

A pastoral response to the unhealed wound of gays exacerbated by indecision and inarticulacy

Yolanda Dreyer

**Department of Practical Theology
University of Pretoria**

Abstract

This article consists of six sections. It illustrates the ambiguity in pastoral care with gay people in institutional Christian communities and how this ambiguity exacerbates the unhealed wound of gay people. It discusses how the Christian message becomes ineffectual in its attempt to address the dilemma of injustice when Biblical evidence is used uncritically. The virtues of truth and righteousness in pastoral care are emphasised. The article argues that Paul Ricoeur's ethics of hermeneutical discourse could provide an epistemological framework for an appropriate response to the dilemma of ambiguity in ecclesial approaches to pastoral care with gay people. Listening for the unheard voices of marginalised people is an essential component of such a "discourse ethics" which is offered as a possible solution to the problem of inarticulacy. The article concludes by indicating some possibilities for a postmodern pastoral response to the unhealed wound of gay people, which at present is often exacerbated by the ambiguity and indecision of official church resolutions.

1. INTRODUCTION – THE UNHEALED WOUND

In South Africa official church resolutions with regard to the position of gays as office bearers and members of the Christian faith community can be described as "indecision". For example, in the publication of the Africa Christian Action, *The pink agenda* (2001:155, ed by Christine McCafferty and Peter Hammond) the stated intention is to support "ministries of churches that are reaching out to, educating or counselling", which sounds positive. But the people to whom they want to "reach out", whom they want to "educate" and "counsel" are labelled as "deviant" (McCafferty & Hammond 2001:xix) and "caught up in homosexual sin". The term "gay" is hereby stigmatized. Some other churches do not want to stigmatize, but their approach is likewise

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paramount to “indecision”. Gays are welcomed in the faith community and regarded as devoted Christians, but church councils are officially allowed to exclude gays who are honest about their gay lifestyle. In South Africa an example of this approach is the policy of the Dutch Reformed Church (Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk).¹ The policy of the general assembly of the Netherdutch Reformed Church of Africa (Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika) is that congregations should accommodate gays and display a pastoral attitude towards them. However, in the same resolution same-sex behaviour is pronounced “sin” and celibacy the only lifestyle option for gay people.² This ambiguity in effect silences those who are affected by the ecclesial decisions. Theologically seen, these church policies could appeal to the dogmatics of Karl Barth. However, the Reformed (Gereformeerde) theologian and ethicist, Amie van Wyk (2008:1574, 1576), criticizes Karl Barth’s condemnation of homosexuality as “non-christological”. Van Wyk’s argument implies that the church itself could become “immoral” if it perpetuates this kind of ambiguity. Yet, Van Wyk himself does not succeed in avoiding the pitfall of ambivalence completely.³

How should one respond to such an “officially endorsed immorality” of churches?⁴ In their endeavour to promote morality, churches themselves are tempted to act and speak in ways that are in fact immoral – “love” cannot be shown and “outreach” be done by exhibiting prejudicial and judgemental attitudes. War language is used in the “battle” against the so-called “pink agenda”. In the following citation from *The pink agenda* (McCafferty & Hammond 2001:145-146) homosexuality is “condemned” as “wrong” and “desctructive”, bad for society and “against God’s ideal”:

¹ NGK (2007:204-205). See Agenda, Deel III: Handeling vir die dertiende vergadering van die Algemene Sinode van die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk, Maandag 4 tot Vrydag 8 Junie 2007, Boksburg, pp 204-205.

² NHKA (2007:45-48). See Besluitbundel van die 68^{ste} Algemene Kerkvergadering van die Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika, Oktober 2007, pp 45-48. Pretoria: NHKA Kerkargief (cf <http://www.nhk.co.za>).

³ According to Karl Barth (in Van Wyk 2007:1574), homosexuality “is the physical, psychological and social sickness, the phenomenon of perversion, decadence and decay, which can emerge when man refuses to admit the validity of the divine command in the sense in which we are now considering it” (KD III/4:184; CD III/4:166). Amie van Wyk’s (2007:1576) own ambivalence, however, can be seen in the following remark: “While the theological debate is continuing, nearly all theologians agree that special pastoral care should be taken of homosexual persons and that they should feel welcome as full members of the church of Jesus Christ. I am sure that the Holy Spirit will lead the church of Christ to reach a satisfactory solution to this burning issue, even if it may be a very painful process.”

⁴ See article “(Im-)morele misleiding” by P F Craffert, in *Beeld* 16 September 2008, p 11.

There can be no sitting on the fence. Society has to choose the direction it wants to go. We need to regain our ability to discern between right and wrong. We must choose to condemn what is wrong and destructive. We need to ensure that we promote and pursue what is right and good for our society. We must hold up God's ideal to society.

Such selfrighteousness by some and indecision by other churches have the effect of silencing the voices of those who see sexual minorities as people created by God and who, like *all* people, are entitled to giving and receiving love in all its forms. The present-day moral philosopher Charles Taylor (1989:97) remarks: "There are good reasons to keep silent. But they cannot be valid across the board. Without any articulation at all, we would lose contact with the good, however conceived. We would cease to be human. The severest injunctions to silence can only be directed to certain classes of articulation, and must spare others. The issue is to define which ones." An unhealed wound caused by immoral ecclesial actions which aggravate the pain of people is certainly one of those issues that pastoral theology cannot ignore. "Inarticulacy" is not an option.

This article is about what Charles Taylor (1989:53-90) refers to as the "ethics of inarticulacy". It focuses specifically on how to articulate a reasonable pastoral response to the "indecision" with regard to the standing of gays according to "official" declarations by most mainline churches. These resolutions demonstrate how very difficult it is for institutional religion to accept paradigm shifts – whether they are triggered by scientific or sociological insights. Such paradigm shifts lead to all kinds of changes, but churches hold on to "the old way". After some time has elapsed churches can no longer defend the old position and are obliged to apologize to those who have been harmed by their stance. Examples in the field of the natural sciences are the apologies to Galilei and recently to Darwin. Apologies for the holocaust and apartheid are social examples.

Sexuality as a social construct is forever changing. These changes are not accepted easily by institutional religion. Should the faith community *now* succeed in acting in a pastoral way for the good of people, the shame of yet another embarrassing apology in future could be avoided. Following in Jesus' footsteps, one of the main tasks of the church is to help heal people's wounds. This should include those wounds caused by outdated social codes that express prejudice against sexual orientation and behaviours that differ from heteronormative conventions.

Some churches have begun to take note of research in the humanities that emphasise how complicated the "histories of sexuality" are. This insight has led to the "moral value" of greater tolerance towards gays. However, this more tolerant approach is conditional. Gays should confess that same-sex

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behaviour is sinful and should either be “healed” and “become heterosexual” or remain celibate for the duration of their lives. Such an official ecclesial position clearly lacks integrity. Insights from research are only applied partially and superficially. As pastoral care is *a response to human experience*, pastoral care will have to change as human experience changes. In this respect, Charles Gerkin (1922-2004)⁵ is especially known for using the expression “the living document” within the context of pastoral care. This emphasizes the changing, dynamic nature of the world in which human beings exist, of the human experience of the world, and of pastoral care as a response to that experience.

How human experience with regard to sexuality has changed, is articulated as follows by Stephen Garton (2004:28-29): “In the second half of the twentieth century the history of sexuality has emerged as a major field of historical inquiry. Sexuality, instead of being something natural, came to be seen by historians as subject to historical change. But how sexuality was made historical, and what might be the motors of historical change, became the object of intense scholarly and theoretical dispute.” The family-based marriage arrangement in the premodern era was replaced by modernity’s love-based marriage arrangement. Stephanie Coontz (2006:145) describes this “emergence of the love match” as a shift from “yoke mates to soul mates”. However, also in this regard, the saying goes that the more things change, the more they remain the same. The “new” arrangement of a “love match of soul mates” still remained a “male provider marriage” (Coontz 2006:145), in other words a patriarchal institution.

Already in the 1920’s sociologists observed that the “contradictions and tensions” of the so-called “love-based” marriage “could not be contained indefinitely” (Coontz 2005:214). Coontz (2006:215) refers to the work of the sociologist Samuel Schmallhausen who stated the following in 1929: “The old values are gone. Irrevocably. The new values are feverishly in the making. We live in a state of molten confusion. Instability rides modernity like a crazy sportsman. Civilization is caught in a cluster of contradictions that threaten to strangle it” (Schmallhausen 1929:418-419). With regard to the “histories of sexuality”, for Garton (2004:8) “gay liberation” is *the* revolution. It emerged in

⁵ See Gerkin, C 1984. *The living human document: Re-visioning pastoral counselling in a hermeneutical mode*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press. Among many other counsellors, the psychologist William Stewart (2005:328) refers as follows to Gerkin’s contribution: “The pastoral counsellor and client are likely to use different language systems, symbols and images to interpret the meaning of experiences. The counsellor must strive to understand the client’s frame of reference and the personal meanings. Failure to do so will result in the client going away empty-handed. The more the counsellor understands the language of the client and helps the client to understand his [sic] own language age, the more the distance between their worlds will be reduced. Gerkin sees people in crisis as being caught between despair on the one hand and an interpretation of hope and expectation on the other. Much of the problem of the crisis experience is seen as a loss of the sense of continuity, with the accompanying difficulty in moving into the open-ended future of hope and faith.”

the 1960s and 1970s and continues up to the present day. However, this and continues “revolution” has not yet accomplished its goal, namely the “normalizing” of sexuality (Garton 2004:189-209). Normalized sexuality would mean for pastoral care that *all* people (also irrespective of their sexual orientation) would be approached as “ordinary men and women” (Garton 2004:188), as fellow human beings, fellow believers and creatures of God.

With regard to this ideal of normalizing especially gender and race, the philosopher Charles Taylor uses the expression “ethics of inarticulacy”. The question is: How can the ideal of *common good* be articulated in the present-day culture when ethical codes are forever changing and paradigms are shifting? As revolutions come and go, so hermeneutical conventions are transient and even views on what the Bible teaches on “proper sexual conduct” do not stay the same. According to Taylor (1989:64), many today:

accept as their highest good (or perhaps we should say at this stage, principle of right) a notion of universal justice and/or benevolence, in which all human beings are to be treated equally with respect, regardless of race, class, sex, culture, religion. But we who stand within this framework are aware that it was not always recognized, that this universal ethic replaced earlier ones which were in various respects restricted, and that this was accomplished through a number of hard-fought and painfully won stages.

Referring to Friedrich Nietzsche’s notion of “transvaluation of values”, Taylor (1989:65) encourages the idea of “superseding earlier views”, rather than succumbing to the temptation of “taking what was previously an ideal”. The paradox of knowing that progression is the ideal (evolutionary), but still being stuck in the past (naturalist), is, according to Nietzsche, the dilemma of the Enlightenment. This is also the reason for “indecision” as manifested by ecclesial institutions in their resolutions on homosexuality. Taylor (1989:70-71) discusses the “Nietzschean” solution to the problem of the “naturalist epistemology” of the Enlightenment:

Enlightenment naturalism ... frequently portrayed religious moralities of the “higher” not only as the source of self-expression but also as the justification of social oppression, as the supposed carriers of the “higher”, be they priests or aristocrats, exercise their natural right to rule the “lower” orders for the latter’s own good. Neo-Nietzschean thinkers have extended this critique and tried to show how various forms of social exclusion and domination was

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built into the very definitions by which a hypergood⁶ perspective is constituted as certain models of religious order excluded and dominated women, as ideals and disciplines of rational control excluded and dominated the lower classes (as well as women again), as definitions of civilization and fulfillment exclude and marginalize dissidents, as other notions of civilization exclude subject races, and so on.

Christianity, especially, is known for “laying a heavy burden on those in whom it inculcates a sense of sin” in the name of subscribing to the so-called “good”, but to “which one cannot really subscribe” (Taylor 1989:81), because one cannot be “guilty” of being a woman, being black or being gay.

2. THE RELEVANCE/IRRELEVANCE OF THE CHRISTIAN MESSAGE

The philosophical question, “Why should I be moral?” cannot be answered by a Christian by simply appealing to the Bible. Each generation has the obligation to find the answer to this question anew in terms of its own situation and context. Paradigms create perspectives by means of which people become aware of their context and its values, and by means of which they interpret the Bible. Traditionally the distinction is between the macro-paradigms, premodern, modern and postmodern, and micro-paradigms. The Bible originated in premodern times. Protestant creeds of the sixteenth century were established in a period when a shift was taking place from premodern to modern on account of the influences of the Renaissance and humanism. In his most recent work, Taylor especially focuses on the period of the shift and thereafter. He distinguishes four micro-paradigms, namely the first and second confessionalist ages, the modern “Age of Authenticity” (for Taylor [2007:27] this means a “super-authenticity” where individuals can choose what they regard as meaningful to their lives and what not, be it relationships, the environment, or the transcendent) and a fourth postsecular one which is already experienced today but cannot yet be seen clearly. The present-day context, normally simply referred to as “modern times”, is much more complex

⁶ “Most of us not only live with many goods but find that we have to rank them, and in some cases, this ranking makes one of them of supreme importance relative to others ... [I]f I am strongly committed to a highest good in this sense I find the corresponding yes/no question utterly decisive for what I am as a person ... Thus I may see expressive fulfillment as incomparably more worthwhile than the ordinary things we all desire in life; but I see the love of God or the search for justice as itself incommensurably higher than this fulfillment ... Let me call higher-order goods of this kind ‘hypergoods’, i.e., goods which not only are incomparably more important than others but provide the standpoint from which these must be weighed, judged, decided about” (Taylor 1989:62-63; see pp 63-73, 78, 81, 85, 88, 89, 98, 100-102, 104-106).

than that. The roots of these “modern times” can be found in the shift from what Taylor calls the “Second Confessional Age” towards the “Age of Authenticity”. The “first” confessionalist paradigm was a product of the sixteenth-century Reformation. The “second” was similar to the third in that “churches managed to organize so much of their members’ lives, and hence became the focus of often intense loyalty, a sentiment akin to nationalism” (Taylor 2007:471-472). According to Taylor (2007:472), the “second” confessionalism consists of a network of four strands: spirituality (a sense of the transcendent), discipline (state control), political identity (social nationalism), and the idea of a “higher” civilization order than other societies, for example in the tricontinental world.

Although, according to Taylor, “these four strands had been present in élite religion in the two preceding centuries”, this powerful network “had become a mass phenomenon” and it resulted in “tightly organized churches, often suspicious of outsiders, with their strongly puritanical codes, their inherent links of whatever sort, to political identities, and their claims to ground civilization order”. However, Taylor (2007:472ff) indicates that these “codes” “were perfectly set up for a precipitate fall in the next age which was beginning to dawn at mid-century.” Triggered by the so-called “sexual revolution”, especially among the youth, the new, present-day context is referred to by Taylor (2007:473-504) as the “Age of Authenticity”. He characterises this “age” in terms of mainly four “strands”. The first strand is that sensuality is seen as something “good” – that is a moral value and therefore should not be suppressed. The second strand is a logical consequence of the first, namely the equality of the sexes. The implication of this is that the relationship between man and woman is no longer hierarchal and male dominated, but that of partners who have been freed of their gender roles. In juxtaposition to the second strand, the third is about sexuality gaining a playful element. Some see playful sexuality as a way of demonstrating their freedom, whereas for others it is a transgression of conventional norms. The fourth strand is autonomy. Sexual orientation is seen as part and parcel of an individual’s personality and identity. For some this implies that social norms need not necessarily dictate one’s life. All of this formed the basis of gay liberation and “the emancipation of a host of previously condemned forms of sexual life” (Taylor 2007:502).

According to Taylor the “sexual revolution” placed some of the most important ethical issues of our time on the agenda. In addition the issue of political integrity was brought to the fore by September 11th, 2001. This

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influences ethical decisions in a context of global pluralism.⁷ The ethics brought into play by the “sexual revolution” can be called an “ethics of justice”. Justice is interpersonal. Therefore, ethical decisions with an appeal to the Bible as support on what is “good” or “bad” today cannot but take changing contexts from Biblical times up to the present-day into account.

From a hermeneutical point of view not every statement in the Bible can be regarded as relevant for all times. In his work, *The relevance and irrelevance of the Christian message*, Paul Tillich (1996) alerts us to a particular kind of “kerygmatic theology” which is based on the proposition that the Bible is the “Word from Above”. Such a theology expects from believers to submit blindly to the authority of God’s Word without taking the ethical impact of such “obedience” into account. When rigid pronouncements from the Bible are harmful, such propositional claims are irrelevant, according to Tillich. Along with Schleiermacher,⁸ Tillich prefers a “responding-listening” and meditative engagement with the Word to a “kerygmatic-propositional” one. Paul Ricoeur (1998:149) describes the “kerygmatic-propositional” approach as *Anspruch*. He rather prefers a hermeneutics that emphasizes *Andenken*, in other words “a call to reflection, meditation” (cf Topping 2007:41). Hermeneutically seen, according to Ricoeur (1980:117), violence cannot be done to others on account of the Bible, even if the Bible itself should endorse this violence. Violence in any form is unethical. It is the “nonviolent appeal” of the Bible which, according to Ricoeur, can positively transform an individual’s lifestory. By means of this “ethics of biblical reading” the differences between the contexts of the Bible and today can be overcome.

A similar process of reaching consensus in communication happens between God and human beings, and between human beings among themselves. This dynamics can be seen in Jim Poling’s (1991:187; cf Capps 1993:100-101) description of practical theology:

Practical theology is theological interpretation of the unheard voices of personal and community life for the purpose of continual

⁷ See, among other references, John P Manoussakis (2005), *The revelation according to Jacques Derrida*, in Sherwood, Y & Hart, K (eds), *Derrida and religion: Other testaments*, 309-323. New York: Routledge, p 310.

⁸ With regard to the legacy of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), see Pelser & Van Aarde (2007:1350): “Schleiermacher’s insight into what was understood under ‘congeniality’ stabilised the use of the concept ‘hermeneutic circle’ (see Warner 2007:24-25). This concept forms part of his insight that human beings only have *finite knowledge*. Human beings have only *relative certainty* about things. In the process of understanding there is always a polar tension between *familiarity* and *strangeness*. Reproduction is therefore not identical with production (cf Stiver 2007:147-150).

transformation of faith in the true God of love and power toward renewed ministry practice ... Reflection begins with the presence of differences and otherness in experience. Difference provokes thought. When persons or communities become aware of some desire that contrasts with identity, the potential contradiction requires reflection Without difference and contrast, there can be no self-conscious experience.

According to Donald Capps (1993) pastoral care with others and respectfully acknowledging their difference, have become possible because of the shift from modernity with its *Anspruch* approach to postmodernity with its *Andenken* approach to engagement with the Bible. In other words, postmodernity has brought about a shift in the meaning of biblical traditions and values. The binding and compulsory effect of the Bible has disappeared to a large extent. Theology, practical theology, and pastoral care are hermeneutical activities. They all endeavour to understand how to communicate in such a way that the recipients can best understand what is for their own good. Such an approach to biblical engagement “may well result in a new approach to ministry” (Capps 1984:48). The changes in values, commitments, goals and convictions will change the face of pastoral care. Though the Bible will definitely be used in pastoral care, people will not be harmed by it. Such a pastoral care could overcome “inarticulacy”. Those who had lost their voices, could then find language by means of the Bible. They need no longer be silenced by their fear of the Bible and need no longer depart from the faith community.

3. VIRTUES OF TRUTH AND RIGHTEOUSNESS IN PASTORAL CARE

In a series of previous articles I indicated that the physical, mental and spiritual health of all believers is the concern of pastoral caregivers. Therefore practical theologians should expose all harmful attitudes towards others, including sexual minorities.⁹ The faith community can no longer condone “indecision” and ambiguity. Empirical studies have made it abundantly clear that “double speak” is harmful to people (cf Onedera 2008:51).

Pastors’ personal disposition, which is related to their religious views, affect their pastoral engagement with sexual minorities. Most churches closely connect homosexuality and marriage. Beliefs and attitudes concerning

⁹ See, among others Dreyer (2005), Sexuality and shifting paradigms – setting the scene; (2006a), Prejudice, homophobia and the Christian faith community; (2006b), Heteronormatieweit, homofobie en homoseksualiteit – ’n roetekaart vir ’n inklusiewe kerk; (2007), Hegemony and the internalization of homophobia caused by heteronormativity; (2008a), The “sanctity” of marriage – an archaeology of a socio-religious construct: Mythological origins, forms and models; (2008b), “De-centre-ing” sexual difference in public and ecclesial discourses on marriage; (2008c), Pastoral care and gays against the background of same-sex relationships in the *Umwelt* of the New Testament.

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marriage come into play when churches deal with sexual minorities. If therapists' view of marriage affect the way in which they do marriage therapy and religious traditions differ as to how they see marital social values as Worthington et al (2008:21-22) have pointed out, this will also be applicable to counseling with sexual minorities. Pastors have to deal with a host of matters: official church policies concerning homosexuality and marriage, the church's, their own and the counselee's view of Scripture and biblical interpretations, as well as their own and the other's virtue orientation, religious beliefs, personal disposition, fears, prejudices and experiences. This can be quite a daunting task which cannot be fulfilled "out there", "objectively", "from a distance". Engagement and personal involvement are the only way. The advice of Worthington et al (2008:32) to family therapists is applicable to pastors as well: "Because religion is powerful and can affect most of therapy, therapists are cautioned to be thoughtful about their own religious commitments, beliefs, and values and to anticipate the likely effects of their own religion on their practice."

Self-reflection on and an awareness of the pastor's own personal disposition, theological views and values will prepare pastors for engaging openly and respectfully with the other, whose belief system may differ from theirs. According to family therapist Zink (2008:70), "discussion of values is beneficial to the therapeutic process and should not be avoided." In Doherty's (1995:182) opinion, a therapist should be willing to use moral language, and be "willing to engage in moral discussion about what is fair, right, honest or responsible." A therapist should seem to be comfortable to talk to others about *their* values, beliefs, insights and ideas of what for them is right and wrong. Zink (2008:70-71) finds that it is possible for therapists to work with clients whose beliefs and values differ from theirs and points out that listening well is the most important skill in such an endeavour. It is obviously much easier for a pastoral counsellor to use moral language and speak openly about beliefs and values than it would be for a therapist. On the other hand, listening without making value-judgements and entering into the world of the client's belief systems may be easier for therapists than for pastors. The pastor's main task involves understanding and interpreting the significance of the Bible and Christian tradition for people in their everyday lives. The temptation may be stronger for pastors than for therapists to impose their own beliefs and value systems onto counselees, especially if pastors come from a tradition where religious propositions are presented as undeniable truths, and especially when dealing with sexual minorities where social and religious morality and values are significant issues.

4. THE ETHICS OF THE CRITICAL DISCOURSE

Pastors who are critical theologians may find pastoral care with sexual minorities easier than the more uncritical pastors. Cook (2008:84) observes that “[m]any but not all liberal Protestants take a welcoming and affirming posture toward same-sex relationships, seeing in them reflection of the *imago Dei*” (see Graham 1997). Whereas the Roman Catholic position on homosexuality is clear and the theology of conservative Protestants is based on fixed propositions, “liberal Protestantism” is characterised by “inherent theological plurality” (Ottati 2006:3). In his book with the rather catchy title, *Theology for liberal Presbyterians and other endangered species*, Douglas F Ottati (2006:viii) points out that, though “liberal Protestantism” is so diverse that it cannot be described easily, what such critical theologians want to do is to “try to retrieve, restate, rethink, and revise traditional theologies and beliefs in the face of contemporary knowledge and realities.” Other characteristics are, for example: being ecumenical, theocentric and worldly, Christ shaped and generous, realistic and hopeful, ecologically inclined and humane (Ottati 2006:308; cf Cook 2008:73). When dealing with the authority of Scripture, critical theology is about “scripture critiquing scripture”. It is open to other sources of knowledge, such as the arts and sciences and does not shy away from the tension (not opposition) between faith and reason (“faith-seeking understanding”). It sees sexuality an inherently good and a God-given gift. It sees the self as an individual with agency, but at the same time always as “self-in-relation”. It is positive about diversity, rather than feeling threatened by it. It emphasises “contextual awareness; concern for those on the margins and commitment to social justice” (Cook 2008:74).

No tradition or interpretation can be seen as fixed or eternally true. Therefore propositions should be investigated with suspicion. As far as ethics is concerned, Cook (2008:74) describes the “liberal way as follows: “Liberal Protestants would maintain that no infallible and a-contextual moral blueprint of how to handle the complexity of contemporary life exists in the Bible or in any church confession or book of church order.” According to this paradigm, Christians cannot escape the responsibility of struggling anew with each and every ethical decision. There are no “easy answers”, however comforting people may think a handy set of easy answers derived from the Bible, Christian tradition or the decisions of a specific church to be. In the process of discernment, listening for God’s voice speaking to the present time will include “listening to the voices that did not help shape the historical theology, namely women, the marginalized, the powerless, and oftentimes persons of color” (Cook 2008:74). It is an earnest process, not a free for all. It is a critical dialogue guided by a belief in the God of the Old Testament who revealed

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God-self to human beings in Jesus Christ through the presence of the Holy Spirit and who calls believers to live lives that witness to both justice and love (see Ellison & Thorson-Smith 2003; Cook 2008:74).

Pastors who adopt this kind of theology and philosophy, will have certain advantages when engaging with sexual minorities. Their open and critical view of Scripture will be conducive to finding a way with the Bible that does not damage, reject or condemn individuals. Their openness to other disciplines will take into account what the medical and social sciences have contributed to the present-day understanding of sexual minorities, rather than being stuck within the frame of reference of premodern Scriptures. Their openness to the voices of the marginalized will be conducive to their pastoral and therapeutic task of listening to understand the experience of the other from the inside. Their willingness to struggle with the Bible and with other voices rather than to have a set of ready answers handy, will be an advantage when dealing with the extremely complicated personal, social and religious worlds of sexual minorities. Their positive regard for sexuality as “good” and a “God-given gift” is contrary to the rather sex-phobic legacy of Christian tradition.

As far as marriage is concerned, critical theologians will characteristically not only see marriage in terms of what the Bible says about it, but will include the insights of fields such as sociology, law and economy. The “inherent theological plurality” of “liberal theology” can certainly be seen in the discussion on marriage. Some adhere to the idea of marriage as a covenant (see Anderson, Hogue & McCarthy 1995:2-3), whereas others find covenantal thinking akin to the sacramentalisation of marriage. Since Luther, Reformed theology has desacramentalised marriage and has broken the traditional bond between marriage and procreation. The jury is still out on whether marriage is per definition a heterosexual affair between one male person and one female person or whether there are other possibilities, such as for example same sex marriage (see Myers & Scanzoni 2005). How marriage is defined in our times, will determine whether sexual minorities (and heterosexual persons, for that matter) would be at all interested in it. According to Cook (2008:75), marriage and family therapists are influenced by the theological discussion on marriage and define marriage “primarily in terms of the *quality of relational intimacy* that exists between persons rather than *form* of relationship ... It may be that the norm of heterosexual marriage has become an idol of our time.”

Though pastoral counsellors within the critical paradigm will probably have quite a few advantages when engaging in pastoral counselling with sexual minorities, there are some pitfalls for which to out. The “liberal”

tendency to want to “retrieve, restate, rethink and revise traditional theologies and beliefs” may clash with the traditional beliefs that the counselee has internalised. The counselee may be extremely uncomfortable with a drastic overturning of their belief system – even if this should be “in their best interest”. The pastor should proceed with caution and patience, respecting the counselee’s values and meanings and listen well. Cook (2008:85) concludes her article on *Marriage and family counseling and liberal Protestant Christianity* by summarizing the losses and gains:

What is *lost* in the face of these contemporary challenges are simple answers and the sense of certainty and security that come with the belief that “my family, my church, my religious tradition, my racial group, my gender, and/or my nation knows best”. What is *gained* is the opportunity to exercise our God-given capacities to engage communally the complexity of contemporary life with eyes, minds, and hearts wide open, to work collaboratively rather than in dominating ways with others as therapists and global citizens, to clarify one’s convictions while remaining in respectful dialogue with those who disagree, and to take seriously once again – and in fresh ways – the ancient charge to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God and neighbour.

5. AN APPROPRIATE PASTORAL RESPONSE

In his book entitled, *The unhealed wound: The church and human sexuality*, Eugene Kennedy (2001:17) states unequivocally: “In the great myths of the twentieth century, totalitarianism emasculates the male figure through the wars and violent repression that are the institutional agencies of maintaining control.” He sees the church as such a controlling agency when it comes to human sexuality. Control of sexuality causes an unhealed wound in the church itself, but the institutional church “continues to look past its own wound as it seeks to maintain the painful division that it imposes on human experience” (Kennedy 2001:36). In trying to control human sexuality, the church wounds not only the people it punishes when they do not conform to its controlling measures, but also itself. By these controlling measures the church as institution succeeds in estranging people from their own human experience. Gay people *are* who they are, but *may not be* who they are. The best option open to them is being who they are in restricted form. The restriction is: no sexual love for a sexual being for the duration of his or her life. Celibacy is imposed and no choice is left to these individuals. They have “lived their lives in a sexually handicapped way, trying to follow institutional mandates and interpretations that by a perverse alchemy transform their naive human eroticism into something base and evil” (Kennedy 2001:39).

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Doing this to others is the unhealed wound of the church – making individuals feel guilty about being the healthy humans that they are. Those who perpetrate this psychological and spiritual abuse of others, probably do so on account of psychological and spiritual unwholeness in themselves. Kennedy (2001:39) puts it as follows: “They mask what is sexually unhealthy in themselves, denying it while indulging and gratifying it in the actions they carry out complacently in the name of the Church.” Only if the church itself recovers from its unhealed wound, can it be an effective healer in its endeavour to heal the world.

When the Roman Catholic Church rationalizes why, in this day and age, it still expects celibacy from its clerics, it demonstrates how it has lost touch with the reality of human beings. Kennedy (2001:142) calls it: “the Institution talking to itself, blinding itself to the unhealed wound, which only bleeds more profusely under the pressure of such strangely asexual argumentation.”

Protestant churches supposedly do not expect celibacy from anyone and does not pretend to make something high and holy out of celibacy, the state of withholding oneself from sexual expression. Protestant churches do, however, want to control when and with whom which degree of sexual activity may take place. In principle most Protestant churches expect celibacy (in which they do not believe) from those who have not been created heterosexual. And they expect it for the duration of their lives. Lay members of such churches who belong to sexual minorities will probably “get away with” not being quite celibate. The same goes for lay members of churches and clerics who have sex before marriage – which is against the churches’ official prescription. But a gay cleric will not “get away with” having relationship which includes sexual expression. They are punished by the church. They lose their vocation.¹⁰

In some churches gay people cannot be ordained at all. In others, as in my Protestant denomination, a gay person can become a minister, elder or deacon, but is then required to remain celibate for life. Kennedy (2001:144) identifies the Roman Catholic discourse on celibacy as “an assertion of power rather than an expression of authority.” He distinguishes between exerting power over others with the aim to control, and exercising authority (which he traces back to the root *augere* which is “to grow”, “to increase”) which has as its goal the “full human development of the other”. Given the fact that, in Protestant tradition, no holiness or state of elevated spirituality is attached to celibacy, and furthermore that the church has already lost control over

¹⁰ See, e.g., with regard to the Dutch Reformed Church, the case of Reverend Laurie Gaum (See Agenda, Deel III: Handeling vir die dertiende vergadering van die Algemene Sinode van die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk, Maandag 4 tot Vrydag 8 Junie 2007, Boksburg, pp 205ff).

confining all sexual activity to (heterosexual) marriage (heterosexual believers rarely conform), why this deadly and deadening control over homosexual activity? Is this a sign of its own woundedness with regard to sexuality which is masked by abusive actions towards those who symbolise their fears? Kennedy (2001:147) points out that: “[a]basement of the other ... is a major component of many unhealthy sexual transactions. This is often the invisible agenda item when an inquisitor denigrates the subject of inquiry by the defiling process of inquiry itself.”

Wholeness is necessary in order to be a healer of others, albeit as a “wounded healer” or, rather, a “healed healer”. The terms “healing”, “wholeness” and “holy” are semantically related.¹¹ Kennedy (2001:182) purports that once the wholeness (integrity) of a personality has been compromised, then what is holy has been “transgressed or violated”. He asks: “What happens when persons are forced for centuries to accept a distorted model of themselves” (Kennedy 2001:183)? Examples of this are slaves and women. We could add sexual minorities. The church can only bring healing to these and other categories of wounded individuals after it has attended to its own wounds and first healed its own distorted idea of what health and wholeness for others could be.

The aim could never be to convert others to one’s own denomination or convictions. It is about contributing together to a better world. Emmanuel Lartey (2006:117) puts it as follows: “God is the God of the other who will remain other in authentic difference The otherness of other humans will not be overcome by assimilation into our likeness.” On the one hand there should be a respect for difference, whereas on the other hand difference can be overcome in God. According to Larry K Graham (1997:176), God is big enough to allow others to be themselves. The church should do likewise. For him, being the image of God in this world means “to ferociously protect and tenderly cherish the uniqueness of each entity in the world, while seeking the conditions of justice in which each might be fulfilled” (Graham 1997:177).

For Gijs Dingemans ([2000] 2001:280) the unity of the diverse Christian faith community is grounded in its mystical relationship with Christ. A Christian faith community which has lost this mystical union, has lost its own identity and the right to talk to others about Christ (cf De Reuver 2004:229). A dogmatist and literalistic interpretation of Biblical texts can turn people into the victims of rigid canonical prescriptions. Christian ethics does not represent a “checklist of commands and prohibitions” (Reid 1993:286; cf Burrige 2007:283).

¹¹ See Gerben Heitink (1990), *Pastoraat en ander vormen van hulp*, in Heitink, G et al (eds), *Heil, heling, gezondheid*, pp 117-130). 's-Gravenhage: Meinema.

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It is not language as such that transforms and empowers, but rather the ethical performative attitude which is expressed by means of language. Paul Ricoeur's concept of the "hermeneutical arch" explains how the interpreter aims to identify people's stories – expressed by means of language – in order to come to *refiguration* or personal transformation. In one of his last interviews before his death in 2005,¹² Ricoeur (in Kearney 2004:159-160) agreed with Sigmund Freud's insight that painful experiences often live on in the human psyche even though the physical cause may be long forgotten. Ricoeur cites Freud when he points out that the person "does not reproduce the forgotten fact in the form of remembering but in the form of action; he *repeats* it, obviously without knowing that he repeats it."

*Care by means of narrative therapy*¹³ is a process of "the addition of suffering to acting", "of sorrow to *praxis*". By means of the narrative we are "making our lives into life-stories" (emphasis by Ricoeur). In his own words: "Does this work of narrative not lie in the transition between what I call in *Time and Narrative*¹⁴ the 'configuration' constitutive of emplotment and the 'refiguration' of life by the practice of narrative? The work of narrative would thus be the narrative form of 'working through'" (Ricoeur, in Kearney 2004:160). The transformation of the self by means of critically engaging with the Bible comes through the imitation of biblical rolemodels of whom Jesus is the most important. Through the configuration of the life stories of biblical characters the refiguration of one's own story takes place. The own life story always includes the "Other on the margins" of society with whom the believer is involved (cf Kearney 2001).

The challenge to Christians in a postmodern world is: understand your world, become involved, prepare for change and learn to develop new strategies for different circumstances. Elaine Graham (1996:50-51) proposes that Christians refrain from confronting people with a set of external moral codes. The problem with such a strategy is that Christianity only possesses what Graham (1996:50) calls "an impoverished vocabulary of moral discernment – in relation to the individual *and* the collective". James Poling

¹² Paul Ricoeur in conversation with Richard and Anne Bernhard Kearney and Fabrizio Turoldo, recorded and written in Paris, 2001-2003, published as "Dialogue 5: On life stories (2003)", in Kearney (2004:157-169).

¹³ Cf R Ruard Ganzevoort's & Jan Visser's (2007:49-57) Dutch expression: "een self worden, zichzelf worden" (= becoming a self, becoming yourself) happens through the "transcendentie in het levensverhaal" (= transcendence in the lifestory).

¹⁴ See Ricoeur, P 1984. *Time and narrative, Volume 1*. Chicago: Chigago University Press; Ricoeur, P [1989] 1995. Pastoral praxeology, hermeneutics, and identity, in Ricoeur, P 1995, *Figuring the sacred: Religion, narrative and imagination*, tr by D Pellauer, edited by M I Wallace, 303-315. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress.

(1995:122) points out that the pastoral task of the Christian faith community has always been to listen to and care for those in need and those who suffer. Postmodern thought challenges pastoral care to include matters such as justice for people of both sexes, for people of all races, for the poor all over the world. Such a strategy calls for “reformed” models of pastoral care:

The pastoral care movement has two choices. Either it is still a reform movement to change church and society, or it is a profession within the established patriarchal church and society concerned mainly with its own financial future, accreditation, and making sure it has a secure place for its members ... If our pastoral care movement decides to return to its earlier reformist goals, it must respond to the present crisis in the area of sexuality by focusing on issues of the liberation of women ... and gays and lesbians from the traditional sexual ethics that support male dominance.

(Poling 1995:122)

6. ANTICIPATING PROPER PASTORAL CARE

Distorted ideas of sexuality in the church should first be healed before the church can heal people who have been wounded in their sexual humanness, in their most vulnerable humanity. To do so, the church will have to let go of power and control (see Kennedy 2001:183) in order to be restored in its authentic authority – an authority that does not want to control by abusing and humiliating others, but that wants them to grow to their fullest human potential and to be the healthy beings that they were created to be. In order to heal the alienation within Christianity, the institutional church should be pastoral in its approach to a broken humanity, attempting to “heal the wound in human sexuality that it has so often exacerbated” (Kennedy 2001:202).

Making the church whole will include bringing together in one created humanity the people that the church has so often separated and polarised: men from women, heterosexuals from sexual minorities, glorifying the one pole and demonising or demeaning the other. Seeing the healed and healing church in a truly pastoral role, Kennedy (2001:206) asks: “What would the Institution lose if, instead of issuing statements such as those about ... homosexuality, it sat, as a good pastor might, and willingly listened to the world and its sexual woes?” Such a church would no longer be controlling (a symptom of psychological unwholeness), but would seek healing for and with the people who are yearning for the healing of their own sexual wounds. Such a church, according to Kennedy (2001:206), could become a “[m]ystery of

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understanding and reconciliation” and “begin its own healing and begin a new relationship to humankind.”

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