledgeable therefore the use of correct methods can lead to true knowledge. This axiom led philosophers, scientists, and theologians attempting to construct and develop systems that would approximate truth.

The practical significance of the discovery and application of the laws of nature offered the promise of making humans happy, rational and free. By applying nature's laws to the problems of personal and social life one could change the world.

Many historians of the Enlightenment saw the Middle ages as an era of barbarism and superstition. Now they looked to the future with hope, believing they were on the boundary of a 'promised land' (Becker 1932:118). Utopia would dawn once humans learn to live by and in the light of the laws of nature. The Age of Reason was an age of hope.

### **1.4 Skepticism**

David Hume (1711 - 1776) believed that knowledge comes to humanity through the reflection on the ideas that come through the senses to the mind. The consequence of this is the banishing of the soul as man is merely matter and substance. Hume's concern was to expose the limitation of reason and explain how humans make the judgements they do.

Geisler (1992:14-15) words the Humean philosophy on causality as follows. "The idea (says Hume) of a casual relation appears in the mind only after there has been an observation of the constant conjunction in experience. That is, only when we observe death to occur after holding another head under water for five minutes do we assume a causal connection. Once an event is observed to happen repeatedly after another, the observer can begin to form the idea that one event happens *because* of the others. In brief, the idea of causality is based on custom ... . There is always the possibility of the *post hoc* fallacy, namely, that things happen after other events (even repeatedly) but are not really caused by them. For example, the sun rises regularly after the rooster crows, but certainly not because the rooster crows."

Not being able to determine causality leads to philosophical skepticism - the questioning of cognitive achievements or the ability to obtain reliable knowledge. So, Hume would say that it is not reason that gives humans their beliefs about the unobserved but rather it is habit and custom. Hume taught that ethics and morality were to be based on feelings and not on reason or matters of fact. Morality as a matter of feelings, is informed by instincts of sympathy, regulated in accord with conventions of justice and general rules. The significance of Hume's skepticism is summed up by Zacharias (1994:356-357). Hume is against revealed religion, against the miraculous and against God. Hume's philosophy removes the intellect as a way to reason God's truth. However, Humean morality is conceptually not far from postmodern morality in certain respects as will be explored in chapters four and five.

## 1.5 Kantian Rationalism

Kant's philosophy provided the foundation for the final emergence of modernism as a cultural phenomenon (Grenz 1996:73-81). This section will examine this thought.

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) chronologically comes at the end of the Age of Reason. The Enlightenment had produced mostly a modern skeptical rationalism. Kant published his *The Critique of Pure Reason*, which breathed new life into the Enlightenment and gave it the shape that would mark the modern era.

Kant elevated the mind to the center of the human knowing process and he agreed with Hume and the empiricists that the content of knowledge comes via the senses (Geisler 1992:16). This means that the content of knowledge comes via the senses but the structure of knowledge is attained in the mind. The senses furnish the data which the mind then systematizes through certain formal concepts present in the mind that act as a type of grid or filter, providing the parameters that make knowledge possible.

Two formal foundational concepts were space and time. Kant distinguished between phenomena (objects present in the experience of the human knower), and noumena (objects lying beyond experience). There is no direct knowledge of noumena because there is no sense experience. This means there are limits to argue from sense experience to transcendent realities. Because science is based on sense experience, no reality that lies beyond space and time can be known by the scientific enterprise.

Kant thus made a valiant attempt to salvage religion from the onslaught of empiricism, positivism, and naturalism (Richmond 1966:48). Man was part of nature, yet his moral experience meant he transcended nature. Moral

freedom guaranteed that man was no mere thing determined by causal necessity. The danger of this view is that religion becomes transformed into secular humanism. Richmond (1966:118) writes: "... Kantian ethics with its religious postulates might well be transformed, without noticeable loss, into a highly moral but quite secular humanism."

Another danger of Kantian thinking is the elevation of the autonomous self. Solomon (1988:40) says this gave birth to the 'transcendental pretence' of modernity. The Western mind-set has exalted and universalized the thinking self. The presumption that in all matters essential, every person everywhere is the same lies behind Kant's philosophy. This has led some philosophers to construct a universal human nature. They contend they are able to assess the conduct and practices of cultures around the world and determine which are civilized and which are barbaric (1988:6).

The significance of Kant for this assignment is that he gave little significance to any role played by human communities, whether in the form of providing social customs, traditions of value, or moral education. Postmodernism (and Hume) would disagree. This is because Kant believed 'duty is for duty's sake.' The fulfillment of duty is an abstract moral requirement. The importance of Kant's contribution to ethics was his thesis that moral judgements are expressions of practical reason (the autonomous will) and not theoretical reason, and the idea of mutually respecting autonomous rational wills.

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Grenz (1996:81) summarizes the modern, post Enlightenment mind as follows. "From Bacon to the present, the goal of the human intellectual quest has been to unlock the secrets of the universe in order to master nature for human benefit and create a better world." Writing on Kant he

says: "Kant's elevation of the active mind as the definitive agent both in the process of knowing and in the life of duty encouraged subsequent philosophers to focus their interest on the individual self" (1996:78).

The modern, post Enlightenment thinker believes knowledge is certain, objective and good. The presupposition is that the rational dispassionate self can obtain such knowledge. Knowledge inevitably leads to progress.

Science and education frees humanity from a vulnerability to nature and all forms of social bondage. The modern technological society of the twentieth century was produced from this Enlightenment quest. The heart of this society is the determination to 'rationally manage life' on the assumption that scientific advancement and technology provide the means to improve the quality of human life.

Postmodernism, as will later be noted, rejects this Enlightenment project, the modern technological ideal, and all the philosophical assumptions (such as basic truths are much the same for all persons in all times and places) upon which the modern era was built.

## **1.6 Modernity defined and critiqued**

Modernity can be defined as a mode of social life and moral understanding (Hunter 1994:16). It is characterized by the universal claims of reason and instrumental rationality. Reality is that which can be appropriated empirically by the senses. Reality can be explained logically and scientifically in an ordered system of rationally derived propositions. Mastery over the world is achieved through the practical application of rational controls on all aspects of life. Modernity has a clear presumption about the universal applicability of reason. The premise and promise of the modern age would be 'the

emancipation of humanity from poverty, ignorance, prejudice, and the absence of enjoyment.'

### **1.6.1 The institutional carriers of modernity**

The reason why modernity is so distinctive and powerful is that it's a dialectic between moral understanding (the value of reason, the importance of individuality, the value of tolerance) as reflected in the section on Kant, and social institutional life. This means in practical terms, the key values of modernity are carried by specific institutions in three spheres of human activity: the economic, the political and the cultural. These are expanded on by Hunter (1994:16-22) and are summarised below. There are three important carriers of modernity.

The first is '*industrial capitalism*.' Here the application of scientific rationality to the production of goods, the organization of labor, and distribution of products was and is the most efficient system ever created. Capitalism and the rationality that defines it is not culturally neutral. Capitalism becomes a carrier of the ideology of rational control as the modern individual is incorporated into a problem-solving approach to all of life. Materialism is fostered which in turn breeds a practical atheism towards everyday life. Capitalism led to urbanization and a weakening of traditional and stable communities. It forced on communities the ideology of self-sufficiency and moral autonomy that undermined the possibility of community.

The '*modern state*' is the second carrier of modernity mentioned by Hunter. He writes: "It is the principal carrier of compartmentality in which knowledge and competencies, not to mention life itself is compartmentalized rather than integrated" (1994:9). The state is therefore not culturally neutral as it carries a rationalistic and bureaucratic form of social organization. Max Weber (1958) writes about bureaucracy being self-aggrandizing as it

organizes not only political life but all other institutions such as education, welfare, military etc.

The '*knowledge sector*' is the third carrier of modernity. This is the modern university, the mass media, the arts and popular culture. One can include any institution that is involved in culture formation and reality definition. These institutions are carriers of modern skepticism and relativism. The mass media transforms and alters humanity's sense of value and predisposes humanity towards superficiality and subjectivity.

Hunter's work reveals his belief that there is an isomorphism between the culture of modernity and the structures of modernity. He is correct and there can be no doubt that the values of modernity are not only intellectualized but have become embedded in human institutions. Virtually all areas of individual and community life have embraced modernity and been encompassed by its presence.

The belief system of modernity held that as infants evolve to adulthood; from helplessness to mastery; so would communities develop from small hunting and gathering cultures to pastoral communities, to progressive urban and industrial societies. To advance one must reject the old, the obsolete. This takes place in capitalism through technological innovation; in politics through the so-called expansion of rights and political change; in intellectual life as the frontiers of knowledge are expanded.

The individual and the community is growing, actualizing and realizing potential – this is progress – this is the desired result of modernity. This is what postmodernism so correctly critiques. Modernism has failed to deliver what it promised.

### **1.6.2 Modernity and the Christian faith**

Modernity believed that the world could be understood and defined. It represented a major shift in consciousness from the medieval Christian worldview, a shift from commitment to a transcendent God and God's revelation, to a framework oriented to autonomous humanity and its self-governed material existence (Pinnock 1990:82). The methodology of science would lead the human sciences to a meaningful understanding of the world.

There is no need for humanity to submit to external authorities. Modernists contend that the Biblical writers were conditioned by the times in which they lived and that there had been an evolution in the history of Biblical religion. A new worldview emerges completely emancipated from the Biblical categories and only dependent on human resources. What developed was a concept of a unified world, only subject to the inexorable sequence of natural causes and effects.

Naturally, this new faith in humanity, lead to atheism. The father of modern atheism, Ludwig Feuerbach, believed that God is a projection of the human and the knowledge of God is nothing more than the knowledge of our selves. Karl Marx claimed that religion is a human veil drawn across social injustices to cover them up. Pure socialism replaces the need for religion. The renowned psychologist Sigmund Freud was convinced that God is a psychological projection of humans, rising from their infantile wish for security. The modern mind saw itself as the creator of its own destiny.

The motto 'God is dead' has become the symbol for secular modernity. Pinnock (1990:85) writes "Reality is material, purposeless, and absurd" in commenting on the lack of structures of coherence, order and value in secular modernity.

Oden (1992:x) thinks modernity does not present too much of a challenge. He writes, "Modernity presents no tougher set of challenges to Christianity than did the fall of Rome, the collapse of the medieval synthesis, the breakup of the unity of Christendom in the sixteenth century, or the Enlightenment".

Heron (1980:3) has an opposing viewpoint. He believes modernity leaves humanity with an endless interplay of human meanings in an empty void. "For all practical purposes, modern Western man assumes that the human race is thrown up on its own resources to cope with life and discover what meaning, if any, it may have." Modernity leaves humanity with no God, no basis for human dignity and no hope. This creates a spiritual void in humans who are created in the image of God for relationship and fellowship with the Creator. This is why there is such a hunger for spirituality in postmodernism.

Modernism challenged Christianity on a number of fronts. The scientific revolution challenged the authority of the Bible. The earth was discovered not to be the center of the universe. Galileo's findings brought the authority of the Church and the Bible into disrepute. How do we interpret the Bible if not literally? In what areas is the Bible authoritative? Psychology revealed that there are forces at work beneath the surface of our conscious minds. These forces influenced humanity powerfully and show that humans are not as detached and fair-minded as was thought.

Biblical criticism exposed the human character of the Scriptures and challenged the Scriptures claim to infallibility and supernatural inspiration. Even doctrinal traditions, after critical inquiry, showed human characteristics. Too often, the response of Christians and the Church to modernity was weak reasoning, dogmatism, and fundamentalism.

All the intellectual challenges of modernity presented the Church with the formidable task as to how she would practice true worship of God. Often, when the Church is tested, the Church makes foolish choices. The Church can also easily be assimilated into the spirit of the age. This often resulted in a secularized worship and spirituality. Evangelicals concentrated on adoration and often neglected issues such as social ethics (justice and socio-economic actions amongst others). On the other side one had those who called themselves liberals. Their focus was more on action and neglected the adoration arm of worship. The Christian's ethics must result in actions that give voice to the nature and will of God.

Every period in history has presented the Church with challenges – from Gnosticism to the Reformation, to the Enlightenment, to postmodernism. Postmodernism is the latest revolution, and it is the contention of this researcher that it will dwarf modernity in its impact of every aspect of thought and culture. Modernity allowed humanity to attempt to shape Christianity through the process of secularization of Church and culture. Postmodernism can lead to a Christianity shaped by relativism and pragmatism.

### **1.7 Summary**

Modernity is a mode of social life and moral understanding that is characterized by the universal claims of reason and instrumental rationality. Reality is that which can be appropriated empirically by the senses and can be explained logically and scientifically in an ordered system of rationally derived propositions. Mastery over the world is achieved through the practical application of rational controls on all aspects of life. Modernity has a clear presumption about the universal applicability of reason. A key

assumption was that basic truths are much the same for all persons in all times and places.

The Enlightenment period is marked by a radical departure from the world-view of the Middle Ages. Copernicus brought in new thinking in cosmology with his claim that the earth is not the center of the universe. This new cosmology replaced the older hierarchical ordering of reality. Analytical techniques were applied to natural phenomena to produce quantifiable results. The fundamental concern of the Enlightenment enterprise can be said to strip humans of their 'particularities'. By doing this one reveals the core of human nature – an 'independent, autonomous, and thus essentially non-social moral being' (Dumont 1986:2). "Human nature and rationality remained the same, independent of its specific historical, social, cultural or chronological location" comments McGrath (1996:165).

The Enlightenment project was a sustained effort on the part of its thinkers to develop objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art, according to their inner logic (Harvey 1989:12). Positively, some Enlightenment ideals gave rise to hope for the future and human reform. However, it soon became apparent that confidence in the dreams, theories, ideals and claims of the Enlightenment were 'loosing ground' and the Enlightenment agenda was failing. It was time for a new perspective on reason and reality, a time for new creative reflection on life, morality and meaning. The ideology of postmodernism arrived with the postmodern era.

## CHAPTER 2

### POSTMODERNISM

This chapter will periodically define modernism or modernity. This is done in order to understand the context out of which postmodernism arises. As discussed in Chapter 1, modernism is the mindset that emerged during the Enlightenment, an optimistic belief in the idea that the methodology of science can lead the human sciences to a meaningful psychological understanding of people.

Modernists view the world including humans, as one large machine. They have great faith in empiricism (knowledge can only be gained through our senses), rationality, and in science. The worldview of modernists exerted a tremendous influence on and in culture. In the midst of the struggle between the mindset of modernists and the Church a new ideology/worldview was developing, namely postmodernism.

Postmodern ideology has permeated much of society and for many the Church's ethical position to a world moving in a new direction has become perplexing. There is great need to discern the epochal transformation, the birth of a new cultural vision, a new worldview.

The postmodern intellectual situation is profoundly complex and ambiguous. There is a diversity of cultural and intellectual cross currents shaping the postmodern intellectual climate. Houston (1994:184) lists pragmatism, existentialism, psychoanalysis, Marxism, feminism, deconstructionism and postempiricist philosophy of science as the most prominent shapers of postmodernism. The open-ended, indeterminate postmodern mind has developed from this maelstrom of divergent impulses and tendencies. This vortex of thoughts and ideals produces the egotism

and estrangement that are the extremes of postmodernism. Houston comments on this. "Pluralism, complexity and ambiguity thus intensify the alienation and narcissism of postmodern humanity. The lack of objective social and personal values are shown by psychedelic exploration, ecofeminist experimentation, and the individualist experimentation of new cults" (1994:184-185).

Breech (1989) poses new questions relating to the meaning and morality of Jesus' stories/parables. Adam and Allan (1995) reveal a new approach to theorizing cultural forms, practices and identities. Veith (1994) in his book *Guide to contemporary culture* shows that this new era has ideals and concepts that would shock the average Christian.

The Church has always had to confront culture and exist in tension with the world. (This will be explored in Chapter 3.) To ignore culture and worldviews is to risk being irrelevant. Veith (1994:16-17) quotes Charles Colson's experience in attempting to talk with a friend about Christianity. "My experience is a sobering illustration of how resistant the modern mind has become to the Christian message. And it raises serious questions about the effectiveness of traditional evangelistic methods in our age. For the spirit of the age is changing more quickly than many of us realize."

McGrath (1996:184) defines postmodernism as follows: "Postmodernism is generally taken to be something of a cultural sensibility without absolutes, fixed certainties or foundations, which takes delight in pluralism and divergence, and which aims to think through the radical 'situatedness' of all human thought." This definition is like all others – inadequate. The reason for this is the diverse strands that require understanding.

There are a few working principles that emerge when one studies these diverse and divergent strands that combine to form postmodernism. Tarnas

(1991:395) notes an appreciation of the plasticity and constant change of reality and knowledge, a stress on the priority of concrete experience over fixed abstract principles, and a conviction that no single a priori thought system should govern belief or investigation, as key principles.

This is essentially the central problem that needs to be examined in this chapter. Postmodernism naturally calls into question traditional notions of truth, structure and reality. The center of discourse is often dislocated to the edges of human preference and subjectivity. People are increasingly attributing thinking and actions to their cultural background. Truth and responsibility are discredited notions because postmodernism is not a set of doctrines or truth claims. This chapter needs to carefully examine the parturition of the postmodern era and explore, value and critique the ideology of postmodernism through some critical reflection.

## **2.1 The birth and rise of postmodernism**

Veith (1994:19) comments on the rise of worldviews: "One world view follows another. In the eighteenth century the Enlightenment challenged the Biblical Synthesis that had dominated Western culture. With the nineteenth century came both Romanticism and Scientific Materialism. The twentieth century has given us Marxism and fascism, positivism and existentialism."

The last great epochal transformation was modernism. Modern world views sought to banish God to the remotest of the transcendent. Positivism sought to unify the sciences, to order human life by discovering the basic paradigm to explain human nature. Secular humanism emphasized the autonomy of the individual and the primacy of the intellect, and attempted to cure society's sickness by education and technology. Modernism tried to

produce a just and egalitarian social order that would embody reason and social progress.

The West has a long history of ruthless expansionism and exploitation. Disenchantment arose as a result of colonialism and imperialism; the oppression of women, people of color, minorities, the working class, the poor; and the destruction of indigenous societies throughout the world; the insensitivity to other cultural traditions and values; the ravaging of the planet, and abuse of other forms of life. The reality of two world wars, Communism, Nazism, and nuclear bombs led to people beginning to question the belief that the science, technology, and reason would ever produce a better world.

Tarnas (1991:356) quotes Sir James Jeans: "The physical world of twentieth century physics resembled not so much a great machine as a great thought." Thomas Kuhn (1962) questioned the concept of any absolutes in science. He reviewed the history of science and argued that scientists work in terms of paradigms (or worldviews). These models are derived from a network of presuppositions, and through them the facts of experience are interpreted. This reflects science's biases concerning the nature of reality and knowledge. Tarnas (1991:396) writes: "The mind is not the passive reflector of an external world and intrinsic order, but is active and creative in the process of perception and cognition."

Reality is in some sense constructed by the mind, not simply perceived by it, and many such constructions are possible, none necessarily sovereign. Man is not an unbiased observer and when one is prepared to concede this, then one might be less dogmatic on many issues.

Barett (1986) describes the reduction of man by modernism in his book. The human being is simply a chance assimilation of atoms. Determinism

was reality as the human being had no human spirit and was subject to the laws of nature in a closed universe. Any immaterial response was simply a bio-chemical response.

The dialectic of the Enlightenment is that modernism delivered oppression and domination when it promised liberation. The worship of reason and science combined with the removal of God to the transcendent freed humans – to do evil. The ground was ripe for a new worldview.

## **2.2 The postmodern reason**

To understand the postmodern mind and agenda we have to understand the modern agenda to which contemporary thinkers so vehemently respond. One of the first major publications that comprehensively described and explained what lay beneath this cultural phenomenon of revolutionary outlook was by Jean-Francois Lyotard (1984). His publication *The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge* effectively put postmodernism on the map.

### **2.2.2 Metanarratives and deconstruction**

Postmodernism whilst claiming not to be a worldview is a new way of viewing reality. It revolutionizes our understanding of knowledge and science. Jean-Francois Lyotard (1984:xxiv) defines postmodernism as “incredulity toward metanarratives.” By metanarratives he means a worldview consisting of a network of elementary assumptions which can interpret and interrelate, every aspect of our experience and knowledge. Patricia Waugh (1992:1) describes metanarratives as “large-scale theoretical interpretations purportedly of universal application.”

Postmodernism brought about the demise of metanarratives. Postmodern ideology sees all metanarratives as having a terroristic or militant function to

sanction the illusion of a universal human history. Scholars like Lyotard argued that all universal narratives, such as Marxism, were totalitarian in their outlook. (This means being potentially capable of generating mindsets that were evil and conducive to crimes against humanity.) A postmodernist would say that the confidence of the rightness of one's own contention ultimately can lead to an inducement to control or destroy those who disagree. McGrath (1996:187) quotes the Oxford literary critic Terry Eagleton's argument that notions such as truth or meaning are intensely repressive and are to be rejected as a form of academic terrorism. The works of postmodern writers such as Jacques Derrida, Michael Foucault and Jean Baudrillard all argue that language is whimsical and capricious. There are no absolute linguistic laws, and language is therefore elective and arbitrary and not capable of communicating or disclosing absolute meaning.

Deconstruction has thus become associated with a school of literary criticism. (This is not the usage or understanding of Derrida who introduced the term.) As a literary critical method deconstruction declares that the identity and intention of the author of a text are irrelevant to the interpretation of the text.

Two general principles of this approach to the reading of texts are highlighted (McGrath 1996:186).

- \* Anything that is written will convey meanings that its author did not intend and could not have intended.
- \* The author cannot adequately put into words what he or she means in the first place. (Note that the notion of the existence of meaning/intention prior to language is challenged by deconstruction.)

This means that all interpretations are equally valid (or equally meaningless). John Caputo said, "The truth is there is no truth" (1987:156). If so, how can Christianity's truth claims be considered when there are so many rival alternatives, and truth is a devalued notion? In postmodern ideology all claims to truth are equally valid and plausible. Thus Christianity is acceptable because it is believed to be true by some, not because it is true.

For postmodern thinkers, reality is mediated by a community's belief system or worldview. The postmodern mind views all metanarratives as interpretations of the totality of history with universal applications and this is a futile endeavor to universalize history. No metanarrative is extensive enough to include the experiences and realities of all people and the only aim of the metanarrative is to validate the power structures that marginalize these experiences. Thus the metanarrative of atonement and redemption in Jesus Christ is discarded.

The problem with deconstruction is that very little is left afterwards. Middleton and Walsh (1995:141) believe deconstruction leaves anarchic pluralism, political cynicism, and cultural and moral paralysis in its wake: "Deconstructive therapy, in other words, is so radical that it runs the risk of killing the patient."

Yet, one must admit that there is a totalizing potential in all metanarratives. The Church must respond by first understanding the attack and then preparing the apologetic. Christianity is rooted in metanarrative that make universal claims. The Bible is a story that reveals a worldview. But is the Gospel violent and totalizing? This issue will be dealt with in Section 2.3.1.

Middleton and Walsh (1995:131-154) have an excellent article on dealing with the deconstruction of metanarrative. They believe in the antitotalising

thrust of the Biblical metanarrative. Yet, they admit that the Biblical story has often been used ideologically to oppress and exclude those regarded as heretics or infidels. Often Scripture has been used to legitimize prejudices (e.g. apartheid) and perpetuate violence against people. Thus, it is not difficult to understand the postmodern attitude to metanarratives. Naturally, this leads to a number of implications resulting in a postmodern 'worldview.'

### **2.2.3 A postmodern 'worldview'**

Veith (1994:42) points out, "If the modern era is over, we are all postmodern, even though we reject the tenets of postmodernism." Postmodernism refers to a distinct ideology whilst postmodern or postmodernity refers to a time period.

Postmodernism is anti-worldview as it denies the existence of any universal truths or standards. Postmodernists deconstruct metanarratives (worldviews) so that no one particular belief is more true or believable than another. One can argue that postmodernism does not really have a worldview because it does not attempt to construct a paradigm that orders reality. Reality eludes all attempts at conformity so there can never be any absolute foundation. All truth is a social construct, pragmatically justified. Reality is constructed by the mind and not simply perceived by it. If reality is a fluid, unfolding process then the quest for knowledge is endlessly self-revising, continually affected and molded by one's actions and beliefs.

All human understanding is interpretation and no interpretation is final. Tarnas (1991:396) writes: "There is no empirical fact that is not already theory laden, and there is no logical argument or formal principle that is a priori certain." He continues by pointing out that the postmodernist has a more sympathetic attitude towards repressed or unorthodox perspectives

and a more self-critical view of currently established ones. Continuing advances in anthropology, sociology, history and linguistics have underscored the relativity of human knowledge, bringing increased awareness of the Eurocentric character of Western thought, and of the cognitive bias produced by factors such as class, race and ethnicity.

Tarnas (1991:397) points out that the nature of truth and reality in science, philosophy, religion or art is radically ambiguous. The reason for this is because signs and symbols of uncertain provenance mediate human knowledge, constituted by historically and culturally variable predispositions, and influenced by often-unconscious human interests. This means the subject can never presume to transcend the manifold predispositions of his or her subjectivity.

The postmodernist thesis is that idiosyncratic cultural-linguistic forms of life ultimately generate all human thought. Knowledge is nothing more than the historically contingent product of linguistic and social practices of particular local communities of interpreters, with no assured "ever-closer" relation to an independent ahistorical reality (Tarnas 1991:395-402). Any interpretation of a text cannot claim ultimate authority because of the hidden incongruity and contradictions that undermine and impair its unity and coherence. The result of this is that all meaning is ultimately 'up in the air' and undeterminable. There is no such thing as 'true' meaning. If reality is multiple, local, and ephemeral, then there can be no postmodern worldview.

### **2.3 A Christian response to postmodernism**

If a Christian believes his faith has absolute claims then he/she will have great difficulty in persuading people with a postmodern ideology of the validity of them because of their rejection of metanarratives. Thiselton (1995:12) says that the postmodern self follows Nietzsche and Freud in

viewing claims to truth largely as devices to legitimate power-interests. The plausibility problem that arise from a spoken or written apologetic that postmodernism presents Christianity can only be overcome with a demonstration of the truths it claims. This section makes recommendations to Christians who believe in metanarrative to adopt a praxis-orientated apologetic of incarnational engaged compassion as the only acceptable apologetic to meet some of the challenges of postmodernism. The theological and philosophical apologetics will only be listened to in a context where they have been demonstrated through incarnational engaged compassion. (Later in this assignment some warnings are given in terms of the validity of many Christian's truth claims.)

Assuming that the Christian metanarrative is true then only a pragmatic test applied to the Christian metanarrative truth-claims (relating to relationship with God and meaning/purpose for and in life) will demonstrate whether or not a truth delivers what it promises. According to John 13 & 17, Christianity is to be a community of believers that is characterized chiefly by worship of God (that is reflected in incarnational engaged compassion for all), love for each other, and unity. Thus, the Church is challenged to demonstrate a Christianity that transforms lives, and integrates them into a community of love.

Some people might claim that postmodernists can not critique an individual or a society's ethics or belief system (unless it is an absolute claim). Thus Auschwitz, Birkenau, Treblinka and apartheid must be accepted or at best, can only be ineffectively critiqued. This is perhaps an oversimplification and reveals a lack of understanding of postmodernism. This will be dealt with later in Sections 4.1 and 4.2. Victor Frankl believes that the gas chambers of the Nazis were the ultimate consequences of the theory that man is nothing but the product of heredity and environment. He believes the

decimation of the Jews was ultimately prepared in the lecture halls of nihilistic scientists and philosophers (1982:xxi).

Christianity claims an alternative paradigm and philosophy to that of postmodernism. Allan (1989:6) writes: "In a postmodern world Christianity is intellectually relevant. It is relevant to the fundamental questions, Why does the world exist? And, Why does it have its present order, rather than another? It is relevant to the discussion of the foundations of morality and society, especially on the significance of human beings."

"If Christianity is true, then we know some things about people that they do not know themselves", writes Sire (1995:111). This gives Christianity the confidence to challenge some of the assumptions of postmodernism. Sire argues that once the possibility that God exists is accomplished, traditional apologetics can be used (1995:113). Whilst the existence of God is not the main challenge of postmodernism, a postmodern thinker has to admit that he/she believes relativism is true. This means truth is necessary and important.

Despite this the starting point in meeting the challenges of postmodernism is never a spoken dogmatic legalism but always a praxis-orientated apologetic. Christians must remember that their own belief system has been in a continuous process of development over two thousand years and has always existed in a multiplicity of views. A praxis-orientated apologetic of incarnational engaged compassion consists of a willingness to live under the ethos of the cross, willing to suffer with and for others.

Kenneson sees beliefs and convictions as habits of acting (1995:163). Thus, his model of plausibility and persuasion is one in which the facts or truth one cites are available only because certain convictions have been acted out. He writes: "The paradigm I am advocating frankly admits that all

truth claims require for their widespread acceptance the testimony of trusted and thereby authorized witnesses.” The belief that Christianity has a relevancy and a truth to convey (that both Sire and Allan believe) is one thing, a reason to be heard is another. Christians are told in 1 Peter to always be ready to give an answer to those who ask questions about the Christian faith but in the postmodern world few are asking. Any effort to argue people into the Kingdom of God by insisting that what Christianity teaches is objectively true reduces the Christian faith to a form of ‘gnosticism’ (Kenneson 1995:166).

The life of the Church, the worship and spirituality of Christians is what will give Christian truth claims integrity, credibility, veraciousness and intelligibility. God is revealed to society and culture as He is mediated through the Christian, through communities of human beings energized, inspired and moved by love and compassion.

When the Church lives its proclamation, when it lives in the community in such a way that its life is incomprehensible apart from the God of Scripture; then and only then, will the postmodern world ask it about the hope it has. And only then will it have something to say. Ludwig Wittgenstein warns that, “The truth can be spoken only by someone who is already at home in it; not by someone who still lives in falsehood and reaches out from falsehood towards truth on just one occasion” (1980:35).

### **2.3.1 Countering deconstruction**

Over the centuries many have used and abused Scripture to defend their own ideologies and purposes. However, Middleton and Walsh (1995) contend there are identifiable, counter ideological dimensions or antitotalizing factors found in the Bible. One would be a radical sensitivity to suffering which permeates the Bible from exodus to the cross. Another is

the rooting of the story in Gods overarching creational intent. Israel was to be a community that refused to cause oppression (Ex 23:9 and Ex 22:22-23) but rather have compassion towards the marginal.

The Biblical text highlights 'absence' – the absence of God, the absence of justice and shalom. The text calls for 'social transformation in the name of the founding narrative' (Middleton and Walsh 1995:145). According to Exodus 19:6 Israel was elected as a 'priestly kingdom and a holy nation.' God's purpose in the exodus was that Israel was to be no less than the bearer of a universal, cosmic narrative, a drama of God's intent to mend the world, to bring justice and healing to all nations and to the non-human realm (Isaiah 42:5-7; 49:6; 55:12-13; 65:17-25).

Walter Brueggemann (1978) argues in chapters 5 and 6 that Jesus Christ embodied the counterideological dynamic of sensitivity to suffering. Jesus enters the religious and political world of Israel and offers a scathing critique of the ritual system imposed by the religious leaders of Israel. This system marginalized many and caused much pain and suffering.

The New Testament reveals that Jesus often critiqued the way that the vision of the canonical metanarrative, which Tom Wright (1991) called 'creational covenantal monotheism' in his book, had become compromised and replaced by a nationalistic, sectarian narrative of 'covenantal monotheism.' This 'covenantal monotheism' resulted in a totalizing form of justice both toward Gentiles and the marginal in Israel.

Middleton and Walsh (1995:152) comment on the Cross event: "The very one who discerned the anti-ideological thrust of the canonical story, that Israel is God's servant to bring blessing to the nations, and who attempted to restore Israel to that vocation, is sacrificed on the alter of Roman and Jewish self-protective ideology ... The person of Jesus, and especially His

death on a cross thus becomes in the New Testament a symbol of the counterideological intent of the Biblical narrative and the paradigm or model of ethical human action, even in the face of massive injustice.”

These counterideological dimensions or antitotalizing factors do not guarantee innocence on the part of those who believe and adhere to the Biblical narrative. Rather these dimensions free the Christian story to subvert violent totalizing uses of the story by those who claim to live by it. Middleton and Walsh have shown that the Biblical story contains the resources to shatter totalizing readings, to convert and align the reader with God’s purpose of shalom, compassion and justice. Anthony Thiselton (1995) deals comprehensively with the issues of language and rhetoric, power, and manipulation, and self and society in his book *Interpreting God and the postmodern self*. He comments on the issue of transvaluation of questions: “Christian theology, then, cannot be said to be compatible with the transvaluation of questions about faith into questions about value or power as an ultimate principle” (1995:14). He admits transvaluation does take place when self interest holds sway.

The very serious charge of totalization made by the postmodernist must be answered by the non-totalizing life of Christians. The Christian is called to continue the ministry of Jesus Christ to a hurting and broken world. The Christian is to be a living epistle (2 Cor 3: 1-3), bringing the world a personal narrative based on *adoration* and *action*. This is worship and spirituality as a lifestyle, a praxis-orientated apologetic, an incarnational engaged compassion and approach, in a postmodern age.

### **2.3.2 Positive influence of postmodernism**

The secularizing and pluralistic developments of the modern age have affected the cultural and intellectual role of religion. In most respects the

influence of institutionalized religion has declined. Yet, the developments of secular individualism and the decline of traditional religious beliefs encouraged new forms of religious orientation and spiritual autonomy.

The collapse of traditional beliefs and meaning resulted in a new concept of reality. Tarnas (1991:404) comments on this: "The postmodern collapse of meaning has thus been countered by an emerging awareness of the individuals self-responsibility and capacity for creative innovation and self-transformation in his or her existential and spiritual response to life." He points out that on the intellectual level, religion is no longer understood as a psychologically or culturally conditioned and determined belief in non-existent realities.

In the postmodern era religion is recognized as a fundamental human activity in which every society and individual symbolically interprets and engages the nature of being. Princeton theologian Diogenes Allen deals with the question of how Christianity's claims to truth can be taken seriously when there are so many rival alternatives, and 'truth' itself has become a devalued notion. The postmodernist belief that all truth claims are equally valid, has certain advantages for the Christian apologist, who previously labored under the limitations of the restrictive Enlightenment worldview, chained by the illusions and pretensions of pure reason. Allen (1989:1) writes, "In a postmodern world, Christianity is intellectually relevant. It is relevant to the fundamental questions, *Why does the world exist? And, Why does it have its present order, rather than another?* It is relevant to the discussion of the foundations of morality and society, especially on the significance of human beings. The recognition that Christianity is relevant to our entire society, and relevant not only to the heart but to the mind as well, is a major change in our cultural situation."

In a postmodern world, Christianity is intellectually pertinent. The market place of ideas is wide open as the result of the demise of the absoluteness of human reason and science, and the supernatural is once again open to consideration. Veith (1994:20-23) likens the current situation to that of the pagans at the Tower of Babel (Gen 11:1-9). Postmodernism strikes at the same thing God did, namely: language. Without language, logic and science are meaningless: they have no application, and are now relative to cultural interpretation. Modern man has been fragmented and scattered. There is no center of discourse any longer.

This reminds Christians that God is the creator and they are His creation. Apart from God they know nothing and He must be at the beginning of their thinking. Veith observes, "Without a belief in God ... it would be difficult to avoid postmodernist conclusions. If there is no transcendent *logos*, then there can be no absolutes, no meaning apart from human culture, no way out of the prison house of language .... Postmodernism may represent the dead-end - the implosion, the deconstruction - of attempts to do without God" (1994:68).

Christian theology works from the premise that fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge (Proverbs 1:7), not the conclusion of one's investigation. Logic and science are merely tools to better understand God and His creation. Cornelius van Til (1974:256) says, "The gift of logical reason was given by God to man in order that he might order the revelation of God for himself." Logic and science are not the ultimate standards to legislate what is possible and do not take the place of God's Revelation.

So, what does postmodernism do for Christianity?

- \* Postmodernism reminds the Christian theologian that theology is not complete, but a developing and maturing science. There are many

approaches to theology, none of which can claim to be complete. It is the obligation of the theologian to explore all propositions in accordance with God's Word, to better understand the divine disclosure that God has given.

- \* Postmodernism reveals the futility of self-dependence and forces the Christian to depend on Christ for everything. Only in Christ we find design, significance, and purpose.
- \* Postmodernism points out to the Christian Church and individuals that we all have presuppositions, and that no one is impartial and unprejudiced. We all bring our tentative assumptions and conjectures to our experience; each fact about the world is theory-laden.

Allen (1989:6) argues that Christian theology has yet to become postmodern. By this one assumes he is talking about theology still being influenced by premodern fundamentalism and modern rationalists. The modernist theologian still refutes doctrines that he or she deems unscientific or irrational, and the premodern fundamentalist will not allow his or her doctrine to engage the world.

Postmodern Christian theology must analyze, explicate, and critique rationalism by substantiating the impossibility of reason apart from presupposing God; it rejects fideism and seclusion because it demonstrates that God is the basis for rationality. Is the theologian, the Church, and the Christian ready to meet the challenge? Allen (1989:8) says, "They have within their heritage immensely powerful ideas, not to mention a Living Lord."

The postmodern era and the ideology of postmodernism has led to the birth of many New Age religions and a new openness to spirituality. Charles Trueheart (1997), a journalist, wrote an article on the renewal of faith in Europe. He believes Europe is effervescent with new religiosity – be it imported from far, recovered from old, or renewed in a contemporary idiom. Religious pluralism is a new fact of life on a continent long dominated by two major Christian Churches. Many of the new generation are coming of age with little or no religion as a point of cultural and personal reference. Trueheart calls them ‘religious blank slates.’

This is a real opportunity, as one who knows nothing of religion tends to have no prejudices against it. In his article Trueheart quotes Grace Davies, a sociologist of religion at the University of Exeter in England, “Religion, like so many other things, has entered the world of options, lifestyles, and preferences.” Trueheart notes two growth sectors of European religiosity. The one is towards contemporary expression of faith in a secular vernacular. Churches are demystifying and deformatizing religion with rock music, and preaching that emphasizes social justice, environmental protection, and psychological counseling. The other growth area is the path directed at Christian roots, towards old and sacred forms of religious expression. These Churches seek a rediscovery of mystery and emotion.

Postmodernism has opened up a new era of spirituality and the Church of true believers must rise to the challenge or miss one of the greatest opportunities for spreading the Gospel. The Church must develop a new vocabulary and modes of communication.

Tomlinson (1995:142) poses the question why in an age of almost unparalleled interest in spirituality, the Church is still so ‘incredibly unpopular.’ He answers with an observation that the evangelical Gospel

tends to be too refined or systematized. By this he means that the Gospel is an 'A-Z of everything you need to know about life, death and eternity.' He suggests that whilst this 'package' is generally assumed to represent New Testament Christianity, it was never presented in this way, either by Jesus or the apostles.

Tomlinson argues that this pre-packaged Gospel is really a systematized stringing together of lots of little pieces (verses taken from all over the Scriptures) which, in their original context, were presented as they stood, without being fitted into a coherent scheme. He goes on to quote a recent survey that shows that 69 per cent of people cannot put a date on their conversion: it was a gradual process - a journey. He compares this with a survey done 25 years ago during which 69 per cent of the respondents said it was datable. Tomlinson sees this as part of the cultural shift that is taking place (1995:141- 143).

The implications for the Church's evangelization program is not to seek fast results, but to develop models of evangelization which will help people along the gradual pathway that seems to be the prevalent means of conversion today. Brueggemann (1993) believes that in the postmodern context the central Biblical themes can be interpreted and imagined creatively and concretely. His book offers a number of examples of exegetical interpretations relevant to a postmodern context.

"In a post-modern world people see in the Church just more of what they see and reject in the outside world; hierarchies, bureaucracies and power struggles." writes Tomlinson (1995:144). They obviously want nothing to do with the Church because they know that it will not bring them personal spiritual fulfillment. If one bears this in mind; it only serves to emphasize the value of worship and spirituality as defined and developed in this study.

The community of believers are to practice the type of spirituality reflected in Romans 12:1 (this sacrifice consists of Christians offering themselves in the whole of their concrete lives) and Hebrews 13:15-16 (gratitude to God will involve beneficence to others). The most effective method of evangelization is the very life they live. The practical love for one's neighbor is an irresistible means for winning over one's fellowmen to Christ. In practicing love, Christians do not seek immediate results, in fact they are to love regardless of the results. In a world of changing values, morals and ideals, the love that Christ has given Christians and that they, in turn, give to the world, can become a beacon of light drawing people to Jesus Christ.

As the Church faces these new challenges, she must redefine not her mission, but her methods. In order to be relevant yesterday, today and tomorrow, the focus of the Church should always reflect the application of Romans 12:1-2 and Hebrews 13:15-16. Worship and spirituality constitute a lifestyle of action and the most effective witness.

There is a danger in the application of this lifestyle. Peter H. van Ness (1992:241) writes that the Benedictine communities practiced 'compassionate disengagement.' By this he means that they strove to work on behalf of the people from whom they had removed themselves. "Their practices of worship and labor (including intellectual labor) and their fidelity to vows of obedience, poverty and celibacy - all had a common theological purpose which was the accumulation of merit." The Church today must be seen as an instrument of God and this would be best achieved if the individuals' motivation for worship were to be gratitude and not to gain merit.

Is there any future for the Church in a post-modern world? The answer is an emphatic yes. Wells (1988:304) writes: "Will modern people therefore

heed the Biblical, eschatological message? At a rational level they may not, but powerful psychological forces flow in the opposite direction. The modern experience, shaped by a secularity that powerfully shifts our attention to the future, to a vision of humanity poised on the brink of a terrifying abyss, means that few of our contemporaries can ignore the future. And Biblical faith, above all else, wants to consider it."

In the article *Mission as action in hope*, Amaladoss (1995:317) discusses mission as action. He writes: "As Christians we visualize a world where there will be a 'new heaven and a new earth' (Rev 21:1), because we believe that God is active in the process of transforming this world. That is the hope that sustains us and makes us ever more creative to bring out what is best in human beings." He defines the mission of Christians as living the faith experience in Jesus Christ, so that the Christian may be credible, and this credibility can amount to evangelization.

In this new era there is no place for escapist theology. The environment outside the Church is hostile and apathetic, yet that is where we practice and live our Christian life. The message of hope is more than ever relevant for a world staring into the depths of non-existence.

## **2.4 Summary**

Postmodernism is anti-worldview as it denies the existence of any universal truths or standards. It begins with a loss of faith in the dreams of modernism. Postmodernists deconstruct metanarratives (worldviews) so that no one particular belief is more true or believable than another.

Reality is in some sense constructed by the mind, not simply perceived by it. Many constructions are possible and none are sovereign. This is because humans are not unbiased observers and all human understanding

is interpretation and no interpretation is final. No empirical fact is not theory loaded, and there is no logical argument or formal principle that is a priori certain. When one is prepared to concede this, then one might be less dogmatic on many issues.

Postmodernism presupposes a metanarrative of its own which is no less subject to deconstruction. Postmodernism is a maelstrom of unresolved diversity and dogmatic relativism. It cannot critique an individual or a society's ethics or belief system (unless it is an absolute claim). The postmodern relativistic position does not always follow logic. Nor does it allow for any definitive answers to the four inescapable questions of life that deal with origin, morality, meaning and destiny.

Positively, postmodernism reminds the Christian theologian that theology is a developing and maturing science. There are many approaches to theology. Individuals all have presuppositions and conjectures, as no one is impartial and unprejudiced. Postmodernism reveals the futility of self-dependence and forces the Christian to depend on Christ for understanding design, significance, and purpose.

Postmodernism is effervescent with new religiosity, a hunger for the experience of spirituality. The very serious charge of totalization made by the postmodernist must be answered by the non-totalizing life of Christians. The Christian is called to continue the ministry of Jesus Christ to a hurting and broken world. The Christian is to be a living epistle (2 Cor 3: 1-3), bringing the world a personal narrative-based on action. This is worship and spirituality as a lifestyle, a praxis-orientated apologetic, an incarnational engaged compassion in a postmodern age. In the next two chapters this perspective will be elaborated on by delineating what I call the incarnational

engaged approach of compassion to Christianity and life in a postmodern age.

## CHAPTER 3

### CULTURE AND THE CHRISTIAN MESSAGE

Cultures are ever changing, bringing about changes in worldviews. The Church has often been slow to appreciate the nature of the changes that have occurred. For effective and relevant communication of the Gospel, the Church needs to understand the content of the message, and then relate it to the contemporary situation. Every Christian community must live and express the life of the Gospel within its cultural context. Postmodernism is fast becoming the dominant cultural ideology for Christianity (if it is not the dominant ideology).

The problem facing Christianity is how to link up with and within cultures. Christianity must beware of cultural imperialism and ethnocentrism. The Church needs to recognise cultural diversity, the cultural mosaic of protocols and heritage as God's bequest to humanity. This chapter will attempt to examine the formation and function of a worldview, and then briefly consider how Jesus approached culture. Finally I will consider how Christianity should approach cultures if its message is to be trans-cultural.

This is why Veith (1994) believes that the Church always had to confront its culture and to exist in tension with the world. The danger of not doing this is "... to risk irrelevance; to accept the culture uncritically is to risk syncretism and unfaithfulness. Every age has had its eager-to-please liberal theologians who have tried to reinterpret Christianity according to the latest intellectual and cultural fashion" (1994:xii).

There are two main processes by which a culture changes: innovation (what has been generated from within the society) and diffusion (borrowing or adopting elements from another society) (Burnett 1992:122). Today,

there is a growing interaction between societies that results in an increase in social stress. And there certainly has been tremendous growth in technology and knowledge. Alan Tippet (1987:157-182) speaks of four basic patterns of change that may occur within a society as a result of stress. First there is demoralization that results in the domination of one culture over another culture. Then there is conversion - a cultural conversion or acculturation. This learning of a new culture is also called assimilation. Thirdly, there is syncretism, the mixing of ideas, new and old expressing themselves in an indigenous system of belief. New ideas are often stated in terms of old paradigms. And finally there is revitalization. After a society has been demoralized by one dominant culture there is an opportunity for an appropriate worldview to be revitalized in religious terms.

It is important to understand how a worldview is acquired in order for another worldview to impact on it. A worldview consists of the shared framework of ideas held by a particular society concerning how they perceive the world. Everyday experiences are fitted into this framework in order to give a totality of meaning and comprehension for the individual. Every culture has a system of order shared by all members of that society. Sire (1976:17) describes a worldview as a set of presuppositions (or assumptions) which we hold (consciously or subconsciously) about the basic make-up of our world.

Everyone has a worldview because we all have ways of relating to our reality. Every society has ideas or values that control and direct behavior. The ideas and behavior seem logical to the people of a particular culture. The ideas of a person's worldview give comprehension and sense. The worldview attempts to show order and predictability within everyday experiences. Any new ideas are required to fit into the worldview held or are discarded. For most people, a worldview is acquired by unconscious

learning in early life as they acquire the culture. This is often called enculturation.

Enculturation leads us to assume the ideas and ways we have are the best and most logical. The consequence of enculturation is that people are reluctant to change their worldview unless it proves totally inadequate to help them cope with their current situation.

Today we are experiencing the greatest contact and interaction between societies that have ever occurred. This is leading to drastic changes in experiences that lead people to try and create new meanings that will help them cope with change.

It is imperative that Christians who desire to practice true spirituality, understand worldviews. Criticism or incredulity towards a worldview will lose the trust and confidence of people. This does not mean one must accept or agree with their perspective, rather it requires appreciation and understanding of the others perspective of reality.

### **3.1 Formation and functions of a worldview<sup>1</sup>**

A worldview is forged and influenced in two ways. Through the answers to questions relating to origin, meaning and purpose, morality, and destiny. Who am I? How did life come about? Why is the world in a mess? What does the future hold? Are but a few of the many existential questions asked. The answers to the questions fuse together and form a worldview. Thus a worldview is a comprehensive system, the conclusion, inference, and summation, as a result of the answers to the questions asked. A worldview can also be the starting point from which the questions relating to origin, meaning and purpose, morality, and destiny are answered. Who am I? How did life come about? Why is the world in a mess? What does the future hold? - are all answered but the answers are dependent on

viewpoint and presuppositions (one's eyeglasses). You will give a particular answer based on your worldview.

There are a number of major functions that a worldview (Kraft 1979:54-56). The following are relevant to this study. A worldview **explains** why the world came to be as it is, and how it continues. It answers the basic questions of life. A worldview will **evaluate**, judge and validate different actions and institutions. During times of crisis, a worldview provides **psychological reinforcement**. This is something that postmodernism fails to do. A worldview must function as an **integrator**. It provides a comprehensive, uniform and meaningful explanation of reality. A worldview must be **flexible and adapt** to new experiences and information that continually come to a society so that it provides meaningful answers. Having considered the formation and function of a worldview I need to consider a methodology as to how Christianity should relate to cultures.

### 3.2 Contextualization and ethnocentrism

Burnett (1992:36) writes: "He who knows but one worldview knows no worldview." Charles Kraft's book *Christianity in culture* (1979) is possibly one of the finest for the Christian to study. He helps us avoid the idolatry of absolutizing our human forms of theology in cross-cultural communication.

The contextualization of theology is a task of high potential risk and it would be wise to recognize that the New Testament never required a single, uniform culture among Christians. The New Testament only requires lifestyles congruent with the nature and meaning of Christ within all cultures containing Christians.

David Fraser and Tony Campolo (1992:191-212) discuss God and culture in their book *Sociology through the eyes of faith*. They point out that the

people of God are pilgrims in every cultural group. No particular social or cultural context compromises the Kingdom of God. The political and economical order in which Christians live is not God's order in any direct sense. Nevertheless, the Christian is called to live out the Gospel within the culture and society they live.

The Christian is to contextualize the Gospel, incarnate it within all peoples and all cultures. To contextualize is to transfer and translate an understanding or cultural trait to a new context. We are to take the meanings and messages of Scripture and transfer them to social and cultural contexts with very different symbolic universes than those found in the Bible. This is successfully done when, in the new context, the understandings and traits acquire meanings and functions roughly similar to those they had in their original context.

The major danger of contextualization is when one accommodates the Gospel to the elements of the culture. Accommodation by compromise results in distortions of the meanings of the Gospel. By reinforcing cultural patterns the Gospel becomes transformed. Fraser and Campolo (1992:202) write: "God's people are to dwell within both the plausibility structures and symbolic universe of their culture and of the Christian faith of tradition."

Eddie Gibbs (1990:70-100) believes all people are to a great extent products of their culture. This means we need to be wary of ethnocentrism (viewing other people's ways of life in terms of our own cultural glasses). He warns: "...the fact that God's personal self-disclosure in the Bible was given in terms of the hearers' own culture inevitably means that misunderstandings may arise and points be missed when read by people of

another culture who are unfamiliar with the cultural milieu of the Bible” (1990:80-81).

### **3.3 Building bridges**

The Gospel must be linked to broader cultures. To do this, a link or bridge is required between the Gospel and human experience. The task of apologetics is to reveal how the Christian faith is able to make sense of human experiences. The bridge must be built in such a manner that individuals can cross from unbelief to faith. In a postmodern world the truth-claims of Christianity are often perceived as a kind of intellectual fascism. The challenge is to preach the Gospel faithfully, without any culturally induced misrepresentations or misunderstandings.

This is what Kantzer and Henry (1990:522) are arguing for. They say: “We are certainly not interested in shaping evangelical Christianity and certainly not Biblical Christianity, into a form that will prove palatable to the sinful hearts and minds of all humans. We are not trying to remove the offense of the cross. That offence is an inherent part of Biblical and evangelical identity. It would be an irresponsible denial of our deepest faith to remove it. Yet we are deeply concerned also to remove false obstacles to the Gospel. We do not want anyone to reject a perversion or misunderstanding of the Gospel.”

David Wells (in Johnston 1985:177) says: “Scripture, at its *terminus a quo*, needs to be de-contextualized in order to grasp its transcultural content, and it needs to be re-contextualized in order that its content may be meshed with the cognitive assumptions and social patterns of our own time.”

Gibbs (1990:84-91) provides four approaches in the communication process. He begins by noting that in the communication process the one who speaks and the one who hears each formulate their ideas within their own frame of reference. As noted previously, one's frame of reference is constructed largely through cultural influences.

**i. Isolation**

The speakers make no attempt to relate their message to the listener's frame of reference. The message is expressed within the speaker's own frame of reference and in terms of their own perceptions. The message does not make contact with the felt needs of the audience.

**ii. Extraction**

The speaker educates the audience in his/her (the speaker's) terminology and concepts. The listeners cannot relate their new knowledge to their life situation; nor can they communicate it to others.

**iii. Identification**

The speaker will examine the hearer's frame of reference, identifying areas of common ground between them.

**iv. Reciprocation**

Both the speaker and listener recognize their differences, and are open to be influenced by each other.

Christians need not fear reciprocation if they are well grounded in their faith. Through reciprocation a cross-cultural pollination of ideas takes place,

beliefs and practices are challenged, affirmed, enriched or modified. It plays a major role in preventing cultural imperialism - where one's culture and Christian beliefs is exported as the Christian culture. This was often the missiology of missionaries and many Christians are still guilty of this kind of application. God works through cultures, and the Church is not a culture but a channel in the communication of the Gospel. Thus, the Church should always determine to build a bridge between its belief system and faith, and the culture that it operates in. This is a critical function and I will explore how this is to be achieved.

Gibbs (1990:87) warns that often the communicator can become a blockage to communication. "The communicator who has not interacted with the material and is merely passing on what he or she has read or been told functions as a tertiary source." He explains that in the ideal communication event the result is that the receptors' understanding corresponds exactly with the intention of the communicator. This is seldom achieved and in most instances the communicator must settle for an approximation within acceptable limits.

Kraft (1979:148) comments on this issue: "... what is understood is at least as dependent on how the receptor perceives the message as on how the communicator presents it." Any message to be transmitted should be encoded by the communicator, and then it can be decoded or translated by the receptor. This is a complex procedure and the cultural gap will determine the success of the process. Gibbs quotes the phenomena described by Abercrombie called *paralinguistic phenomena* (1990:87). Simply stated this warns people that the ways in which they say things convey as much as what they say. This means tone of voice, attitude and actions all convey a message. It also reinforces the argument for a praxis-

orientated approach through incarnational engaged lives. Christians are to live the Word.

### **3.4 The impact of the Gospel on postmodern culture**

Raines (1961:14,15,17) has a penetrating analysis as to why the contemporary Church has lost its relevancy. He comments: "The Church has accommodated herself to the cultural climate. The Church is no longer changing culture, but is being changed by culture ... (The Church) is usually content to grow in physical stature and in favor with its immediate environment ..." "The Church becomes the mouthpiece of the people instead of the voice of God. The Church, that is meant to be at tension with the customs and traditions of every culture, changes her protective coloring like a chameleon to suit the environment she is in ..." "And the judgement is clear; the world pays little attention to the Church ... The world believes it has tamed and domesticated the Church and can keep her busily occupied in cultivating her own garden. The world has pulled the teeth of the Church and no longer listens to her enfeebled message."

Christianity impacts on cultures in general (Gibbs 1990:95-99). There are a number of expected and desired results of the impact of the Christian.

#### **i. The Gospel censures culture**

Rather than being enculturated, the Gospel will bring under judgement those elements of culture that oppose the values of the Gospel. (Here I am talking of gross immoral behaviour such as murder, rape, abuse etc.) This is done by critical contextualization - the avoidance of cultural imperialism. The Biblical worldview addresses most of the contemporary issues of life. However,

positive aspects of postmodernism are to be affirmed or enriched by the Gospel.

**ii. The Gospel transforms culture**

This transformation must heed the warning relating to cultural imperialism mentioned earlier. The transformation here relates to bringing people into relationship with God and each other through the application of the command to love your neighbour. It is not the imposition of a culture on a culture. Tippet (1970:34) writes: "If our missionary methods extract converts from their society and leaves them as social isolates or misfits, there is something wrong with our missioning." Cultural integrity is part and parcel of human identity, and any system of thought or behavior that denies cultural integrity is dehumanizing.

Any extractionist approach in evangelism is to be strongly opposed (Wagner 1979:97). Whilst the Christian is not of this world, he or she is to remain in it and become the means for God to channel His blessing to the world in its diverse makeup.

**iii. The Gospel does not compel a Christian to cultural homogeneity**

The preservation of cultural diversity honors God, respects humanity, enriches life, and ultimately will promote evangelism. Imposing a culture on people is a denial of the Creator. The Church must be rooted in the soil of its local culture and recognize the kaleidoscope of Gods creation.

The Church must learn the lessons from its experiences in history and especially from the Enlightenment and modern periods.

**iv. The Gospel offers reconciliation**

The Gospel can reconcile people groups that were previously antagonistic to one another. This unity is not uniformity but an abolition of animosity, enmity, and inequity. Through listening to and feeling the pains, aspirations, longings, and cries of a society, the Christian can channel healing and reconciliation.

**v. The Gospel promotes collective support and enhancement**

The super-cultural dimension of the Gospel must be demonstrated in a postmodern world. Active steps should be taken by the Churches to expand their circle of fellowship. Relationships that express the reality of Christian worship and spirituality, as defined earlier in this study, must be forged. The Church must express publicly the unity and diversity of the body of Christ.

Whilst the Gospel can do the above it is imperative that Christians understand that Christian faith never exists in purity but always in conjunction with very human and imperfect Christians. As with every religious society, the Church is exposed to serious perils by the mere fact of existing in the world. Stephen Neil (1984:257-260) highlights three dangers.

- i. Experience becomes frozen in an institution. A hierarchy develops and the Church acquires property and wealth. Then often the Church begins to claim privilege against other societies. All such claims will be immediately rejected by the postmodernist and there will be no opportunity to present the Gospel.
- ii. The life of the Church tends to become determined by convention and conformity. The ordinances of the faith take on a social rather

than religious character, and lose their significance. Postmodernism has seen a surge in the interest in spirituality and the appeal of Christianity will falter if Church life loses its mystical, experiential aspects.

- iii. The Christian faith becomes identified with a certain culture. Today, Christianity is often regarded as an ingredient of Western Culture. Postmodern Christianity needs to operate above but through culture. The worship and spirituality of the Christian as a lifestyle needs to reflect the Biblical worldview and not ethnocentrism.

These dangerous tendencies can be traced in all religions. Almost every new Christian group starts with the idea that it will not become a denomination or institution. It will be based on the example of the early Church. It will not compromise in any fashion. The truth is that religion will always be contaminated to some extent by cultural development. Religion and culture cannot and should not be separated. Special aspects of the Kingdom of God are found in different cultures. As different societies bring their history to the Scriptures they discover characteristics of the Gospel that other cultural groups can benefit from. A faith that tries to live in a world of its own, not relating to humanity's life in society, will be characterless, anaemic, and fail.

The only solution to ensure contamination does not destroy or inhibit faith is to live in a state of perpetual self-evaluation and criticism. Radical questions must always be directed as to the relevance and adequacy of old forms of organization and ministry to contemporary situations. The Church must never be separated from its traditions but neither should it be bound by traditions. No Christian can accept the benefits of the Gospel and walk away from the demands of the Gospel.

### 3.5 Summary

In this new era of postmodernism the Church needs to distinguish between the essentials of the Gospel and the fortuitous accretions that are not central to the issues of faith in Christ. Then, as the Church demonstrates the Gospel, as it lives out the Gospel, the power of the Gospel will be manifested and people will be saved. Cultures will be the medium through which Jesus Christ will work. Through identification and reciprocation, the Biblical worldview can challenge, modify, affirm, and enrich the postmodern worldview. The Gospel recognizes the cultural mosaic of customs and traditions as God's gift to humanity. The Christian becomes enriched when he or she encounters the full spectrum of the Creator's handiwork.

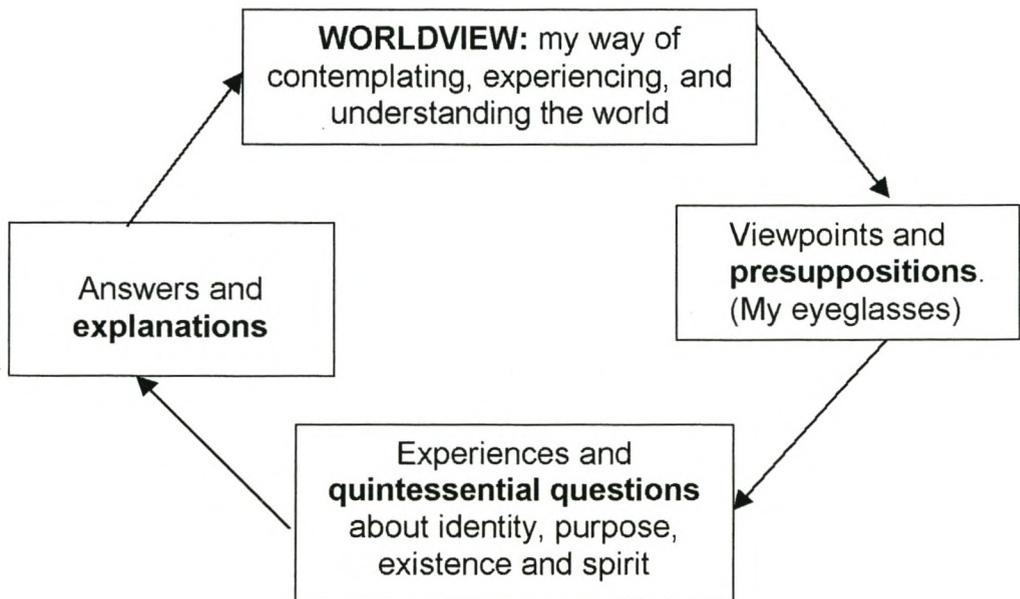
The postmodern society can no longer define society, family, morals or ethics. It struggles to argue against abortion, free sex, racial exclusivity or injustice. Now, more than at any other time in the history of the Church, the Church has a radical role to play in society. Secular society views the Church with mistrust, suspicion, and often with disgust. The challenge is to encode the Gospel and the Biblical worldview in a praxis-orientated apologetic. The worship and spirituality of Christians needs to live out the message of the cross; a Gospel of love that does not demand rights, but rather models servanthood. The postmodern society will not consider the Christian's truth claims unless the Christian's moral and ethical life backs them up.

The Christian faith needs to continuously evaluate its worship and spirituality. It must be determined to discover how the world perceives its worship, its message, and its life. How does the Church's ecclesiastical tradition and liturgy facilitate or hinder its communication attempts? In a postmodern world Christianity need to re-evaluate its apologetics and discover new channels to communicate; access them and speak

authentically through them. By diffusion (the borrowing or adapting elements) of the postmodern ideology and restating new ideas in terms of old paradigms, the Christian can practice a contemporary faith yet uphold the Biblical teaching on worship and spirituality.

**Endnotes**

**1. The formation and crystallisation of worldviews**



## CHAPTER 4

### TOWARDS A POSTMODERN ETHIC AND MORALITY

Through a process of dialogue with the first three chapters this chapter will focus on developing an understanding of what postmodern ethics is all about and propose the beginnings of a practical theological theory of incarnational engaged compassion as a foundation for postmodern Christian morality. I will investigate how postmodernism defines and responds to ethical issues before applying useful principles to propose the beginnings of a Christian riposte – a postmodern Christian ethical system of incarnational engaged compassion. There will be a brief description of ethical theories and the Bible before evaluating the dilemmas of the Christian practicing prostitute and the homosexual respectively. The case study relating to a prostitute and homosexuality will provide an opportunity to apply this theory. The parable of the Prodigal son provides useful principles to guide Christian morality in general. These principles will be applied to the specific problem of the Christian practicing prostitute. The context of this parable is Jesus' legitimacy as a teacher being questioned because Jesus was so close to sinners. Jesus tells 3 parables (of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son) to reveal that God is a God of compassion who joyously welcomes repentant sinners home. If God loves and forgives sinners, then so should those who have received so much and have faith in God. If God is compassionate then so should those who love God and have experienced compassion, be compassionate to others. The heart of Jesus teaching is that the Church is to become like the Father. The radical quality and demands of Jesus' teaching seem impossible for us to meet unless heard as part of the call to become true sons and daughters of the Father.

My conclusion will proffer my belief that often we are not so much faced with moral issues but rather an understanding of what the Scriptures teach; what it means to be a Christian and how we are to live the Christian faith in a postmodern world.

Today, as has been noted earlier in this study, there is a constant change of reality and knowledge, a stress on the priority of concrete experience over fixed abstract principles, and a conviction that no single a priori thought system should govern belief or investigation, as key principles. This calls into question traditional notions of ethics, truth, structure and reality. The center of discourse appears to be dislocated from a divine revealed morality to the edges of human preference and subjectivity. People are increasingly attributing thinking and actions to their cultural background and their worldview. Universally applicable ethics and truth are discredited notions because postmodernism is not a set of ethical rules, dogma or truth claims.

#### **4.1 Insights of postmodern ethics**

At this stage of this study it is time to apply some of the insights and understanding gleaned. McGrath (1996:184) defines postmodernism as follows: "Postmodernism is generally taken to be something of a cultural sensibility without absolutes, fixed certainties or foundations, which takes delight in pluralism and divergence, and which aims to think through the radical 'situatedness' of all human thought." This 'radical situatedness of all human thought' is an important insight as it could be argued that idiosyncratic cultural-linguistic forms of life ultimately generate all human thought.

Postmodernists deconstruct metanarratives (worldviews) so that no one particular belief is more true or believable than another is. Reality eludes all attempts at conformity so there can never be any absolute foundation. All

truth is a social construct, pragmatically justified. Reality is constructed by the mind and not simply perceived by it. If reality is a fluid, unfolding process then the quest for ethics and knowledge is endlessly self-revising, continually affected and molded by one's actions and beliefs.

A Christian postmodern ethical system will need to reflect a critique of modernism's trust in the supremacy of reason in formulating a unified ethical system for living. Degenaar says that rather than focusing on uniformity, continuity and homogeneity, postmodernity is focused on fragmentation, discontinuity, and heterogeneity (1993:52). All human understanding is interpretation and no interpretation is final. Tarnas (1991:396) writes: "There is no empirical fact that is not already theory laden, and there is no logical argument or formal principle that is a priori certain." He continues by pointing out that the postmodernist has a more sympathetic attitude towards repressed or unorthodox perspectives and a more self-critical view of currently established ones. I believe this is due to the recognition of the 'radical situatedness of all human thought.'

Tarnas (1991:397) argues that the nature of truth and reality in science, philosophy, religion or art is radically ambiguous. The reason for this is because signs and symbols of uncertain provenance mediate human knowledge, constituted by historically and culturally variable predispositions, and influenced by often-unconscious human interests. This means the subject can never presume to transcend the manifold predispositions of his or her subjectivity.

The postmodernist thesis is that idiosyncratic cultural-linguistic forms of life ultimately generate all human thought (Tarnas 1991:395-402). Thus, ethics is nothing more than the historically contingent product of linguistic and social practices of particular local communities of interpreters, with no assured "ever-closer" relation to an independent ahistorical reality. Any

interpretation of a circumstance or text cannot claim ultimate authority because of the hidden incongruity and contradictions that undermine and impair its unity and coherence. The result of this is that all meaning is ultimately 'up in the air' and undeterminable. There is no such thing as 'true' meaning. If reality is multiple, local, and ephemeral, then there can be no universal worldview and no universal ethical system. No metanarrative means no absolute points of reference and as Cilliers (1998) argues for in his book on complexity and postmodernism, there is no universal central control as the world is contingent and controlled by the complex interaction among different groupings (cultures, institutions, etc.).

Degenaar (1993:53) warns of the danger of not recognizing the tension between culture in the plural (particularistic view) and culture in the single (universalistic view). The notion of culture can be the "... form of life of an ethnic community and the meaning of culture as the general process of spiritual development of humanity." There is a paradox that exists between these two notions and it has very important implications for postmodern ethics. If one only sees humanity as consisting of distinct cultural groupings the one develops an "... exclusivist notion of 'cultures bounded as wholes' and contact between cultures becomes difficult if not impossible." The alternative notion of operating with a notion of culture in a universalistic sense leads to the dismissal of the variety of cultural diversity.

Cilliers (1998:136-137) discusses the approaches of Habermas and Lyotard on the issue of consensus. Habermas's approach consists of 'dialogue of argumentation' and rests on two assumptions: in the first place, it assumes that 'it is possible for all speakers to come to agreement on which rule or metaprescriptions are universally valid for all language games; and in the second place, it assumes 'that the goal of dialogue is consensus'. Cilliers quotes Lyotard as finding neither of these assumptions acceptable,

primarily because they deny the complexity of postmodern society. Lyotard's emphasis is on the multiplicity of heterogeneous discourses and the role of paralogy, and he insists on the value of difference.

Concurrence can be achieved, but only as a local phenomenon limited in both time and space. Consensus as a goal would attempt to fix the social system into a specific state. So how are we to work at consensus? Cilliers believes that an outline for a practical theory of justice (and thus for ethics) that can best be understood as follows: "It becomes the responsibility of every player in any discursive practice to know the rules of the language game involved. These rules are local, i.e. 'limited in time and space'. In following such rules, one has to assume responsibility both for the rules themselves and for the effects of that specific practice. This responsibility cannot be shifted to any universally guiding principles or institutions whether they be the State, the Church or the Club." (1998:137).

#### **4.2 Postmodern moral behavior**

The crucial issue at hand now is how to determine what moral behavior is. The Enlightenment project attempted through people like Kant to establish a universal set of rules that would be able to regulate our behavior in every situation. The problem of arguing that human beings are constituted by their ethical behavior is succinctly highlighted by Cilliers (1998:137-138): "Following a universal set of rules (assuming such rules exist) does not involve decision or dilemma, it merely asks for calculation. Given the circumstances, what do the rules decree my behavior should be? Can this be called 'ethical'? What kind of human being would act like this? Clearly some kind of automaton, itself constituted by rational, rule based principles." In response to those who claim that postmodernism results in relativism with an 'anything goes' approach one can respond that a

postmodern ethic does not free us to do as we like but rather allows us to choose to act ethically.

Bauman (1997:201) says that ethical discourse is not institutionally pre-empted and hence I believe its performance, guidance, and denouement must be an intrinsic and natural part of any theoretical archetype of postmodern ethics. It is important to realize that the modern ethicist endeavored to determine universal ethical principles (such as Kant's categorical imperative). One could argue that the whole process failed as the universal ethical principles never provided criteria for right ethical behavior in existential practical circumstances experienced daily by people and secondly, people become the 'automatons' that Cilliers speaks of.

Bauman is of the opinion that modernity contributed little, if anything, to the enrichment of our understanding of moral problems. He provides a useful insight into the dilemma of postmodern ethics that I will summarize (1997:201-203). Bauman notes that the moral and ethical issues that arise in postmodernism are not all new. The ethics of modernity substituted legal for moral regulation and the exemption of a wide and growing sector of human actions from moral evaluation. The postmodern ethical dilemma arises essentially from two crucial peculiarities of the postmodern condition: pluralism of authority, and the centrality of choice.

Pluralism of authority results in the absence of a single universal source of authority. This firstly results in the removal of binding norms each agency must obey. Because general universal rules do not exist people are guided by their own purposes. Rules emerge mostly from negotiation and competition. Modernism tended to have moral responsibility that was negated, nullified or transferred away as long as the agencies remained subordinated to a unified, monopolistic legislating authority. Recognition of the pluralism of authorities results in people assuming responsibilities for

the consequences of their actions. Purposes can no longer be substantiated monologically (principles wide enough to command authority of the sort that belongs solely to ethical values must be dialogued).

The augmented autonomy of the agent has similarly a twofold ethical consequence. The median moves from heteronomous control to self-determination, and I think Bauman is saying that autonomy becomes the defining characteristic of postmodern agents - self-monitoring, self-reflection and self-evaluation become principal activities of the agents. The individual seeks ethical principles that can serve self-interest without undermining one's enhanced autonomy.

Bauman now highlights a serious problem for postmodern ethics. He writes: "... with the autonomy of all and any agents accepted as a principle and institutionalized in the life-process composed of an unending series of choices, the limits of the agent whose autonomy is to be observed and preserved turn into a most closely guarded and hotly contested frontier. Along this borderline new issues arise which can be settled only through an ethical debate" (1997:203). Issues such as what are the standards by which success or failure is to be judged; people choosing grotesque, bizarre or eccentric lifestyles; people indulging and engaging in substance abuse, in idiosyncratic sexual activities; all become problematic ethical issues. How far are the autonomous powers of the agent to extend and at what point is their limit to be drawn.

Postmodern ethics realises that people are constantly faced with moral issues and forced to choose between often equally well grounded/founded options. This choice is based on the assumption of responsibility of the one choosing, and for this reason bears the character of a moral act. Postmodern ethics has all people becoming moral subjects. In postmodern

ethics the performance of all existential life-functions now demands that the agent be a morally competent subject.

Let me summarize: Postmodern ethics recognizes paradox in that the responsibility for ethical decisions lies with the individual who has no universal means to justify the moral decision made. Humans are morally ambivalent and thus a non-ambivalent morality is impossible. Moral conduct can never be guaranteed as human beings are imperfect beings living in an imperfect world. Morality is ambivalent with multiple interpretations. There are no metanarratives, no absolute points of reference for ethical decision making in a complex and contingent world. Thus, morality is un-universalisable. Morality is the autonomous self-responsibility for ethical decisions and not an external heteronomous ethical code system.

#### **4.3 Towards a postmodern Christian ethic**

For postmodern thinkers, reality is mediated by worldviews. Rorty (in Baynes *et al* 1987:60) contends that there are no features of the world that could officiate or function as independently existing norms or criteria for truth to which we could appeal. Any standard we come up with is itself a human fabrication and there is no standard of rationality that is not an appeal to such a criterion, no rigorous dialectic that is not obedient to our own beliefs.

What Rorty is saying is simply understood if it is seen as a hermeneutical circle being driven towards radical perspectivalism. Rorty is not saying each person is trapped in his or her own private reality (human beings live in complex communities and can engage in conversation with one another) but that rationality ceases to be a matter of universal truth. Thus the naïve self-assured realism of modernity is impossible to the postmodern mind

because reality is either mediated to us by our own perspective or is simply and purely a human construct.

The postmodern mind views all metanarratives as large-scale interpretations of the whole of history with universal applications and this is a vain attempt to universalize history. No metanarrative is large enough to include the experiences and realities of all people and the only purpose of the metanarrative is to legitimize the power structures that marginalize these experiences. Thus the metanarrative of redemption history in Jesus Christ and the ethical system based on it is rejected.

The Church must respond by first understanding the attack and then preparing the apologetic. Christianity is rooted in metanarrative that make universal claims. The Bible is a story that reveals a worldview. But is the metanarrative of the Gospel violent and totalizing? This question was answered in Chapter 2 with an acknowledgement that the Biblical story has often been used ideologically to oppress and exclude those regarded as heretics or infidels. Often Scripture has been used to legitimize prejudices (e.g. apartheid, the crusades, the inquisition) and perpetuate violence against people. A so called Christian moral and ethical system, based on the claim that this is what the Scriptures teach, has been forced on people to various degrees throughout the history of the Church. Thus, it is not difficult to understand the postmodern attitude to the Christian metanarrative. A dogmatic interpretation and forced application of a Christian ethical system on people; that does not recognize the hermeneutical problems of interpretation that postmodernism so wisely highlights, will most assuredly lead to violent totalizing. So how do we deal with this problem?

Christians may believe that the Bible is God's Word, infallible and inerrant in all that it reveals and teaches. They may believe that Scripture is absolute

truth and the guiding principle for all of life. The problem arises when one has to interpret Scripture. It is here that the postmodern ideology (if one can call it an ideology) has much to teach Christians. Let me briefly highlight some important considerations.

- The interpretation of Scripture is not done in a vacuum. We all have tradition, culture, presuppositions, and premises that influence our understanding of God's truth.
- All interpreters are interpreting the partial revelation (scripture does not reveal all there is to know of God, only what God chooses to reveal. Nor does scripture record all God's activities relating to His creation.)
- Revelation was given in a specific social/historical context that requires interpretation. The meanings of word are context related in terms of purpose and function.
- This revelation is given by an infinite God; and the interpreter has a conditioned finite mind.
- Subjective existential experience normally precedes any substantive 'objective' propositional truth beliefs when a person first 'believes' and becomes a Christian. In other words 'believing' is not based on objective truth.
- When a person becomes a Christian, the family background, the Church and denomination he/she is in (amongst many other influences), will influence his/her understanding of scripture, and consequently his/her beliefs and practices. This reveals the 'conditioning' that we all experience - consciously or unconsciously.

Thus, the interpreter must recognise that he/she is fallible and sinful. If this were the Christian's starting point, if they recognised this postmodern 'truth'

of the 'radical situatedness of human thought' they would be more humble in what they say or do. Any student of history will know that doctrinally the Church has never been 100% in agreement at any stage. Pelagius and Augustine – Calvin and Arminius disagree on predestination, salvation etc.; eschatologically there are at least four perspectives; disagreement runs from baptism to speaking in tongues and the charismatic gifts; the Church has been in conflict over doctrine all its existence. All adherents to a doctrinal perspective based their belief on their interpretation of scripture. Why this confusion? Not because the Scripture's teaching is unclear but because of the inherent weakness of the interpreter and the social/psychological reality of the idiosyncratic cultural linguistic nature of life. Does this mean truth can never be known? No! I believe we need to believe in the concept of truth. The complexity of this problem is partially solved as one reflects on the six considerations mentioned earlier. When we believe in a truth we need a humble recognition of who we are and who God is and that we can have many opinions that we hold to but a few convictions that hold us. I also need to recognise *difference* as a value to be highly respected. (This last point is a strong belief of postmodern ideology.)

I noted in Chapter 2 the radical sensitivity to suffering which permeates the Bible from the exodus to the cross; the rooting of the story in God's overarching creational intent that Israel was to be a community that refused to cause oppression but rather have compassion towards the marginal. Israel was to be no less than the bearer of a universal, cosmic narrative, a drama of God's intent to mend the world, to bring justice and healing to all nations and to the non-human realm.

Jesus enters the religious and political world of Israel and offers a scathing critique of the ritual system imposed by the religious leaders of Israel. This

system marginalized many and caused much pain and suffering. I would argue that the example provided by Jesus Christ, His counter ideological intent, could provide a postmodern model of ethical human action. The *Laws of Scripture* was summed up by the apostle Paul as "*Love your neighbor.*" And it is from this ethical principle that all Christian ethics should be based.

#### **4.4 A postmodern Christian approach to morality**

Postmodernism can open the minds of Christians to a number of issues that are important when one considers a Christian ethical system.

Postmodernism reminds the Christian theologian that theology is not complete, but a developing and maturing science. There are many approaches to ethics, none of which can claim to be complete. It is the obligation of the Christian and theologian to explore all propositions in accordance with Gods Word, to better understand the divine disclosure that God has given. Postmodernism reveals the futility of self-dependence and forces the Christian to depend on God and others for everything. Postmodernism points out to the Christian Church and individuals that we all have presuppositions, and that no one is impartial and unprejudiced. We all bring our tentative assumptions and conjectures to our experience; each fact about the world is theory-laden. Postmodern theological ethics recognizes paradox in that the responsibility for ethical decisions lies with the individual. Moral conduct can never be guaranteed as human beings are imperfect beings living in an imperfect world. Morality is ambivalent with multiple interpretations.

Postmodernism reminds the Christian that ethics (and theology) is a developing and seasoning science. There are many approaches to theology. Individuals all have presuppositions and conjectures, as no one

is impartial and unprejudiced. Postmodernism reveals the futility of self-dependence, and dogmatic arrogance.

#### 4.5 Ethical theories and the Bible

There are a number of ethical systems revealed in Scripture. I shall briefly expand on them but before I do so it is necessary to first give a broad outline of the three classical ethical systems that have emerged in philosophical writings through the ages.

First there is consequentialism or utilitarianism. "Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as determine what we shall do." Jeremy Bentham penned these words<sup>1</sup> as he devised his hedonic calculus. A consequentialist does not necessarily abandon all rules but rather relativises them. Actions are determined to be right or wrong by consequences that are evaluated by their utility (usefulness in preventing pain suffering or producing pleasure and happiness).

Then we have the deontological view that lays the stress on non-negotiable duty. Baron (1999:3-91) provides an in-depth analysis of Kantian ethics - a term that applies to an array of ethical theories that build on key ideas in Kant's ethics. She shows how Kant (1724-1804) sought to establish rational grounds for the assertion of particular duties. Certain attitudes and actions constitute one's duty and find expression in absolute laws. He gave us the concept of *categorical imperatives* - statements that do not depend on prudential considerations. Moral statements must pass the test of

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<sup>1</sup> The opening words of Bentham's *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*. Chs I-V are found in John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, Collins Fontana, 1962, p. 33.

universalisability - we must act only in a way in which we can at the same time will that it should be a universal law. This rules out all exceptions.

Finally, there is virtue ethics. Slote (1999:175-238) describes virtue ethics in some detail. He writes: "... an ethics of virtue thinks primary on what is noble or ignoble, admirable or deplorable, good or bad, rather than in terms of what is obligatory, permissible, or wrong, ..." (1999:177). I would call virtue ethics the common sense approach to ethics. Aristotle (1947) had an interesting way of dealing with virtues. It is generally called 'the doctrine of the mean.' Virtue is the observing of the mean between excess and deficiency. The doctrine of the mean can best be understood as determining the right relationship between emotions/feelings invoked and expressed, and cogent reasoning and rationality. Any behaviour or response to a stimulus that conforms and is in harmony with the mean will be an action that is an assertion and expression of the emotions that accord with the mean. Feelings such as pain, fear, pride, loneliness, anger etc. are not wrong in themselves but they can become wrong emotions if they are expressed to the wrong degree.

According to Aristotle the purpose of using reason is not to inhibit or deny emotions but can and should influence emotions so that an appropriate response is found – i.e. the mean. Too often we react to circumstances – rather than respond. To respond involves responsibility; it involves reason, understanding, insight and the application of practical wisdom (learned from life). We suppress reason and allow emotions to have free reign or we suppress emotions – both result in disastrous consequences.

I would say that reason must be present in emotions and emotions can and must be rational. This means that our feelings need to be appropriate and sensitive to the circumstances or stimuli. We all need to be balanced – to have a healthy rational emotional life. This demands emotional intelligence

and a practical wisdom – a continuous education experience that the practical experience of life and existence provides if we are willing to learn. We are physical/emotional/spiritual beings with rational facilities that empower us to learn from experiences. Life trains those who are willing to learn the meaning of life.

Must Christians believe only in absolute rules, must they place a premium on human happiness, or should they look for moderation - the mean between excesses? To answer this one must ask what type of moral thinking is reflected in the pages of the Bible? A full study of this question can not be done in this assignment but I believe that the Bible reveals a variety of moral reasoning. The deontological strand comes out strongly in the 600 odd prescriptions and prohibitions in the Old Testament. In the New Testament we find Paul laying down the law on numerous occasions as he provides guidance on various moral issues that troubled various churches. Yet, I would contend that not all ethical reasoning in the Bible is of the deontological type. There are cases of 'justified deception' where circumstances and calculation of the consequences made a difference. Proverbs 6:17 says that a lying tongue is an abomination to God yet there are incidents in the Bible that suggest that it would be a mistake to view the prohibition of lying as an absolute that allows for no exceptions. Think of Rahab (Joshua 2) who lies to save the lives of the spies or how Elisha misleads the Syrian soldiers (2 Kings 6) to save himself. The Hebrew midwives (Exodus 1:19) lie about delivering children. In the New Testament we also see that Jesus and Paul often appear to be flexible on issues (from the Sabbath issue to the eating of certain foods). So again I note a more consequential approach. And then there is wisdom of Solomon in the Old Testament and Jesus' teaching and action that often appears to reveal the practice of virtue ethics.

For me it is clear that the Bible resists simplistic categorization in terms of ethical theory. There exists no pure theory, only tendencies in one direction or another. Thus the selection of scriptures will determine one's justification of a rule-based approach or a results based approach to ethics. If this is all that one can say on the issue then one has a non-resolvable dilemma but I am convinced that the Bible does provide more constructive help. God presents His own character and gracious activity (incarnational engaged approach) towards His people as a model to emulate relationships with Him and fellow human beings. The essence of the moral teaching of Jesus was not unswerving allegiance to God-given laws, but in the challenge to be fellow workers in the Kingdom of God - to become 'perfect' as the Father is perfect (Mt 5:48) in justice, mercy, grace, compassion and love. Christians are called to forgive as God forgives. God desires mercy not sacrifice (Hosea 6:6; Mt 9:13; 12:7). Jesus recasts the entire Old Testament law in Mark 12: 29-31 when he highlighted the importance of love. Jesus views certain aspects of the law as more weighty than others. In the same manner that Israel carried out her rituals of worship in a formally correct way believing that she was fulfilling the law of God so many Christians believe that being a Christian is 'keeping' the laws.

It is my contention that the Bible's focus is more on what Christians should be than what they should do. Moral teaching is based more on the indicative form than an imperative form. Love is the summary of the law (Rom 13:9) and is the quality without which the most outwardly impressive of actions remains worthless (I Cor 13:3). I would propose that a careful reading of moral laws in the Bible reveals what I would like to call a scale of values implicit in the text. Contravention of the laws is sin yet there are different punishments legislated for different and similar offences. Any Christian ethical theory on morality must recognize that characteristics of both the deontological and consequential theories are present in the Bible.

Our morality can not only conform to one of these two theories only but needs a *via media* that is true to the spirit of Jesus Christ. My proposal is a Christian morality based on compassion, love and justice that is not obsessed by rules nor subordinated by consequences. Rather, it is to be more of a virtue ethic of practical wisdom and balance, an incarnational engaged morality founded on the love and justice revealed in the spirit of Christ's life and teaching as recorded in Scripture. It must be balanced (a 'doctrine of the mean') application of scripture reflecting love, justice, humility - a practical wisdom of insight into the doctrine of God and the nature of man gained from revelation, experience, and the social sciences.

#### **4.6 The case studies**

In this section I will concisely apply the principles and conclusions thus far argued for into a real life scenario.

A practicing prostitute called Mary becomes a Christian. A few months after joining the Church she is seen one night working the streets. (Her background includes being raped by her father and brothers for 5 years as a child. She left school at the age of 17 and became a drug addict and prostitute.) Mary admits to the pastor that she is still a 'working girl.' Many questions arise from here on. Can a practicing prostitute be a Christian or can a Christian be a practicing prostitute? What is the Church's response and responsibility? How must the pastor and the congregation respond? Is prostitution an immoral vice or acceptable vocation?

There are many participants in this moral dilemma. There is Mary the pretty practicing prostitute. Then often we have the principled pontifical pastor and the painfully pious people. There are also Mary's patrons - the poorly

principled pagans. How should the Church respond? She could be excommunicated or simply treated as *persona non grata*. Mary could be whipped or her unique talents could be utilized to raise funds. The issue could be ignored, accepted or condemned publicly. She could be counseled with the intention of conforming her to the Church's beliefs or she could be counseled with compassion and understanding - the incarnational engaged approach.

What norms are relevant to resolve this issue? Most will agree that we must uphold the Bible's teaching on morality, sex and prostitution but often when the Church deals with moral issues she forgets the Scripture's teaching on salvation, humility, sin, forgiveness, love your enemies and neighbors, the grace, love and mercy of the Father, and much more. To not be accused of compromise the Church can become guilty of upholding a moral value and neglecting the fundamental principles of grace and love. Often what can be seemingly a clash of principles is defused with a holistic approach and a deeper insight and experience of God the Father and His Word. The Church has a calling born out of the unconditional love and grace she received. This calling is to be humble and responsible to teach the full Gospel whilst recognizing her own frailties and imperfections of life in a fallen world.

The moral issues relating to the practicing prostitute will be addressed by the understanding of the birth and development of postmodernism and ethics. Postmodernism holds that reality is in some sense constructed by the mind, not simply perceived by it, and many such constructions are possible, none necessarily sovereign. Man is not an unbiased observer and when one is prepared to concede this, then one might be less dogmatic on many issues.

Mary, the practicing prostitute, with her baby, came to ask if she could fellowship with a Church. She had been kicked out of two Churches previously. Why? Probably because a dogmatic legalistic approach was taken. The Church is forced to deal with some rather complicated moral, theological, and practical issues. This is how an incarnational engaged ethic of compassion would approach the issue. If she was a Christian she was a 'perfect' prostitute. Let me explain this play on the word perfect.

Who or what is the perfect prostitute? Both the Old and the New Testaments teach that it is the sacrifice of blood that washed sins away. When any sinner, including the practicing prostitute repents and accepts Christ (becomes a Christian), they are made positionally perfect instantaneously. This simply means that they are justified by the blood of Christ, they are redeemed, they are made sinless, they are adopted into the family of God, righteousness is imputed to them, they can enter the 'holy of holys', they are in relationship with the triune God, they are saved. But, experientially they are being saved as the renewal/restoration (Rm 12) process continues. Moment by moment, a person's life is being changed and we are on the road to becoming more Christ like. We fail, we sin, yet the Father loves us and disciplines us to renew us.

The point I highlighted is that James teaches in James 2:10 that if we break one law we break the whole law. This puts us all in the same boat constantly in need of the grace, mercy, and forgiveness of the Father. Paul spoke harsh words to the Galatians (especially in Chapters 2 and 3 and 3:11) and said that a person is put right with Christ through faith and never by obedience to the law.

The practicing prostitute became the perfect prostitute; the perfect applies to her position in Christ, the same position for all Christians. But experientially or practically she has to be renewed. This means that not all

of her sinful behavior is changed immediately, the same applies to you and to me. As the practicing prostitute, who has become the perfect prostitute when she became a Christian, is exposed to the presence of God in her life through the filling of the Holy Spirit, as she is exposed to the love and fellowship, as she is exposed to the life changing teaching of the Scriptures, she is being renewed. Our Churches should be full of sinners seeking God and we should have an incarnational engaged compassion of 'Fathers' towards them.

The Church would probably not allow a practicing prostitute to become a Sunday school teacher. Nor should it simply condone her behavior, but the Church should choose to minister unconditional and sacrificial love and compassion, make the prostitute feel accepted and welcome, providing her with both the preached Gospel and a lived out message of love to her. There are a great deal of issues that have to be dealt with. Often prostitutes have experienced years of being raped and sodomised as children; issues such as betrayal, anger, trust, warped understandings of love need to be addressed and this takes time. The issue is who decides the pace of the renewal process?

Some people progress faster than others do. If perfection could be put on a scale and 10 were perfect, two people saved on the same date can be at different levels of maturity and renewal after five years. Both of them are perfect positionally as a result of the blood shed by Christ for them but experientially they could be miles apart – for many different reasons. Now my work and that of Christians is to walk with and love both of them as God continues the renewal process. This process is never completed and will only stop when we die or when Christ returns. Then and only then will we all be experientially perfect. Now, all the Church can ask is that the

individuals that the Church minister to are open, honest and transparent, wanting to change, to be renewed, to become more Christ-like.

Let me further strengthen my case with a brief look at homosexuality. This is a much bigger issue than most Christians are willing to acknowledge. Let me simply state that homosexuality, like any other sin, was never God's plan for men. It is not a natural relationship and was not ordained by God. The Bible is so clear on this that even I have no doubts about this truth.

The issue is rather the understanding of what is the cause of homosexuality and is there a difference between a practising homosexual and a celibate homosexual. Here there exist some gray areas. Is it simply lust? Then why do many men not lust after other men? What makes one man lust after another man? Is it simply sin? However, some non-Christians do not lust after men. Is it biological? Is it a learned orientation from childhood environment or experiences? There is growing medical evidence that indicates it might be in the genes and that hormones in the mother's womb can determine the sex of the brain. This can result in a human with a male body but a mind that functions as a woman or vice versa. Are the differences in the male and female sexes produced biologically or socially/culturally or both? What of a hermaphrodite – a person born with the characteristics (e.g. sexual organs) of both sexes? Who determines if the baby is to become a boy or a girl and what if the wrong decision is made?

These and many more questions need to be honestly and carefully addressed before we simply apply our judgement on God's behalf. Generally, the Church believes that sin enters creation through the story of the fall of Adam and Eve. This resulted not only in spiritual fall but deformity in the biological creation. It is never God's will for a child to be born with a defective heart, or no limbs or brain due to genetic defects, or is

it God's will? If it is not God's will, and if a child is born as a homosexual, then I would see that as being the consequence of the fall. The story of the Gospel and the Kingdom of God is that God is busy restoring creation to His original purpose. The Kingdom has come in Christ but its fullness is still to come. The homosexual would then first need to enter the Kingdom through accepting the Gospel's message and then let God restore him to wholeness. This is the same process for every sinner is it not? The practicing homosexual, the non-practicing homosexual, the prostitute, the sinner, all need to be exposed to the supernatural healing power of God's grace and love. Only Jesus can save us and only Jesus can change us. All we are required to do is to be willing and available and let God accomplish His work of renewal in us.

The practicing prostitute, the practicing homosexual, like any other sinner can become a perfect person when they become Christians. The clear teaching of Scripture is that we come as we are, vile sinners not worthy of the gift of salvation and eternal life. Salvation is a free gift so that none can boast (Ephesians. 2:8-9). The Bible teaches clearly that the moment one becomes a Christian one become perfect positionally in God's eyes (justification). Then the process of renewal/restoration begins (sanctification) as we respond out of gratitude to that we receive – unconditional, sacrificial love from the Father. No sin is to be condoned but the sinner is to be loved and that is often not practiced by Christians even though they often quote the cliché. I think the real issue is about me demonstrating incarnational engaged love to all people and allowing the Holy Spirit to convict and challenge and change sinful behaviour. God looks at the heart, the intention and integrity, thus so should the Christian. If they are saved and genuinely battling to change then the Church must walk with them as long as it takes. The Church must welcome all sinners, whether they are practicing homosexuals or prostitutes, to come and sit in

the service, to receive salvation, the love, and grace of God that can change their lives.

The Church is called to love as the Father loves. Yes, the Church will fail often but she must try again and again. The challenge for Christians is to reflect the truth of the Gospel as revealed in Scripture. Continuously, the Church is called to challenge interpretation, dare tradition, and provoke application of methods that are relevant to the people who are hurting and desperately need to experience the Christian message. All this is done whilst remaining humble and faithful to Scripture, God's revelation, and totally dependant on God's grace that saved one and is saving one.

#### **4.7 Summary: The incarnational engaged compassion model**

This section will in effect summarise this study and Chapter four specifically and provide a brief but concise foundation for a Christian ethics in a postmodern world. To be human means to be confronted by the ethical challenge. We are all ethicists. However, for Christians, it is essential to accept that we live in a post-Christendom world. By this I mean that no longer does Christianity in doctrinal composition or ethical code exercise an all-powerful sway on society's self-understanding or sense of meaning and purpose. To live as Christians in the world we now need to *engage* with each situation. To do this Christians must first become aware of the ethical dimensions and challenges of the context in which they live. Before responding to a challenge Christians must *analyse* and raise questions to each situation. Then we will learn to differentiate between genuine ethical problems and socially/culturally determined differences. Often there is no actual ethical issue at stake. To do this it is vital to learn to *apply wisdom and discernment*.

For most Christians theology is ethics in action. Thus the theological position and interpretation will determine the ethical stance. The problem with identifying an ethical issue is therefore firstly a theological problem. To do ethics one must first do 'good' theology, as ethical living is an ordering of one's actions in accordance with one's beliefs. But, as this study has shown theology is not an exact science and Christians are not infallible. Theology is a developing and maturing science with many approaches to theology, none of which can claim to be complete. All individuals have presuppositions, and no one is impartial and unprejudiced. We all bring our tentative assumptions and conjectures to our experience; each fact about the world is theory-laden. This means that ethics is also a developing and hopefully a maturing field of insight. Common sense and reality demands humility from Christians in approaching any ethical issue. Are Christians going to continue with the cultural imperialism of the past or develop a new more sensitive, and I believe relevant methodology in defining and dealing with ethical issues?

Christians who believe in revealed ethics must develop an *ethic of honesty, integrity and transparency* (based on the concerns mentioned in this study) whilst they consider how their revealed ethic intersects with the general moral quest of others.

Why did the apostle Paul sum up the laws of god with one rule: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' Love is critical because it characterises God. Love is the character of God and love is to be the foundation of the human ethical ideal. The love Paul speaks of in I Corinthians is merciful, forgiving, kind, patient, trusting, understanding, constructive, good manners, has no limits to its endurance, and has eternal hope. It is unconditional and sacrificial. Out of this love compassion is birthed that will undergird all ethics.

Compassion is generally understood as 'to suffer with.' It is a sympathetic understanding and a desire to help. For the Christian compassion is measured by the compassionate God as revealed in the biblical narrative, especially the story of the Prodigal Son. Compassion is the divine response of the Father confronted with human need. Compassion is the salvation that Jesus offered to the outcasts. By salvation I mean loving, nourishing, caring, and giving life. In Luke 6:36 Jesus is quoted as saying: 'Be compassionate as God is compassionate.' Compassion is revealed as a central quality of God and Christians are called to feel and act as God does; in a life-giving and nourishing way. To be compassionate is to love. Integrity, honesty, transparency and humility in one's convictions applied with compassion provide guidelines and boundaries in ethical decision making in a postmodern world. The proposed paradigm is a practical theological theory of incarnational engaged compassion for ethical issues.

Classical Protestant and Catholic fundamentalism on morality tends to have a typically Cartesian outlook - a reduction of Eternal or Divine Truths to epistemology (things can not be other than they appear because God would not deceive His creation). The question that begs answering is, 'What is truth?' Christian moralists look to Jesus to answer this. My understanding of the life and teaching of Jesus is that he suffered for his beliefs but never inflicts suffering for them. Jesus' silence to the question put to him by Pilate was not a rational response. Jesus' life stood proxy for the rhetoric of 'truth.' All Christians must recognise that moral language represents a particular intersubjective perspective as we view reality through the lenses of a value laden worldview. Jesus' message took the form of his life and was often perceived as an offence to the religion he claimed to represent. His life and teaching reveals that submission to the content of one's beliefs is not humility but rather often leads to dogmatism (as in the Pharisees). Christian morality in a postmodern era needs to stop *telling* people what to do

(dogmatic legalism) and begin *showing* people what to do by doing it themselves. This is the life-style metanarrative of incarnational engaged compassion as revealed in the Bible that this study concludes should be the foundation of the moral value system of the Church in a relativistic postmodern world. It is the Christian riposte to postmodernism and a Christian paradigm for ethical decision making

All ethical decision making must always take place in an open discourse where integrity, honesty, transparency and humility prevails. All issues must be engaged with love, sensitivity, compassion through a process of analysing and applying wisdom and discernment. All discourse involves an ongoing open process of dialogue with the right to be heard and the possibility that your view is wrong.

## CONCLUSION

Does a legalistic approach (I must do everything in my strength to be a good Christian) to the teachings of Christ ever produce an abundant spiritual life? Religiosity (legalistic conceptualization of the Law) was the one sin that Israel often seemed to fall in. In Isaiah 58 God warns Israel that they have kept the Law legalistically but have missed the substance of the Law. *"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter – when you see the naked to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? ... if you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves on behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday"* (v. 6-7,9-10). God's emphasis and requirements was focussed on the inner attitude of the heart of the people (sincere gratitude for salvation and fellowship). Gratitude to God will involve beneficence to others. Since Christians share together in the benefits of Christ's sacrifice, they must show their gratitude by sharing with others what God has given to them. This implies that the response of praise and the works of love are the only appropriate sacrifices remaining to the redeemed community.

The worship God requires of those who have experienced His saving grace, is a responsive worship. Christians should respond to God's mercy and grace with sacrifices of praise and acts of goodness and generosity. Sacrifices such as these please God and in these sacrifices, His will is done. Through such deeds God is truly worshipped. The Old Testament is absolutely unequivocal about the response required by God. Micah 6:7:

*'With what shall I come before the Lord and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgressions, the fruit of my body for the transgression of my soul? He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.'*

The commandments of God are summed up in two great commandments. According to Mark 12:30 the first of these is the following: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength." Is this not the same as Hebrews 13:15: "...continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise"? In addition, is the second great commandment, as summed up in Mark 12:31, namely "love your neighbor as yourself", not the same as Hebrews 13:16: "And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased"? The two great commandments and the two requirements of worship highlighted by the author of Hebrews belong inseparably together.

A sanctimonious participation in the outward forms of Christianity is no substitute for a heart that is right with God and a life lived totally to His praise and purposes, and it is no substitute for a compassionate concern for one's fellow men. The Christian is called to offer a sacrifice of compassionate service to his/her fellow human beings. The Christian was created for good works (Heb 9:14; Eph 2:10).

The incarnation of Jesus is the most spectacular instance of cultural identification in the history of mankind. Jesus, entered humanity's world, emptied himself of his glory, took on human nature, lived a human life, endured human temptations, experienced human sorrows, bore humanity's sins and died their death. He made friends with social outcasts and

penetrated humankind's humanness. He humbled himself to serve. Jesus' ethics and spirituality reflects an incarnational engaged approach of compassion. If Christians are to be 'little christs' their approach to ethics should reflect his. Otherwise, they will make no difference to a postmodern world.

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