The gift of life

Towards an ethic of flourishing personhood

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Research Justification

The concept 'human life' and what it entails have become a prominent idea in current theological–ethical discourses, especially in the growing Christian reflection on bioethics, eco-ethics and social justice. Contemporary Christian ethicists focus on concepts such as 'flourishing life', 'happiness' and 'joy' and the means in which these deep human desires can be realised and fulfilled in life today amidst perennial surges of racism, xenophobia, sexism, systemic violence, and policies and structures which further poverty and other forms of social injustices. Christian soteriology, and subsequent moral agency, grapples with the question: How can humans flourish in societies today and how should Christian morality be defined and designed to be instrumental in the current pursuit of happiness, joy and hope? Currently, theologians doing theology within the ambit of the reformed tradition in cooperation with theologians from other traditions, attempt to give impetus to a social ethic that can direct moral agency in the face of the ethical challenges brought about by the Fourth Industrial Revolution, climate change, global politics and social disorder.

The aim of this publication is to engage with and participate in this modern-day discourse by proposing relevant theological perspectives on the concept of life and in particular its relevance for Christians living in this age and in an environment that poses major challenges to public morality and the common good. In conjunction with the emerging theological interest in the concept of life, this project is a modest attempt to take part in the advancement of an *ethic of life* for today, under the rubric of an ethic of flourishing personhood. The point of departure is the biblical concept of the gift of life and what this gift entails for the understanding human life, personhood and moral agency. The paradigmatic approach in this contribution is reformed theology – the tradition that originates from the work of John Calvin, enriched by his contemporaries and followers over the last five centuries and especially the recent contributions of modern global scholars doing theological research in this tradition. Where applicable the research also engages with similar discourses in other theological traditions in search of plausible and enriching ideas.

By way of a comparative literary study of the primary scholarly contributions of these theologians, this research engages with these recent studies and offers new knowledge and insights for Christian ethics today. The line of reasoning in this book delineates the broad concept *ethic of life* and the biblical concept *gift of life* and draws the line towards an ethic of flourishing personhood because it is the entire personhood of human beings that is in the balance. The central theoretical argument of the study is that reformed theology can give direction to the contemporary theological search for meaning and purpose of human life and offer answers to the questions on life facing humanity today especially by pursuing the idea of flourishing personhood. The contribution is offered in this scholarly research is original with clear and meticulous references to the consulted sources and without any form of plagiarism.

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I dedicate this work to my thirteen grandchildren. Our youth have to navigate an increasingly complex world. My hope is that this book can serve as a roadmap, so that they may each have a flourishing life.

Contents

Abbreviations Appearing in the Text and Notes

List of Abbreviations

AAAS	American Association for the Advancement of Science
ANC	African National Congress
IVF	In Vitro Fertilisation
NGOs	Non-governmental Organisations
NP	National Party
PAS	Post-abortion Syndrome
PTSD	Post-traumatic Stress Disorder
SAIRR	South African Institute of Race Relations
TRC	Truth and Reconciliation Commission
UDBHR	Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights

Biographical Note

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J.M. Vorster served as professor in Ecclesiology and Moral Theology at the North-West University (previously Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education) from 1990 until retirement in 2011. Since then, he has occupied a position as post-65 researcher at the same institution. In 1978, he obtained a DPhil degree in Philosophy and in 1984, a ThD in Theology. The focus of his research is the ethics of human dignity and human rights as well as political ethics. He published 115 articles in accredited national and international scholarly journals, 15 chapters in scholarly books and 12 books as sole author on relevant topics in his field of interest. He was a participant as speaker and session chairperson at several national and international academic conferences. From 2000 to 2013, he acted as an advisor of the International Association of Religious Freedom at the annual sessions of the Human Rights Council of the United Nations in Geneva and furthered his research about human rights at the United Nations. He is an active member of the International Reformed Theological Institute (Amsterdam) and until recently of the Society of Christian Ethics in the United States. Since 2005, he serves as the final editor of the open access accredited scholarly theological journal *In die Skriflig/In Luce Verbi* as well as series editor of the book series: *Reformed Theology* in Africa being published by AOSIS Scholarly Books in Cape Town. In 2016, he was awarded the Totius prize in Theology by the South African Academy of Science and Art and is rated since 2005 as an Accomplished Researcher by the National Research Foundation in South Africa.

Declaration

Chapter 4

This chapter, entitled *A dignified life*, presents research findings from J.M. Vorster's previous article and chapter:

- Vorster, J.M., 2019, 'The theological-ethical implications of Galatians 3:28 for a Christian perspective on equality as a foundational value in the human rights discourse', *In die Skriflig* 53(1), a2494. https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v53i1.2494

- Vorster, J.M., 2017, 'Racism in South Africa: Are we at a tipping point?', in J.A. du Rand, J.M. Vorster & N. Vorster (eds.), *Togetherness in South Africa*, pp. 59–78, AOSIS, Cape Town. https://doi.org/10.4102/aosis.2017.tsa49.03

The chapter represents a more than 50% reworking of previous material to meet the standards of the publisher and the Department of Higher Education and Training. The acknowledged material has been used with the permission from the author and publisher, and these sources have been duly cited in the reference list.

Chapter 5

This chapter, entitled *A relational life*, presents research findings from J.M. Vorster's previous articles:

- Vorster, J.M., 2016, 'Marriage and family in view of the doctrine of the covenant', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 72(3), a3218. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v72i3.3218

- Vorster, J.M., 2018, 'The church as a moral agent: In dialogue with Bram van de Beek', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 74(4), 4809. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v74i4.4809

The chapter represents a more than 50% reworking of previous material to meet the standards of the publisher and the Department of Higher Education and Training. The acknowledged material has been used with the permission from the author and publisher, and these sources have been duly cited in the reference list.

Angle of approach

■ Introduction

In an age where there was broad recognition of the Christian religion and respect for the church as an institution in European culture on the one hand and immense human suffering on the other, the young German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer was deeply concerned about Christianity. His concern sprung from the fact that a person who professes to be a Christian and who holds on to a long Christian tradition could confess doctrinally correct beliefs, observe its moral codes and follow the accepted behaviours and practices of the church, whilst simultaneously supporting an evil system and committing unspeakable horrors driven by a totally immoral ideology. This kind of contradiction was, in his view, characteristic of a formalised and stagnant religion of traditions, doctrines and customs, without any real impact on the predicament of suffering people. In his many writings, he opposed the dead, formalised and fossilised religion and the cold, institutionalised church of symbols, rituals, customs and traditions that he saw in the Europe of his day. Deeply distressed by the rise of the ideology of national socialism, the politics of Hitler's Third Reich and the looming war between so-called 'Christian nations', he contended that Christian faith should be liberated from such a religion.

As a first-hand witness of the evils of national socialism in Germany and the silence and even collaboration of the German church, he wished for a

faith that grapples not only with the foundations of faith but especially with the life-changing ability of faith – a faith that speaks to suffering people and challenges the causes of their suffering. He longed for a Christian faith that is relevant for human beings in predicaments of evil and vulnerability. He therefore called for a *religionless Christianity* or a *this-worldly Christianity.* This idea was the foundation for and the guiding principle of his thought-provoking theology. A prominent South African exponent of Bonhoeffer's theology, De Gruchy (2010), described this idea of Bonhoeffer as a call for a Christian religion where 'being for others', a deep rootedness in the life, suffering and resurrection of Christ, is valued as the true meaning of Christianity.

On 21 July 1944, nearly a year before his execution, Bonhoeffer wrote to his friend Bethge from prison (Bonhoeffer 2015a):

> In the past few years or so I've come to know and understand more and more the profound this-worldliness of Christianity. The Christian is not a *homo religiosus*, but simply a human being, in the same way that Jesus was a human being ... I do not mean the shallow and banal this-worldliness of the enlightened, the bustling, the comfortable, or the lascivious, but the profound this-worldliness that shows discipline and includes the ever-present knowledge of death and resurrection ... I want to learn to have faith ... I thought I myself could learn to have faith by trying to live something like a saintly life ... Later on I discovered and I'm still discovering right up to this moment, that one only learns to have faith by living in the full this-worldliness of life. If one has completely renounced making something of oneself, whether it be a saint or a converted sinner or a church leader (a so-called priestly figure!), a just or a unjust person – a sick or a healthy person – then one throws oneself totally in the arms of God, and this is what I call this-worldliness: living fully in the midst of life's tasks, questions, successes and failures, and perplexities – then one takes seriously no longer one's own sufferings, but rather the suffering of God in the world. Then one stays awake with Christ in Gethsemane. And I think this is faith; this is metanoia, and this is how one becomes a human being, a Christian. (pp. 471–473)

Bonhoeffer's criticism of a fossilised Christian religion interested post-war Christian theologians. His plea for a faith that speaks to suffering people and addresses the causes of their suffering resonated with many theological traditions worldwide. Churches, motivated by the ecumenical movement and extra-ecclesiastical developments such as the ratification of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations in 1948 and the wave of decolonisation, endeavoured to become involved in the new social and political discourses. The quest for the liberation of oppressed and marginalised people resulting from racist, gender-biased, homophobic and other oppressive, one-dimensional societies, permeated the agenda of the church. Political theologies, founded on new hermeneutical theories with different angles of approach, emerged and found their way to what became known as *public theology* – a vibrant branch of theology in the first part of the 21st century. Public theology deals with the life-changing ability of Christian theology in

the sense of what Bonhoeffer termed a 'this-worldly' Christianity. Christianity is nowadays very much concerned with human life, and this tendency can largely be attributed to Bonhoeffer's plea for a religionless Christianity.

■ Lived faith

In his seminal study on and exposition of the idea of a 'religionless' Christianity in the works of Bonhoeffer, Wüstenberg (1998:159) indicates that Bonhoeffer overcame the dialectical-theological antithesis of religion and revelation and developed a concept of religion where not the confession of faith itself but *lived* faith is essential. Believing is not only to adhere to fundamental doctrines of faith but rather to live the faith. A living faith implies believing through 'participation in Jesus's being', therefore, to live a life in 'being for others'. Lived faith denotes a life lived for others. Bonhoeffer was thus not so much concerned with a static dogmatic religion but with pulsating life flowing from faith. Christian religion has to be defined in a non-religious way in order to reveal its essential meaning. A non-religious interpretation of the Christian religion is therefore nothing other than a Christological interpretation which, according to Wüstenberg, amounts to asking about the 'relevance of Jesus Christ for modern life'. For this reason, Wüstenberg chose the title *A Theology of Life* for the English translation of his work *Glauben als Leben: Dietrich Bonhoeffer und die nichtreligiöse Interpretation biblischer Begriffe*.

The publication of this book about Bonhoeffer highlighted the prominence of life in the discourses in public theology today, and especially in the field of Christian ethics. A Christian ethic now asks the question: What does human life entail in a society moving towards the Fourth Industrial Revolution with its tremendous technological advances, but also increasing levels of inequality, the degeneration of the quality of life of the marginalised and vulnerable, and the inhibition of a fulfilling and flourishing life by an increasingly technocratic society? New forms of social injustices, political and economic exploitation, angst and fear are emerging. The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and the fear and isolation it caused added to the angst and the new quest for happiness. Furthermore, the concept of *life* raises new interest in a Christian ethic, especially in view of the huge strides in contemporary research in evolutionary biology and the medical possibilities emerging from this research. Climate change and ecocide entered the field of scientific concerns so that theologians also ask (see Naude 2016; Snarr 2017): What can a Christian ethic contribute when it comes to the moral issues flowing from new biological technologies? Since the widely acclaimed theology of Bonhoeffer with its quest for a living faith, the concept 'human life' has become a prominent idea in current theological–ethical discourse, especially in the disciplines of bioethics, eco-ethics and social justice. Marais (2015:9ff.) reports in her recent thought-provoking study how topics such as 'flourishing life' and 'happiness'

became prominent themes in contemporary reflections on Christian soteriology.

■ An ethic of personhood

The aim of this research is to engage with and participate in this modern-day discourse by proposing relevant theological perspectives on the concept of life, in particular its relevance for Christians living in this age and in an environment that poses major challenges to public morality and the common good. In conjunction with the theological interest in the concept of life, this project is a modest attempt to take part in the advancement of an *ethic of life* for today. The angle of approach in this contribution is reformed theology – the tradition that originates from the work of John Calvin, enriched by his contemporaries and followers over the last five centuries. Over the years, and especially in recent times, theologians doing theology within the ambit of the reformed tradition, in cooperation with theologians from other traditions, gave impetus to a social ethic that can direct moral agency in the face of the ethical challenges brought about the Fourth Industrial Revolution. My line of reasoning aims to delineate the broad concept *ethic of life* into an ethic of flourishing personhood because it is the entire personhood of human beings that is in the balance.[1] The central theoretical argument of the study is that reformed theology can give direction to the contemporary theological search for meaning and purpose and offer answers to the questions on life facing humanity today. Reformed theology can contribute to the development of an ethic of flourishing personhood flowing from God's revelation in the written word (Scripture).

■ Reformed faith as lived faith

Two important tenets of reformed theology need to be mentioned at the outset of this study. Firstly, since the time of John Calvin and his contemporaries, reformed theology was not intended to be a theology dealing with personal piety, spirituality and the future dispensation alone. Calvin's reformation was also an attempt to be, in the words of Bonhoeffer, a 'this-worldliness' movement within Christianity at that time and in subsequent centuries and

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1. All researchers stand on the shoulders of previous research and findings and use and apply or review these findings in new contexts and as answers to new emerging questions. Over the years, this author has done research about several social ethical topics. Some of the outcomes of these attempts has been published in scholarly national and international publications in the form of original research, dialogues and discussions. In this publication, I revisit some of the research I have done in the past and offer certain findings in the context of my reflection about an ethic of flourishing personhood. Where applicable I refer to my previous research and the re-applications or revision of some of the findings of previous research for the purpose of this study. The reference list includes the titles of my relevant previous research articles and books which are referred to in this study.

other environments. Calvin (2008:*Inst*. III.VII.5.11) was deeply concerned about the plight of the poor and the responsibility of the civil authority to protect the rights of the vulnerable. In a recent publication, I discussed Calvin's ideas on the rights of people, especially the poor, with reference to the 1559 edition of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* and several of his biblical commentaries (see J.M. Vorster 2017a:35ff.). Although he did not develop a doctrine of human rights, his elaboration on the task of the church and of the civil authorities was aimed at a reformation of social life. De Gruchy (2009:206) describes Calvin as an evangelical reformer and a Christian humanist because of his emphasis on the social implications of the gospel. He called on both the church and the civil government to do justice to the poor – the civil authority by just rule and the church by reminding civil authority and society of the plight of the poor and God's concern for them.

His call for reformation of the church and the reinvigoration of Scripture was just as much a call for socio-political reformation as it was a re-invention of Scripture and a deep-rooted criticism of Roman Catholic theology and papal authority as the main tenets of the Christianity of his time.

Theologians and jurists following Calvin's social theories nurtured the idea of democracy and the rule of law and opposed the powers and structures of the monarchies, with the aim to promote social justice and responsible politics. In his study on the reformation of rights brought about by the Calvinist tradition, Witte (2007) explains how exponents of Calvin's views, such as Beza, Hugo de Groot, Althusius and John Milton with their ideas of a political covenant between God, civil authority and citizens, influenced John Locke and the development of constitutionalism in the United States. In the United States, reformed churches were the custodians of the new constitution with its high regard for democracy and the protection of people's rights and liberties. Reformed theology has since its inception been a theology of Scripture alone, making it a theology with a special focus on the welfare of human beings in all their relationships. Reformed theology with its emphasis on the calling of Christians to act as kings, prophets and priests in society and to be compassionate and humane in the face of oppression, poverty and suffering is essentially a theology of 'lived faith'. Because of this tradition of social involvement, reformed theology is suited to engage in the modern discourse on the concept *life* and its relevance for life today.

◼ Reformed faith as biblical faith

Secondly, doing theology from the perspective of the traditional reformed paradigm requires a clear affirmation of the plausibility of this theological research and the hermeneutical theory determining this venture. Over and against the modernist view that theology is below reason and cannot claim to be a science, the postmodern epistemology of Kuhn (1970) and

Lyotard (1991) supports the credibility of the biblical faith as a valid paradigm and as a plausible approach to doing science. Just like other sciences, theology departs from certain axioms. Furthermore, all theological research and biblical interpretation are driven by a certain hermeneutical theory flowing from a theological paradigm. Therefore, a brief overview of the hermeneutical theory that is applied in this book is necessary. Reformed theology departs from the axiom that God exists and that God reveals God-self in his creation and caring immanent reign. People are able to know God, and this knowledge is the foundation and guide of human existence and conduct (Calvin 2008:*Inst.* I.2.1.7). The perfect knowledge of God is a creational gift, implanted in the human mind, but it has been distorted and corrupted by sin. However, every human being still 'has a seed of religion, divinely sown in all' (Calvin 2008:*Inst.* I.4.1.12). This seed of religion brings about in every person the light of reason and a moral sense (*lex naturalis*), which is sufficient to prevent humankind and society from falling into total chaos (Calvin 2008:*Inst.* II.2.13.166). However, this gift is not enough to come to the knowledge needed for salvation and reconciliation with God. To know God more comprehensively, that is to the extent that persons should know to find salvation and for living under God's transforming reign, a second source of knowledge is necessary. This knowledge comes from God's self-revelation in Scripture. As an act of free grace, God reveals this knowledge in Scripture. Scripture is God's particular revelation.

The reformed creeds[2] use Calvin's idea of this *duplex cognito Dei*, in other words God's general revelation in the 'book of nature' and his particular revelation in 'the written word' (Scripture). The Belgic Confession testifies the following in Article 2 (see also Heid. Cat. Q/A 122; Canons of Dort, Head III and IV, art. 6, 7; Westminster Confession of Faith, I; the Westminster Larger Catechism Q/A 2; and the references to Scripture in these statements):

> We know Him by two means: first, by creation, preservation, and government of the universe; (Ps 19:2; Ep 4:6) which is before our eyes as a most elegant book wherein all creatures, great and small, are as so many characters leading us to contemplate *the invisible things of God*, namely, *His internal power and divinity*, as the apostle Paul sayeth (Rm 1:20). All which things are sufficient to convince men and to leave them without excuse. Secondly, He makes Himself more clearly and more fully known to us by His holy and divine Word (Ps 19:8; 1 Cr 12:6), that is to say, as far as it is necessary for us to know in this life, to his glory and our salvation. (art. 2)

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2. The direct quotations from the reformed creeds, namely the Belgic Confession (1561), the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), the Second Helvetic Confession (1566), the Canons of Dort (1619); The Westminster Confession of Faith (1647); the Westminster Shorter Catechism (1647) and the Westminster Larger Catechism (1648), are taken from the publication of a synopsis of the original texts of these documents by Beeke and Ferguson (1999).

The view of Scripture as the particular revelation of God is the foundation of the reformed doctrine of Scripture, which can be summarised in the following statements:

- Scripture is the written revelation of God and is a holy text.
- Scripture was inspired by the Spirit of God and is more than just a collection of ancient texts.
- Scripture came into being by a divine-human action and is authoritative for faith and life.
- Scripture originated within different linguistic and literary contexts and contains multiple literary genres.
- Scripture is theologically congruent, irrespective of chronological and historical differences and contradictions that may occur in the text.
- Scripture reveals the reality of the renewing immanent reign of God and its implications for the renewal of God's creation.

These fundamental beliefs, founded on the axiom of God's existence and his self-revelation, constitute the pre-conditions of a reformed hermeneutical theory. In my opinion, this theory can be described as a hermeneutic of congruent biblical theology. I have discussed the plausibility and the intelligibility of such a hermeneutic in another recent article and will therefore refer in this study to the guiding principles only (see J.M. Vorster 2020). These guiding principles of the theory are briefly explained in the following overview.

■ A hermeneutic of congruent biblical theology

The four important directives for a plausible hermeneutic of congruent biblical theology are outlined below. These are the role of pre-understanding when dealing with a passage in Scripture; the recognition and negotiation of the different literary genres in Scripture; the notion of grammatical-historical exegesis and the appreciation of the idea of congruent biblical theology.

■ Pre-understanding

It is valid and fair to assert that research does not take place in a void, because all scientific research departs from certain axioms. Researchers are not completely objective because they are influenced and driven by their respective paradigms and axiomatic presuppositions. This is also true in the case of biblical interpretation. No reader approaches Scripture without some form of pre-understanding (*Vorverständnis*). Spykman (1995:121) explains that the self is always involved in the process of interpretation. Exegetes can never

escape themselves or turn themselves off. Osborne (2006:29) also emphasises the pertinent role of the reader's context, because readers often wish to harmonise the text with their belief systems and see its meaning in the light of their own respective preconceived theological systems. Therefore, readers of Scripture must be aware that their understanding of the text is influenced by a pre-understanding resulting from their respective paradigms. They must deal with this reality by constantly revisiting and challenging their presuppositions as Gadamer (1979:258ff.) and Osborne (2006:407) remind us. Therefore, it is valid to use axioms when doing science, but interpretation must be compared with the findings of other readings driven by the axioms and presuppositions of their paradigms. Biblical interpretation is after all a collective and ecumenical endeavour as the apostle Paul reminds us in Ephesians 3:

> I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, *together with all the Lord's holy people*, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. (vv. 16–19)

Furthermore, the universal basis of language brings readers closer to each other. Other interpretations of readers driven by other paradigms, but dealing with the same text, can become a corrective to our own reading and interpretation, and in this way the influence of pre-understanding can be managed. Whilst working within the paradigm of the reformed tradition, I hope that I succeed in honouring this prerequisite.

◼ Genres

What is also essential in biblical interpretation according to a hermeneutic of congruent biblical theology is to stand firm on the reality that the revelation of God in the written Word was not only written down by many authors but also using different literary genres. God spoke to people through historical narratives, by way of people's experiences, in the psalms through expressions of truth and wisdom, by way of symbols and metaphors, through prophecies and by way of the teachings of Jesus and the apostles. Each literary genre of the biblical text poses its own challenges. Narratives, wisdom literature, prophecies, epistles and symbolic images and expressions require different tools of interpretation (Ricoeur 1981b:ch. 3). Kelsey (2009:135) explains that biblical passages ought to be studied with a literary interest in their genres, the structure of their compositions, the devices and force of their rhetoric and how they come to their respective answers. In this respect, Osborne (2006:181–343) proposes a comprehensive, thorough, and well-argued genre analysis that considers the implications of the

various genres for their respective interpretations. Neglecting the challenges posed by a genre can lead to erroneous interpretations and findings, especially when the reader participates in the quest for biblical–ethical principles that can be applied by Christian ethics to the moral questions of this day and age. For example, a description of a certain situation or a cultural custom in a narrative genre cannot be elevated to prescription. Descriptions of the way of life of a patriarchal family and a polygamous marriage cannot be translated into an ethics principle condoning and advocating patriarchy and polygamy. Descriptions of capital punishment for various transgressions in ancient Israel cannot be interpreted as a biblical sanctioning of capital punishment in modern criminal law. The deeper spiritual experience of an author cannot be proffered as normative for spirituality today, and customs in families and other relationships in antiquity cannot be set as a foundation for a Christian ethic of family life and relationships today. The literalist method of turning descriptions into prescriptions has caused many questionable moral codes that have influenced Christian life in the past, such as the perception that women are inferior, the defence of slavery and the endorsement of violence as a way to solve problems and serve a good end. The reader of Scripture ought to use the tools required by every genre to excavate the deeper meaning and message of biblical passages and to establish what can be regarded as a divine command for moral conduct.

◼ Grammatical and historical exegesis

In addition to this important guiding principle, a biblical ethic requires a thorough grammatical analysis of the passage under scrutiny, not only within its socio-historic context but also within the context of the congruent theology of Scripture. Gadamer (1979:258ff.) reminds us that the connecting point of the authors of the biblical text and the readers of the text through the centuries is ultimately the universal text. The universal text brings authors, readers and Christian traditions into the same space, and therefore the art of good and sound grammatical-historical exegesis remains the foundation of responsible theology. I do not discuss the complete process of grammatical-historical exegesis here, I suffice with highlighting only the crucial arguments relevant for a hermeneutic of congruent biblical theology. The first argument is that the text under scrutiny should be authenticated by way of the tools of the science of text criticism and redaction criticism. Then the grammatical structure should be analysed within its historical context, and the meaning of the unit of thought in the text must be excavated by using the tools of lexicography (Van der Belt 2006:328) (for a thorough explanation of the other rules of exegesis, see Osborne 2006:35–180; Peels 1996:52–92; Silva 1996:197–286; J.M. Vorster 2017b).

■ Congruent biblical theology

Lastly, the passage must be collated into what Kelsey (2009:458–477) calls the 'wholeness' of Scripture. A biblical ethic rests on biblical theology, which only emerges when the 'parts' are synchronised into the 'whole' of God's revelation. A biblical ethic can thus not be founded on isolated parts of Scripture. In his study on the meaning of the Ten Commandments for modern Christian ethics, the reformed theologian Douma (1996:11, 363) warns against an appeal to Scripture that uses biblical passages in an atomistic (isolated) way by lifting them out of their immediate context and the context of the congruent theology of Scripture. He typifies such use of Scripture as 'biblicism'. Biblicist ethics employs a principle of *sola text* instead of *tota scriptura*. Biblicism can lead to highly erroneous understandings of parts of Scripture, especially when the interpreter searches for biblical moral codes. Just as in cases where descriptions of certain conducts in ancient times are proposed as ethical prescriptions for today, a biblicist pattern of reasoning can elevate the moral codes of certain historic situations to an ethic for all times and circumstances. A typical example of biblicism is the restrictions in many churches on the ordination of women in ecclesiastical offices with reference to 1 Corinthians 14:33–35 and 1 Timothy 2:12–15 without taking into consideration the rich content of human equality in biblical anthropology. The relation 'part' and 'whole' is fundamental in a hermeneutic of congruent biblical theology and is briefly explained in the next paragraph.

One of the principles of the reformed doctrine of Scripture is that God's revelation in Scripture is theologically congruent irrespective of chronological and historical differences and contradictions that may occur in the text. The ongoing revelation of God necessitates that the evidence acquired by a grammatical-historical analysis of a passage under investigation must be harmonised with the testimony of the broad revelation. A grammatical-historical exegesis is inadequate if it is not enlightened by the theological interpretation of Scripture. The 'part' (passage in the biblical text) needs to be illuminated by the 'whole' (the congruent biblical theology). This guiding principle in a hermeneutic of congruent biblical theology has important implications for the process of interpretation. Firstly, the principle entails that Scripture can be regarded as its own interpreter (*Scriptura Scripturae interpres*). This enables the reader to approach difficult passages from the perspective of passages of which the meanings are obvious. With reference to the above-mentioned biblicist exposition of the inferior position of women, 1 Corinthians 14:33–35 and 1 Timothy 2:12–15 could rather be interpreted in the light of the lucid description of the principle of equality in Galatians 3:28. The interpreter will then realise that the two passages restricting women to silence in the gatherings of believers are time-bound and cannot be understood as ethical principles for all times. In his defence of the reformed doctrine of Scripture against the emerging liberal schools of the early twentieth century,

the Dutch systematic theologian Bavinck (1928:450) emphasised the theological unity of Scripture as the ultimate tool to understand parts that sometimes seem to contradict each other (Scripture is the *supremus judex controversarium*).

The principle of a congruent biblical theology as a guiding principle in biblical interpretation makes it necessary for the interpreter to distinguish between the centre of the revelation and the periphery. In dealing with Scripture, the reader could ask: What are the essential teachings of Scripture that are a *sine qua non* for salvation, faith and life, and what are non-essentials (*adiaphora*) that are time-bound or mere guidelines for a particular situation or a certain way of life? When non-essentials are elevated to essentials, biblical ethics becomes casuistic with a strict deontological rule for every form of conduct. When essentials are reduced to non-essentials, biblical ethics become relative and ineffectual. The reformed idea of the congruence of biblical theology presents a functioning tool to distinguish between non-essentials and essentials in Christian ethics. The interplay of biblical passages (parts) and the congruent theology of Scripture (wholeness) is therefore an indispensable component of a hermeneutic of congruent biblical theology. Van der Kooi and Van den Brink (2017:554) indicate, with reference to various contemporary exponents subscribing to this idea, that this theory has again become a productive movement in the contemporary hermeneutical discourse.

■ Conclusion
■ The next step

The use of Scripture in this publication and the proposals that flow from the consideration of biblical data adhere to the directives of the theory of a hermeneutic of congruent biblical theology as explained above. In the rest of this study, I explore the biblical concept of the gift of human life and I attempt to determine its significance for a fashionable ethic of flourishing personhood. The following characteristics of the gift of life are discussed in separate chapters under the headings of human life as:

• a unique life
• a sacred life
• a dignified life
• a relational life
• a dedicated life
• a blessed life.

The study concludes with a proposal of what flourishing personhood would entail when it is related to the gift of life as a determinant for Christian ethics. My contention is that the characteristics of human life, explained and applied

under the rubrics above, shape significant and applicable moral principles and call for a dynamic moral agency that can guide persons in the pursuit of flourishing personhood in society today.

In Chapter 2, I argue the uniqueness of human life and point towards the substantial relevance of this characteristic for a contemporary ethic of flourishing personhood.

A unique life

■ Introduction

Christian anthropology draws on the doctrine of creation, the doctrine of sin, Christology and pneumatology. Other systematic theological themes also shed light on our understanding of certain aspects and responsibilities of human life, but these four doctrines determine the essence of what it is to be human. The premise for understanding the human being is the belief that God created humans, that this creation was distorted by evil, that God re-created the fallen human being in the suffering on the cross and the death and resurrection of Christ, and that in Christ the restored human being receives the Spirit of God for comfort and guidance until God restores the whole creation into its creational glory with the consummation. This framework of God's decisive reign over humankind determines all the facets of Christian anthropology. How these perspectives determine human life today will become apparent in the rest of this study.

Traditional reformed theology approaches the congruent theology of Scripture from the perspective of creation, highlighting the sequence of creation, fall, redemption and the call to human gratitude. Barth's angle of approach in defining Christian anthropology is Christology, which illuminates, in his view, our understanding of creation and fall and the restoration of humanity (Barth 1956:123). The doctrine of reconciliation determines the way in which the origin, presence and future of humankind

should be comprehended. These perspectives can be appreciated and will indeed be applied in some of the depictions of human life that follow in Chapter 4 of this study. To my mind, the ontological approach of the reformed tradition is still significant and constructive because the narrative of creation, with its various metaphors, reveals intrinsic qualities of the human being that distinguishes the human creature from other creatures. It is essential that we understand these differences in order to understand the full meaning of the gift of life. A reading of the creation narrative and a probing of the metaphors reveal that the human being is not something (or somebody), but someone, as the Roman Catholic theologian Speamann (2006:5–15) explains in eloquent terms.

The story of creation explicitly asserts in a single passage that human life is the 'breath' [*niš-mat*] of God. Genesis 2:7 reads: '… the Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and man became a living person [*nepeš chajja*]'. This short narrative is profoundly significant. Bonhoeffer (2004:78) is of the opinion that Genesis 2:7 expresses a variety of cardinal relationships that determine the existence and nature of the human creature. An interpreter can take his argument even further when focusing on the description of various movements in this passage. Three movements, each rich in content, capture the attention of the interpreter. These are: 'The Lord God formed the man'; 'The Lord God breathed the breath of life' and 'The human creature became a living person'.

■ God forms

The first movement depicts an artist making an artwork out of lifeless material, such as a sculptor making a sculpture from clay. The artist has the ability and the talent to create an astonishing image with passion. The metaphor is down-to-earth. The way of speaking is childlike. The Lord God models or moulds with clay and the human being is fashioned like a vessel out of an earthly clod. In the description of the Lord God as Yahweh Elohim (the Lord God), two very important attributes of God become apparent. On the one hand, he is portrayed as Elohim, which describes his omnipotence (all power). God is above his creation and all laws of nature and God is therefore able to create. The power of God has no limitations. God acts above, and in history, God orders and guides, and God can create life out of death. From the omnipotence of God can also be derived God's omnipresence (all present) in and above creation and God's omniscience (all-knowing). On the other hand, God is depicted as the relational God (Yahweh). Yahweh is only used in the Bible when the author is talking about God's personal relationship with the people. A great example of this can be found in Psalm 19 where the omnipotence of God in nature and the relationship of God with the people is lauded. The author

talks in the first six verses about Elohim and the relationship with the material world. Then, in Verse 7, he shifts and starts to write about Yahweh and the relationship with those who know Yahweh and who are in a covenantal relationship with Yahweh.

God's act of sculpting the human being out of the earth expresses God's nearness to the human being, but also God's omnipotence. The nearness is discernible in the fact that God relates to his work, but also exerts God's omnipotent ability to do what he intends to do. Brueggemann (1982:45) remarks that whilst other living creatures are created by a command of God, the creation of the human creature is a pertinent act of God. In his view, this pertinent and decisive act of God expresses not an indifferent nearness, but a committed fatherliness. The fatherliness portrays the love of God and embodies the essence of the true God of whom the whole Scripture bears witness. The act expresses the benevolent and concerned attitude with which the creator creates the human being and the relational context in which the creature can worship the Creator. This argument of Brueggemann can be expounded even more. It will be fair to add that this creative act of God also indicates that the piece of art is wholly dependent on the creative artistic design of the creator. The statue cannot choose its own form and can only come into being by the hands of the sculptor according to the artistic passion and the intention of the sculptor. Similarly, the human creature cannot develop according to its own innate abilities but is developed according to the artistic plan of the creator.

Modern 'theology from below', which founds anthropology in evolutionary biology, questions in my opinion the brilliance of the artistic act of God, devalues God's artistic design and casts a shadow over the splendour of human life. With this statement, I do not reject the findings of evolutionary science because creation and evolution can be reconciled to a large extent. To comprehend the relevance of God's artistic act for an ethic of flourishing personhood and to address the limitations of the anthropology and morality of the theology 'from below', I prefer to expound on the relation between theology and natural science in the following argumentation.

■ Evolution?

God's artistic act of sculping the human being according to God's design raises progressively the question: What then about the increasing findings of modern evolutionary biology concerning the development of the human being? This question has interested reformed theologians for a long time and the discourse is still ongoing. On the one hand, the creationist movement in orthodox reformed theology rejects the idea of any evolutionary development of humankind based on a literalist interpretation of the

creation narratives. This movement also fears the domino effect in Christian faith when theology attempts to Christianise the natural scientific findings about the age of the earth and natural evolution. Exponents of this movement claim that if the theory of evolution is accepted by the theology of creation, one after the other foundational belief of Christian faith will tumble. Their line of reasoning follows the sequence: no creation – no Fall – no necessity for redemption in Christ and sanctification by the Spirit of God – no eschatology – and – in the end, hopelessness. On the other hand, some scientists in the field of evolutionary biology reject any notion of God's creation based on the presupposition that all metaphysics are below reason. The third angle of approach is to do science and theology within totally independent trajectories. This view entails that science and religion have entirely different provinces and operate by entirely different methodologies and rules. Nothing about humanity's biological history and nature has any relevance to religious claims and beliefs. Science deals with facts and religion with values (Clark 2000:1). Another line of thought in theological reflection on evolutionism proposes that evolution is the result of intelligent design, which can be equated with God's act of creation. God designed everything and implanted the laws of nature for the whole of creation to evolve according to his intelligent design. Therefore, anthropology ought to be approached from evolutionary biology.

I do not follow any of these patterns of reasoning. My point of departure is that both Christian theology and evolutionism are matters of belief – belief in God as creator or belief in coincidence. Both sciences depart from axioms that are plausible in scientific research. From this premise, the basic tenets of reformed theology and the proven findings of natural sciences regarding natural evolution can be harmonised without excluding each other. Theology can enrich natural scientific research with the introduction of concepts such as, for example, the origin of evil, the presence and work of the Holy Spirit (pneumatology), the spirituality of human beings, their sense of religion and the ability of humans to love and to act morally, as well as the expectation of the end of all things (eschatology). The natural sciences can enrich Christian faith by presenting their astonishing findings about nature as proof of the omnipotence and omnipresence of God as revealed in God's revelation in nature. I would argue the case of reconciling theology and the findings of evolutionary biology in view of the recent propositions offered by Welker (2012) and Van den Brink (2017).

◼ Reconciling creation and evolution

Welker (2017:19ff.) deals with the question of what theology can contribute to the discourse between theology and science by discussing five answers that have emerged in the development of this discourse in recent years.

Firstly, he deals with the proposal that the theology and science discourse could search for common metatheoretical presuppositions, which means that it might concentrate on a sphere 'above' theology and science in which the abstractions from the theoretical foundations of both overlap. He contends that in our time of multi-disciplinary enthusiasm in academic research, academics from different disciplines tend to overlook the fact that each of them belongs to a network of established, recognised and proven methods and practices that must not be ignored during academic contact with other fields and disciplines. This proposal has dominated the international discussion over the last 50 years and has led to the emergence of several models of the discourse, such as, *inter alia,* the conflict model, the complementary model, the dialogue model and the integration model. Although he does not regard searching for common metatheoretical presuppositions as worthless, he is concerned with the fact that the metatheoretical approach becomes primarily interested in debating the 'big questions' and then comes to vague answers. In his view, the most fruitful dialogues of the past concentrated on specific questions, which leads us to a second answer to the question about the contribution of theology in the faith–science dialogue.

Before dealing with Welker's view on the second answer, I would argue that the metatheoretical approach becomes more helpful when argued against the background of the emergence of the post-Kuhnian philosophy of science and the criticism on the old modernism and positivist models of objective epistemology. Kuhn (1970:44–46) and his contemporaries made a case for the view that all sciences are paradigm-driven and must take account of pluralism in the search for knowledge because the time of the huge master narratives has elapsed. Lyotard (1991:xxiii) describes this huge movement as the postmodern condition. To my mind, the post-modernist view of science became promising and advantageous for the theology–science debate, because it recognises the plausibility of theology (and other sciences in the humanities) as a science driven by the axiom of the existence of God and that humans can come to knowledge about God. Doing science from the point of departure of belief is plausible. As said above, both theology and evolutionary sciences depart from a belief – either God or coincidence. When this post-modernist view of epistemology is applied to the theology–science discourse, it adds value to the metatheoretical approach. Recognition of the plausibility of the belief system underlying theology can lead to more clear answers on the 'big questions'.

The second answer in Welker's discussion reads: In its discourse with the sciences, theology may present and unfold central theological themes to prevent the sciences from developing false perceptions of theology, as has been the case in the past. In his discussion of this answer, Welker (2012:23) uses creation and Genesis 1 as an example. Reading the creation narrative from a creationist perspective excludes any notion of compatibility with

natural scientific findings about the age of the earth. With reference to the studies of several Old Testament scholars, he indicates several problematic interpretations in the creationist perspective. Genesis uses two time-systems and connects very different domains of life and action. It describes God's intervention in that which has already been created for the purpose of further specification and embeds the creature's activities in the process of creation and God's participation in that process. Also, the mandate of dominium implies much more than a mere human dominium over nature, when read within the context of the creation of the human being in the image of God. These insights indicate that creation and evolution can be compatible. Creationism presents a false perception of theology and inhibits the discourse between theology and science. For a profitable discourse with science, theology has to unfold theological topics that speak of potential common areas of research. Welker (2012:30) regards this task of theology as crucial for the discourse. In reaction to this point of view, I want to reiterate the importance of the congruence of biblical theology. When the creation narrative is read within the context of the wholeness of Scripture, it can be unfolded as one such common area for the theology–science discourse.

Rightly, Welker (2012:31) also addresses mistakes and inconsistencies in how theological and religious issues are presented in natural sciences. He asks: Does the research about physical, chemical and biological processes in natural space-time, however impressive these might be, offer any perspectives on theological issues? When dealing with this question, he addresses Stephen Hawking's view of God and creation. Hawking, in considering the 'big-bang' theory concludes that this discovery brought the beginning of the universe into the realm of science and places limits on the work of a creator. Moving his attention away from the first moment, Hawking, with the use of quantum mechanics and the general theory of relativity, proposes a theory that posits that space-time is completely self-contained, with no singularities or boundaries. What is then the role of a creator? Hawking takes the beginning away from the creator. Furthermore, he implies that a creator can only create a universe that mathematics permitted the creator to create. Welker (2012:35) considers Hawking's view on creation and the creator to be ambivalent because Hawking himself begins to consider that there might be limits to forming theories and conceiving reality in mathematical terms only. Welker then asks how we can develop theories about the world that stimulate the disciplines of natural sciences and theology to engage in a possible synthesis of theoretical conceptions and to allow the differences to emerge clearly?

The fourth answer emanating from the science–religion debate maintains that the dialogue between theology and science could develop multi-perspectival explorations of areas of knowledge common to both. In illustrating

this answer, Welker (2012:37) makes use of a discourse on anthropology and introduces a 'micro-anthropological approach' rather than the 'macro-anthropological approach' of theology and philosophy. In his view, such an approach can be cultivated by using the anthropological vocabulary of Paul, which is highly consistent and of a deep diagnostical realism. For example, when reading Paul about body and spirit, one must be aware that the body, although made of flesh and sharing in the frailties and endangerments of the flesh, requires a much more positive evaluation than the flesh because it is also characterised by a multitude of mental and spiritual forces. Paul sees the body as a complex multi-centred organism which, in interaction with many parts, connects very different services and functions so that it can become an important witness to God. The body is a sphere where God wants to live and through which God seeks to be glorified. He refers to 1 Corinthians 6,19–20, 2 Corinthians 4:10, Galatians 6:17 and Phillipians 1:20 and stresses the relevance of the meaning of the body of the resurrected post-Easter Christ for the church, making the believers the carriers of his post-Easterly existence. The flourishing interplay of the Spirit with the many-membered body is a sign that the body is not finally or completely defined with its physicality and corporeality and that it does not have to be identified with its fleshly corporeal frailty and finality (Welker 2012:47). Welker (2012:47) then explains Paul's view of soul, heart and conscience and contends that all these aspects of Paul's anthropology provide formative theological and theoretical impulses to topics and questions of both the theology and natural sciences and can invite a multi-perspective exploration. Answer four, which calls for a multi-perspectival exploration of areas common to theology and natural sciences and uses a micro-anthropological approach as example, in his view provides the possibility of a more constructive theology–science discourse. From this perspective, a fifth possible answer can be investigated.

Welker (2012:53) then investigates the fifth possible answer, namely that the dialogue between theology and science could endeavour to build small bridges at the boundaries of each other's areas of knowledge. Here he again employs anthropology as an example to build his argument. The human relationship with God is his point of departure and this fundamental idea of theology ought to be respected in the theology–science discourse. However, the concept of relationship is vague and has an abundance of meanings and, in the discourse, we must look for precision in our reflections on human relationships and a relationship with God. The theologian must therefore seek to find the simplest presentation of the human relationship with God and God's relationship with humans as a point of contact with science. With reference to Luther and Barth's anthropologies, Polkinghorne's idea that large-scale cosmology could serve as a framework for scientific and theological anthropology, the doctrine of creation and the light of the relationships portrayed by the holy communion, Welker concludes that a

theological anthropology 'from above' can serve as an advantageous framework and a creative impulse for the theology–science debate (Welker 2012:62).

Three points of departure are possible in this respect. One is to make sure that the broader cosmological conditions set by the natural sciences and the insights of soteriology and eschatology contributed by theology will not be lost. A second approach could raise awareness of the soteriological and eschatological dimensions already contained within the theology of creation. This means that the human being should be evaluated as more than just a species. Humans are frail and the human body perishable, but they are destined by God to become his temple. The same human spirit that can be corrupted by the power of evil is destined to be freed and strengthened by God's creative Word and by God's Holy Spirit in order to witness God's good intentions with creation (Welker 2012:63). Whilst science illuminates the phenomenon of the human being, theology can shed light on the true human being. The widely acclaimed idea of human dignity in many sciences and political charters illustrates the feasibility of this approach. Thirdly, Welker claims that theologians and natural scientists alike are members of 'truth-seeking communities' that deal with the deeper spiritual body and with qualities such as communal memory and history, and with artistic and mathematical abilities. These abilities are realities that cannot be denied by natural science. They pose questions about an ultimate reality, which is by no means simple and certainly hard to access, but worth the finest collaborative efforts of scientists and theologians (Welker 2012:65).

Welker's choice for bridge-building between certain areas of knowledge of theology and science is beneficial for this research on the gift of life and the reflection about personhood. The notion that God formed the human being in God's time according to God's intention, does not entail a rejection of all scientific theories and findings about evolution. A bridge can be built between this formative action of God and mathematical concepts of time, as long as God's time is not encapsulated in human history and reduced to chronology. Furthermore, Christological and pneumatological perspectives on the reality of the frailty, brokenness, and eventual redemption and spirituality of the human being can add some perspectives on human features, for instance, emotions such as hate, love and compassion and realities such as conscience, memory, as well as artistic and mathematical skills.

The recent study of Van den Brink (2017:325) also echoes the idea of the necessity of a plausible harmonisation of some results of evolutionary biology with certain interpretations of the doctrine of creation in reformed theology today. He maintains that the results of scientific research on evolution cannot be denied, nor can the idea of God as the creator and his reign over the universe or his divine involvement in the origin of the human being and human life

be refuted. Based on thorough research on what he terms the neo-Darwinist theory of evolution, the voices of the past in reformed theology about evolution and creation, and the questions posed to theology by modern research in evolutionary research, he indicates that the discourse boils down to three basic theses that ought to be addressed by theology. These are:

1. Progressive creation. This is the idea that diverse forms of life developed over enormous periods of time according to a geological timeframe.
2. Common descent. This is the idea that forms of life develop independently but from a common source.
3. Natural selection on the foundation of coincidental mutations. This is the idea of a dominant mechanism behind biodiversity that enables certain organisms to adapt better to their environment because of coincidental mutations.

Van den Brink (2017:326) concludes that the scientific proof for Thesis 1 is strong and a rejection will be irresponsible. Thesis 2 has a well-established standing in evolutionary biology, although the scientific proof is still insufficient because of uncertainties. Thesis 3 is still seriously discussed in evolutionary scientific research. Currently, theologians reflect on these topics and feel comfortable with either accommodating a single thesis, or a combination of some or to reject all of them. Van den Brink (2017:339) opines that theology can indeed move out of 'post-evolutionary apologetics' in the direction of a constructive engagement with evolution. The dialogue can be constructive, and he finds no reason why the main tenets of theology, such as creation, fall, redemption and pneumatology, have to be reviewed to accommodate the proven aspects of evolutionary biology.

From the pre-suppositional approach as argued above, this research engages in the theology–science discourse and opts for an accommodation or reconciliatory model because such a model is theologically plausible and does not inhibit the main features of the congruent biblical theology. My thesis is then that God formed the human creature in an artistic act and this formation reflects the omnipotence and the nearness of God. God created in his time and space according to his divine design, which cannot be limited to human categories of time and space. The proven findings of evolutionary science not only fit into this pattern but also portrays the glory, aesthetics, fine artistic work and design of the Creator. Reconciling God's artistic act with evolutionary findings enriches Christian anthropology and adds more value to human life as a mere 'theology from below' which utilises only evolutionary biology and ignores the brilliance of God's artistic act of designing and forming the human being.

The sculpting of the human creature out of clay by the powerful, but relational Lord God is followed by a second movement when God breathes life into the statue.

■ God breathes

The second movement in God's creation of the human being according to the testimony of Genesis 2:7 is that God, after sculpting the human creature out of material substance, blows the breath of life [*niš-maṯ*] into his piece of art. Here again the nearness, tenderness and love of God for the human creature comes to the fore. Fedler (2006:73) calls this movement a 'kiss of life' and then remarks that this 'kiss of life' can be considered one of the most strikingly tender moments of all of Scripture. God gave life to animals and plants, but humans received the 'breath of God' and became a unique creature amongst the other creatures with a special relationship with the creator. The human creature therefore became a unique being (Westermann 1972:3). This unique being is much more than just another species formed by coincidental natural selection and survival of the fittest. It is more than the neo-Darwinist claim to its existence (see Cunningham 2010:23). The breath of life does not develop but is a divine gift. This gift has enormous consequences for human existence. As God is holy, his gift of the 'breath of life' sanctifies human life. Human life is sacred. Furthermore, the breath entails that human life has more faculties than mere biotic life. In this respect, the testimony of Paul in Acts 17:28 is important to consider. He refers to the extraordinary quality of the human life in these words (Ac 17):

> For in him we live and move and have our being. As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring'. The breath of God refers to spirit which is bestowed onto the human creature and this astonishing gift qualifies human life. (v. 28)

How could we understand this gift? This question can be answered after examining the concept breath of God [*niš-maṯ*] as it was used in the Old Testament. The Hebrew word *niš-maṯ* ought to be understood in its relation to the much-used words *ruah* [wind] and *leb* [heart] in the Hebrew text of the Old Testament. Schwarz (2013:9) explains that *ruah* can be used in two ways. Drawing on the exact statistics provided by Wolff, he explains that almost one-third of the use of this word in the Old Testament denotes a natural power, namely the wind. The word is also used to refer to spirit, especially in relation with *nefesh*, as it is used in Genesis 2:7. He agrees with Wolff, who calls the term in this sense a theo-anthropological term. In his survey of some usage of the word in the Old Testament, he refers to Isaiah 7:2 where the word is translated with a strong wind. Also, in Genesis 14:21, it denotes the strong wind that God uses as a natural power to rescue the Israelites. The wind is God's powerful tool which he uses in the execution of his reign as we read in Ezekiel 13:

> Therefore, this is what the Sovereign Lord says: In my wrath I will unleash a violent wind, and in my anger hailstones and torrents of rain will fall with destructive fury. (v. 13)

Schwarz (2013:9) then points out that in its theo-anthropological meaning, *ruah* is firstly the human breath that endows a human being with life. However, *niš-mat* indicates that this breath is nothing natural in the sense of being derived from nature. It cannot be taken for granted. It is a gift of God. God alone can endow objects with his 'breath'. In this respect, he refers to Isaiah 42, which reads:

> This is what God the LORD says: the Creator of the heavens, who stretches them out, who spreads out the earth with all that springs from it, who gives breath [*ruah*] to its people, and life to those who walk on it. (v. 5)

It is God's creative power and it is the difference between life and death. Therefore, the breath of God in the human creature differentiates the human creature from the idols they made. Whether they are made of stone or wood or are silver or gold plated, they have no breath (*ruah*) (Hab 2:19). This *ruah* is the spirit of life that belongs to humans, and when it departs the human creature returns to the earth (Ps 146:4f.).

Ruah in its theo-anthropological meaning also refers to God's life-giving breath, or Spirit, and this meaning becomes evident in Job 34, which reads:

> If it were his intention and he withdrew his spirit and breath, all humanity would perish together, and mankind would return to the dust. (vv. 14–15)

Ruah also refers to the endowment of artistic abilities of the human creature. Exodus 31 reads:

> [*A*]nd I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with wisdom, with understanding, with knowledge and with all kinds of skills, to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to engage in all kinds of crafts. (vv. 3–5)

Schwarz (2013:10) contends that both life itself and all the faculties that go with it, such as will, intention, strength, wisdom and creativity are not innate in humans, but are ultimately gifts of God because they are part of the breath of God given to them.

Following Wolff's exposition of human reason in the Old Testament, Schwarz (2013:10) links *ruah* with *leb*, the Hebrew word for heart, which occurs over 800 times in the Old Testament and can be regarded as the commonest of all anthropological terms. The word is almost exclusively used to denote something in humans. Besides its description of the human organ or the upper body, it can also mean the location of human secrets. Psalm 44:21 reads: '… would not God have discovered it, since he knows the secrets of the heart [*leb*]?' In this passage, the meaning of *leb* moves beyond the anatomical to the spiritual and emotional realm. It also designates human temper (Pv 23:17) and other feelings such as gladness (Ps 104:15) and it is the seat of human desires (Ps 21:2, 51:10). Still, the overwhelming designation of *leb* in the Old Testament is the seat of the human's intellectual and rational human motions. 1 Kings 3:9 tells of wisdom and 'wisdom

and knowledge', which are both located in the heart: 'So give your servant a discerning heart (*leb*) to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?' In Ezekiel 11:19f, God promises the Israelites that God will remove their heart of stone and will give them a heart of flesh so that they can follow God's statutes and obey them. The heart of stone does not listen to God's commands. The new heart of flesh is an insightful (understanding) heart that moves (convinces) them to obey God's will. This use of heart [*leb*] presupposes the human rational faculty and the ability of discernment and deliberation. *Leb* is thus a very comprehensive anthropological term in the Old Testament that embraces bodily functions, but overwhelmingly refers to emotional, intellectual and intentional modes. The Bible primarily views the heart as the centre of the consciously living person.

His discussion of the concept *ruah* and *leb* leads Schwarz to useful findings that will be beneficial for the further exploration of an ethic of flourishing personhood in this study. He (Schwarz 2013:13) concludes that:

1. A human being is in many ways not different from other living beings. All living beings are ultimately connected to the whole realm of living beings.
2. Life in its various forms and expressions is neither self-sustaining nor self-generating. In whatever form it exists, life should ultimately be perceived as a gift of God. Therefore life, and especially human life, is not to be taken for granted because it is predetermined.
3. A human being is not just a living being like any of God's other creatures but is a reasonable being with the power of considerable deliberation, intention and wilfulness. In that latter category, there is a similarity to God's own self, which is characterised by similar faculties.

To this summary of Schwarz can be added that the human being has human spirit that differs from other creatures. What does such a claim suggest?

As a systematic theologian, Welker (2013:137) proposes an interesting view on how the notion of human spirit could be understood. He explains certain views that featured in ancient philosophy and in later times. He then argues that efforts to understand the idea of the 'human spirit' should probably begin with those particular capacities about which there is general concurrence, in other words, with what seems to be quite straightforward mental and cognitive operations. The human spirit entails a certain capacity. Welker (2013) claims:

> Through this capacity, an enormous wealth of not only optical, but also acoustic-linguistic impressions can be accommodated, organized, and variously associated, combined, and contrasted with the world of intellectually or mentally accessible images and image sequences. (p. 137)

His explanation of human spirit concurs with the evidence in the Old Testament about the *niš-maṯ* in relation with *ruah* and *leb.* He confirms that the gift of the human spirit is extraordinary. Both Schwarz and Welker prove from different

theological perspectives that human life is much more than mere biotic life. This statement is confirmed by Psalm 8:6, which lauds the creation of the human creature with the words: 'You made him (her) a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him (her) with glory and honour'. However, the gift is not a gift of divine substance. The human creature does not become divine. Over and against the view of ancient philosophies, Calvin (2008:*Inst*. I.15.5.108) already rejected the idea that the breath of life was a transmission of the substance of God '… as if a portion of the boundless divinity had passed into man'. The human creature does not become God and does not bear the substance of God; rather, God adorned human creatures with special endowments (Calvin 2008:*Inst*. I.15.5.108).

In his study on the concept, Vriezen (1966:440) also discovered that this gift of God does not entail that the human creature received godly attributes. He concludes that the idea of the human spirit as something divine does not feature anywhere in the Old Testament theology. Welker (2013:139) also cautions against any form of equating spirit, reason and God with philosophical, theological and even cultural contexts, and against any unbroken and thereby essentially reckless glorification of the spirit in and of itself. It is true that the created human being does not become divine but the endowment of the *niš-mat̲* of God, 'the kiss of life' and everything that this act of God entails, point to something brilliant, extraordinary and sanctified.

Receiving the breath of God does not entail that this life now becomes the property of the human creature. The human does not take complete possession of its own life. God does not transfer life or hand over life. He gives life and can take it away. Kelsey (2009) therefore speaks of human life as borrowed life and uses this concept to develop a part of his seminal view on theological anthropology. The gift of life is essentially a given life in the sense that it remains the property of God. God lends life to humans to handle with care and responsibility to him. This concept of life as the breath of God borrowed to humans but still the property of the living God, is a very important foundation of Christian–ethical reflection on life issues. When we deal with human life, we deal with the property of God.

■ Humans become

The third movement described in Genesis 2:7 focuses on the result of God's gift of *niš-mat̲*. The creature 'became a living being'. The Hebrew words are '*nepeš ḥayya*'. In his study about the use of the concept *nepeš*, in the Old Testament, Wolff (1974:10–25) explains that the Hebrew uses one and the same word where in languages today authors need widely different ones. Therefore, the context of the use of the word is very important. His survey of the word is founded on this significant principle. He explicates that in Isaiah 5:14, the word means the gullet, the jaws or the throat. The same meaning can

be found in Habakkuk 2:5. According to these passages, read in context, *nepeš* is a term for the organ that takes in food and satisfies hunger. Wolff refers also to Proverbs 10:3, but in this instance, the word refers to the throat whilst at the same time ambiguously pointing to the needy person. The word also denotes the organ of breathing (Je 2:24, 15:9; Job 11:20) and possibly the outer neck (Ps 105:18). In other contexts, the word can be translated with desire, like desire for food and nourishment (Dt 23:24) or the longing desire for the living God (Ps 42:1–4). 1 Samuel 1:15 mentions how the childless Hanna pours out her *nepeš* – her unsatisfied desire – before God. The Deuteronomic command to love God with the whole of the *nepeš* (Dt 6:5) means that persons should carry the whole living force of their wishes and all their longing desire into their love for the one God of Israel.

Wolff (1974:10–25) asserts that it is only a short step from the *nepeš* as an indication of a specific organ and act of desire to the extended meaning where the *nepeš* is the seat and action of other spiritual experiences and emotions as well. Exodus 23:9 exhorts Israel not to oppress the stranger because they know the *nepeš* of the stranger. Here the word can be translated by 'soul', which not only refers to the needs and the desires of the stranger but the whole range of the stranger's feelings in the face of possible oppression and hostility. Wolff mentions many passages where the word carries the meaning of the inner being and is linked to certain human experiences such as suffering, sympathy, lamentation, fright, despair, despondence, exhaustion, defencelessness, affliction, misery, bitterness, rage and distress.

The word *nepeš* can in certain contexts also be translated with 'life'. In this respect, Wolff refers to Proverbs 8:35ff., which reads: 'For those who find me find life (*hayyim*) and receive favour from the Lord. But those who fail to find me harm themselves (*nepeš*), all who hate me love death'. Psalm 30:3 uses the word to indicate the opposite of death, namely life. In Proverbs 7:23 and 19:8, life is the only meaning that will fit. He also refers to Deuteronomy 12:23, Leviticus 17:11 where the *nepeš* can mean nothing other than life associated with life-sustaining blood. However, the interpreter must never fail to observe that the *nepeš* is never given the meaning of an indestructible core of life that remains when cut from the body, in contradiction with physical life. This observation of Wolff is very important because it warns against a translation indicating a 'soul' beyond the borders of death – a mistake that can lead to an erroneous interpretation of Genesis 2:7.

Nepeš can also refer to something the human being *is* and not only to something the human being *has*. Wolff refers us to the legal texts from the Law of Holiness (such as Lv 17:10, 15, 19:8, 20:6, 22:3–4, 23:30; Nm 13). Linked with *ḥayya, nepeš ḥayya* can be translated with aquatic creature (Gn 1:20ff.; see also Lv 11:10, 46; Ez 47:9), land animals (Gn 1:24), animals in general (Gn 9:10, 12, 15), humans and animals together (Gn 9:16) and living creatures.

However, in one instance, namely Genesis 2:7, *nepeš ḥayya* refers to the human creature as a living being, not simply because of the creature's creation out of the dust of the earth, but because God breathes the breath of life into his nostrils. *nepeš ḥayya*, linked with the *niš-maṯ* of God, results in the human being that can be more closely defined as a person. On the foundation of the excellent, scholarly exposition by Wolff (1974:10–25), it will be valid and fair to conclude that the gift of spirit gives rise to the human creature as a person with distinctive attributes that can be encapsulated in the concept personhood. Zizioulas (1975:317) describes this becoming of the creature as a movement from 'thinghood' to 'personhood'. He argues that the personhood comes to the fore in the person's ability to be creative. The human being becomes someone, which is much more than being merely something (see Spaemann 2006:5ff.). The human body really does live only by God's gift of spirit; that is what constitutes its essential being. The movement of 'thinghood' to 'personhood', as Zizioulas describes it, is unique when compared to other ontologies in ancient cultures. Many creation narratives were produced in ancient cultures. Westermann (1985:37) compares some of these narratives with the biblical testimony and concludes that only the biblical narrative emphasises the uniqueness of the spirit-filled person in this way.

From 'thinghood' to personhood

In this study, the concept 'person' is used to describe the uniqueness of the human creature. A person is somebody with the gift of the 'breath of God'. The gift of life manifests in the person and validates personhood. Personhood indicates the splendour of this gift. It entails the blossoming fullness of the life of the person under the guidance of the Spirit of God and the teachings of the congruent biblical theology. A person can strive towards flourishing personhood, a condition of abundant love, inner peace, joy, happiness, fulfilment, meaning, vision, idealism and direction. Personhood is the life-condition God presents to us as his property in a world where evil is still present, devaluing the grandeur of personhood. An ethic of personhood is an ethic that endeavours to unfurl the gift of life to its full consequences in human experience with the aim to realise personhood. The concepts person, personhood and an ethic of personhood are used in this sense in this study.

At this stage of the argument, the testimony of the first biblical narrative in Genesis 1:27 should be taken into consideration, namely the creation of the person as male and female in the image of God (*imago Dei*). The *niš-maṯ*, *nepeš ḥayya* and the *imago Dei* determines the uniqueness not only of the person but also of human life. In the Christian tradition, the idea of the *imago Dei* served as the foundation of theological anthropology. Regarding the use of the concept in reformed theology, Calvin (2008:*Inst*. I.XV.24.108) explained

that the creation of the person in the image of God 'was manifested by the light of intellect, rectitude of heart, and the soundness of every part'. These gifts established, in his view, the essential value of the human creature. God firstly created the habitat of the person and then the angels as the protectors of humankind. God granted a special value to humans in the sense that the person is: 'by the beauty of his person and his many noble endowments, the most glorious specimen of the works of God' (Calvin 2008:*Inst.* I.14.20.101). In his study of the relevance of the anthropology of Calvin for today, N. Vorster (2019b:14) explains that Calvin consistently described creation as a 'theatre' of God's glory and the human being as created in order to adore God's glory in this theatre. Over and against the philosophical concept of his time where the human being was seen as the centre of reality, he decentred the human being and founded the value of the human being not in itself or in some natural capacities, but in the human being's relationship to God. In his earlier publication, N. Vorster (2007a) echoes this cardinal anthropological principle in the classic reformed tradition in the following words:

> [*The imago Dei*] is a functional and relational concept that defines human nature in relation to God and assigns human beings a special place in creation. Human beings are God's representatives on earth and thus are endowed with a special status of dignity. The dignity of humankind is not based on something intrinsic to their nature but lies in their relation to God. The image is not something in the person, but it is the person himself. When a person's life is taken, the property of God is destroyed (Gn 9:6). (p. 75)

Where the *niš-maṯ* and *nepeš ḥayya* in Genesis 2:7 outline the personhood of the human being, the *imago Dei* indicates the special and unique value of the person. Recent reformed theology maintains that this value establishes the dignity of the person. In contemporary Christian anthropological research, scholars from various and different theological paradigms and ecclesiastical traditions concur that the *imago Dei* is the foundation of the Christian understanding of human dignity. The Old Testament scholar, Westermann (1973:103), remarks that this fact cannot be overestimated. As in the case of *nepeš ḥayya*, discussed above, the creation of the person in the image of God holds the person in high esteem as a relational being living in relation with God along with other persons and the rest of creation (see also Schwarz 2013:10ff.). In the rest of this study, I use the term 'person' instead of 'human creature' or 'human being' because of the prominent value of the person because of its creation with personhood and in the image of God.

Furthermore, the idea of the covenant between God and the person as it is presented in the congruent theology of the Old Testament, echoes the relational character of a person's existence. It is already present in the creation narrative's use of *Yahweh Elohim*. As a covenantal being, a person has inherent value. In the realisation of these relationships, which shape its inherent humanity, the person emulates the image of God, because God is deeply

involved (in relation) with God's creation. Therefore, the sculpting out of clay also indicates the deep relation of the person with the earth. Humankind's bond with the earth belongs to its essential being. The person became a living person only when God blew the breath of life into the structure of clay coming from the earth. The statue of clay becoming alive by the *niš-mat̲* of God means that body (out of the earth) and life merges completely. The breath of God generates the human spirit and the animated body. 'The body is the form in which the spirit exists, and the spirit is the form in which the body exists' (Bonhoeffer 2004:79).

This is the reason why the destruction of human life is prohibited in the Old Testament where people are instructed to respect the quality of life and the integrity of creation as a vital part of their worshipping of God. In his study about the uniqueness of the person and human life from the perspective of biology and theology, Van Huysteen (2006:275) rightly questions an abstract understanding of the *imago Dei*, as was done in the history of the interpretation of this doctrine. He concludes that the image of God is not found in some narrow, intellectual or spiritual capacity, but in the whole person – both in its essence and in conduct. It means that the person could imitate God and act like God to attain holiness through compassionate care for the other and for the world. This relational quality of the person and its implications for human life and conduct are addressed and unfolded in Chapter 5. At this stage, Westermann and Van Huysteen's arguments are mentioned to appraise the abundance of significant qualities embedded in the life of the person.

The creation in the image of God also leads to God endowing the person with creational gifts. The finest of these gifts is that the created person can know God. Persons can know God by way of his general revelation in the 'book of nature', that is, in his creation and his sustenance of everything in the history of the world. Every person has the seeds of religion and the sense of morality and is religious in nature, as evidenced by the person's experience of something divine behind origin and history. This gift of the sense of religion is accompanied by a gift to all people of a moral sense. All morals come from God.

Modern socio-biology questions any divine involvement in the moral capacity of the human being. For instance, Ruse and Wilson (1985:50) argue that the basis of ethics does not derive from God's will; it is merely an adaptation put in place to further our reproductive ends. Morality is thus simply part of a general and flexible human behavioural programme. According to Pope (2007:253), socio-biology asserts that divine commands and metaphysics are not necessary for the functioning of ethics, and that the human being's sense of morality is the result of its evolutionary development as just another living species (also see Ruse 2009:38).

The doctrine of creation contradicts this idea. The innate moral sense of the person is termed in the history of Christian theology as the natural law. Roman Catholic theology has emphasised the natural law since Thomas Aquinas and constructed many of its moral viewpoints on this doctrine (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2004:70). In recent years, the idea of natural law was rediscovered in reformed theology after an era of suspicion of this idea because of the influence of Barth (see Arner 2016; Brunner & Barth 1946; Grabill 2006; VanDrunen 2010). Natural law enables all people to come to appropriate moral decisions and establishes decent and respectable laws. However, natural law must not become natural theology, which entails that realities in nature can be used as the foundation of theological–ethical principles. The anthropology of the separate development theology that emerged in many European colonies and which became the foundation of the oppressive Apartheid system of institutionalised racism in South Africa, hugely erred in this respect. The phenomenon of people having different pigmentation and other physical traits was used as a tool to design a racist anthropology and to justify it in terms of Christian theological–ethical principles. In South Africa, this ideology was termed Christian Nationalism. The argument in Apartheid theology runs as follows: Nature teaches us that humanity consists of different groups with different traits and in different phases of development. Therefore, all forms of integration and inculturation of these groups run against the natural (creational) order.

A Christian Nationalist anthropology founded on this natural condition was developed as an ethical framework for the politics of colonialism. Therefore, the social stratification in the European colonies was not only seen as justified to protect the identities of 'superior races', but also necessary for the development of 'inferior races'. Hence the perennial forms of discrimination and cultural domination that became the order of the day in colonies under control of European nations. Barth recognised this kind of natural theology also amongst the German Christians in Nazi Germany and was fierce in his total rejection of Nazism (Brunner & Barth 1946). The ideology could in his view in no way be reconciled with biblical Christology and the doctrine of reconciliation. His criticism is to the point and should be heeded by Christians who still venture to justify racism, ethnocentrism, colonialism and other ideologies of nationalism with reference to the realities of nature and the possibilities provided by a natural theology. The Christian justification of colonialism and the oppressive and dehumanising politics that determined the lives of indigenous people in the colonies can be defined as one of the dark periods in the history of Christianity, along with the so-called holy wars of the Crusades and the religious persecutions in the name of Christ.

The concept of natural law can merely be used to describe God's creational gifts to the person, such as the sense of religion and morality, which can be used to prevent society from falling into total chaos, and as a call to

responsibility and accountability to God – even when the subject rejects God. In the eyes of God, no person can be excused for trespassing God's commands. In his explanation of the human condition without God, Paul says in Romans 1 (see also Rm 2:12–16):

> For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles. (vv. 21–23)

There is no excuse for those who reject or misuse the creational gifts to live irresponsibly and self-centred. All persons are accountable to God. All rulers, governments and authorities are responsible to God for the way they execute their powers because of the creational gifts of the sense of religion and morality.

The biblical narratives of creation reveal the essence, significant qualities of the person and the purpose of its existence. Other than all other species, the human creature is created as a person – somebody with personhood, inter-dimensional relations, creational gifts and a special vocation to serve God. Personhood is a rich concept, and the richness becomes clearer when it is explained in the context of the congruent biblical theology. Kelsey (2009:159ff.) made a huge contribution in this regard with his study of creation from the perspective of the wisdom literature. His root question is: 'What does the specifically Christian conviction that God actually relates to us imply about what and who we are and how we are to be?' In answering this question he then constructs his theological anthropology on the Christian belief that the triune Creator relates to the person in interrelated, but also distinct ways. God creates and grounds the reality, value and well-being of the person; he promises an eschatological consummation and draws the person to it; and he reconciles the person in its multiple estrangements. The person lives on 'borrowed breath' (creation); lives on 'borrowed time' (consummation) and lives by 'another's death' (reconciliation). This contribution is immense, especially in the sense that he emphasises and demonstrates the value of doing theology within the framework of a congruent biblical theology.

■ Evil and personhood

In this study, the line of thought is somewhat different and follows the classic reformed salvation-historical pattern of reasoning, namely creation, fall, redemption, and human gratitude. With Kelsey's anthropology within the context of congruent biblical theology in mind, we can now proceed to the concept evil and its implications for the person and the unfurling of its personhood in God's creation. In other words: What are the effects of evil, the

redemption in Christ, the gift of the Holy Spirit on the created person and personhood?

The *imago Dei* and the remarkable traits of the person with the *niš-maṯ* of God and as a *nepeš ḥayya* and with creational knowledge of God were deeply distorted by the fall. The doctrine of the total depravity because of the fall is very prominent in reformed doctrine. Amongst other things, this doctrine is based on Paul's description of the condition of the person because of the immense power of sin. In Romans 3 he laments the human condition by saying:

> There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one. (vv. 10-12)

The Heidelberg Catechism testifies in Lord's Day 3 with reference to Genesis 3; Romans 5:12, 18, 19 and Psalm 51:5, that the person's wicked nature comes:

> From the fall and disobedience of our first parents, Adam and Eve, in Paradise, for there our nature became so corrupt that we are all conceived and born in sin. (n.p.)

The uniqueness of the person was thus eventually deeply disturbed by the introduction of evil into God's creation. The person became disobedient and rebelled against its creator by trying to become like God. The person aspired to be like the creator. This action unleashed the punishment of God (Gn 3:17–24). Death and hardship entered creation and disturbed the fullness of the created life of the person and personhood (see Westermann 1985:50ff.). In order to understand the condition of human life, the influence of evil and the judgement of God must be comprehended. Evil distorts the quality of human life and causes the moral shortcomings in human relations and conduct. Also, the natural law (natural knowledge of God) as a creational gift to the person has been twisted and corrupted because of sin.

But what about personhood itself? Does the person become only a living creature in the chain of species and animals? And can the person, because of its innate evil nature, be dehumanised and treated as a mere object and be exploited for the benefit of the powerful? Does inability to self-redeem and total dependence on God's act of reconciliation inhibit the call to be humane? No. Irrespective of the destructive power of evil and the person's natural inclination to hate God and its fellow persons, God does not destroy the work of his hands. He does not withdraw his breath of life – the *niš-maṯ.* The person remains a *nepeš ḥayya* and has an innate dignity because of its creation in the image of God. Bonhoeffer (2004:135) explains that the world is not wholly God-forsaken because of evil. Instead, it is a world that, even under God's curse, is blessed and in its enmity, pain and hopelessness, it is still a world where 'life is upheld and preserved'. By the general grace of God, the human being remains a unique being with personhood in relation with God, fellow persons and creation. Furthermore, notwithstanding the reality of evil, the

innate sense of morality remains intact and implies that God holds the entire human race accountable before him (Rm 1:18–32) (VanDrunen 2014:211). God gave persons the sense of morality and can thus still expect from the person responsible moral conduct as the response to his creational gifts. With an ethic of personhood, the person is still able to pursue the grandeur of personhood in the presence of the constant threats against flourishing personhood in this age of lurking wickedness and its agents.

The only way out of the desperate state of the depraved person is its re-creation, which can only come from God. Because of his abundant grace and love for creation, he sends his son, Jesus Christ as the Redeemer of the person and the liberation of creation from the bondage of evil. By way of the cross of Jesus and faith in him as the resurrected Christ, made possible by the endowment of the Spirit of God, the person can become reconciled with God and can take up its status before God and the surrounding evil powers. God remains concerned about the person and in his wisdom and love, he resolved to recreate and to steer the creation into a process of total renewal. God promises a new dispensation under his immanent reign – a growing Kingdom in this world where evil and its destructive influence will be restrained and life in its fullness will eventually be restored. God enters reality as a person (Christ) and affirms a new immanent reign over the totality of creation. He bestows the person with a new breath – his divine spirit (Holy Spirit). Therefore, even in a cursed reality, human life has extraordinary value.

The anthropology of reformed theology is incomprehensible without an understanding of the immense destructive force of evil and the faith in the resurrected Christ as the only way out of this predicament of bondage, hopelessness and spiritual death. Christian anthropology remains without its full content if it is to be founded on creation defined along the lines of evolutionary biology alone. The full content and richness of this doctrine can only be grasped when it is argued from the doctrine of creation in congruence with the doctrines of Christology and pneumatology. Human depravity entails that the person became totally unable to redeem itself and to make the most of the God-given qualities of personhood. However, Christ and the Spirit of God adds new value to life and, in its new relationship with God, the person can attain flourishing personhood. The new relationship with God restores the person's inter-dimensional relations with all spheres of creation and the ability to engage in an ethic of personhood along the lines of these relationships. God's artistic act of sculpting the human creature out of clay, his endowment of *niš-mat*, his act of redemptive and restorative grace in Christ after the Fall and his bestowment of his spirit on humankind, constitute the uniqueness of the life of the person and the possibility to pursue flourishing personhood. The inherent value of this unique human life, its core characteristics and its moral consequences are the ingredients of what can

be named an ethic of personhood today. An outline of what such an ethic can entail in pursuing flourishing personhood in contemporary society and life is drawn in the following chapters. It is subsequently applied to certain prominent life issues of today. In Chapter 3, the sacredness of personal life and its implications for an ethic of flourishing personhood today will be addressed.

A sacred life

◼ Introduction

As believers, we profess that God himself is the living God (Dt 5:26; Jos 3:10; Ps 18:46). Therefore, he is also the source of life. According to the congruent biblical theology, all life comes from God. Kress (1999:37) argues that God's creational act finds its focal point in the creation of life. God brought life to a universe that was 'uninhabitable' [*tohu wabohu*] (Ge 1:2). Du Toit (1974:60) explains that the Hebrew concepts *tohu* and *bohu* indicate a desert. The characteristic of a desert is its lack of life and barrenness. In a state of chaotic uninhabitability, God brought beauty and life (Ps 19:2). God prepared everything as a dwelling for living creatures, says Von Rad (1961:54). In many other passages in the biblical text, God is described as the source (fountain) of life (Ps 36:9; Jr 2:13, 17:13; Job 33:4) and as the one who gives life to all creatures. He is also the one who takes it away (Ps 104:29). Thus, all life stands related to God as the Lord of life and death. Life is the supreme good that nothing can surpass or relativise (Starke 2003:269). However, the apex of the created life is the spirited life of the person who comes to life through the gift of the breath of God.

What do we do with life? In answering this question, we could distinguish between the life of a person and the life in other living creatures. Although all life comes from God, the life of a person is unique. This chapter deals with how we may well view the unique life of all persons. The section

'Eco-relationship', in Chapter 5, investigates our responsibility towards all other forms of life from the perspective of an ethic of flourishing personhood.

The starting point in this reflection is the premise that the life of any person is not only unique but also sacred in the eyes of God. Barth (1960a:344) is of the opinion that the prohibition on the killing of a person is the first and foremost law given by God. He refers to Genesis 3:9 in this regard: 'Whoever sheds human blood, by humans shall their blood be shed; for in the image of God, has God made mankind'. In this passage, the value of human life is related to the *imago Dei*. The argument can be taken further by saying that God as the giver of life relates to the person exactly because of this divine gift. The person does not possess his or her life in the same way that they could possess an object such as a piece of art or a property. Nor are God and the person co-owners of life. Life flows from the living God to the person and as the sole source of life, human life belongs to God and God alone. The saying in modern bioethics that 'I am the sole owner of my body and my life' and 'I am the boss of my own womb' can thus be questioned from the perspective of an ethic of life. Human life relates to God as part of the *imago Dei* and can therefore be regarded as sacred. This principle has direct implications for the discourse on the beginning of life in the abortion debate, the discourse on assisted suicide in the euthanasia debate, capital punishment in the penology debate, as well as in other issues related to these discourses. The chapter turns to some of these debates now.

■ The beginning of life

The debate on the beginning and end of life in this section departs from the above-mentioned principle that the life given by the living God is his possession. The given life of the person does not become the property of the person to use or misuse, to create or end according to the person's own choices and perceived autonomy. In our dealings with human life, we remain responsible to the living God, the only possessor of life. How then may we evaluate the highly contentious approved practices in many societies of the legitimation of abortion on request and voluntary physician-assisted suicide?

■ Abortion on request

The whole debate surrounding abortion on request boils down to the fundamental question: When does the life of the person begin? More to the point one can ask: are the psychotic, blastocyst, embryo or foetus *human* in the sense that it bears human life and could therefore be regarded as a person with personhood in the making? Furthermore, can one thus ascribe any value to the psychotic, blastocyst, embryo and foetus in the sense that they are worthy of moral and legal protection? Over the years, several suggestions

have been made from medical, biological, philosophical, juristic and ethical perspectives in response to the question about exactly when in prenatal life we consider human life to begin. What value, if any, can be given to these manifestations in the process of human reproduction?

As a medical researcher in neurobiology and paediatrics, Condic (2014) asserts that the conclusion in science that human life begins at 'sperm–egg fusion is uncontested, objective, based on the universally accepted scientific methods of distinguishing different cell types from each other, and on ample scientific evidence' (Condic 2014:4). In her opinion, this finding is entirely 'independent of any specific ethical, moral, political, or religious view of human life or of human embryos' (Condic 2014:5). She admits that this definition does not directly address the 'central ethical question surrounding the embryo, namely what value society should place on human life at these initial stages of development' (Condic 2014:5). A neutral examination of the evidence merely establishes the onset of a new human life at a scientifically well-defined 'moment of conception', a conclusion that unequivocally indicates that human embryos from the one-cell stage forward are indeed living individuals of the human species' (Condic 2014:5).

The influential Roman Catholic catechism (1992:2270–2273) builds the ethical argument opposing abortion on this scientific position, which was recently strengthened by the proven fact that the DNA of an embryo is already present at that stage. The Roman Catholic argument pursues the following pattern of reasoning:

1. The moment of fertilisation is an entirely logical point to choose as the beginning of human life.
2. It is one of the few points that is not arbitrary or difficult to judge, as an egg is either fertilised or not.
3. At this point the fertilised egg has begun to develop into a separate and unique human being.
4. At this point, the fertilised egg contains the full genetic code of a human being.
5. It is the beginning of a process of development and maturation that does not end until the individual naturally dies, or is killed.
6. It only marks the beginning of biological life.

For this reason, Pope John Paul (1995) declared that direct abortion, that is, abortion willed as an end or as a means, always constitutes a grave moral disorder, since it is the deliberate killing of an innocent person.

Proponents of abortion on request differ from this position and call it a metaphysical point of view and a semantic story. They resort to the argument that the embryo or foetus cannot be regarded as a human being, and definitely not as a person. From the embryonic stage, the entity can gradually develop

into a person. Dabbagh (2009:2) explains this point of view by saying that during the pregnancy period, the foetus goes through several steps and many different shapes. When the foetus is 12 weeks old, its shape is different from the foetus that is 20 weeks old, but the entity is still called a foetus. Although the name is the same, the shape is quite different. For instance, medical scientists regard the entity as a foetus at 9 weeks, but they also refer to the entity that is 20 weeks old as a foetus. They use the same name for different steps (with the exception of the first 8 weeks, when it is called an embryo) during the pregnancy period. When after 36 weeks the child is born, it seems that its shape is approximately the same as the shape of the foetus. The argument of the opponents of abortion about the beginning of life can in his opinion therefore only resort to a metaphysical story to make any semantic position intelligible.

The issue in this debate is the question of whether human life at the time of conception can be equated with personhood. Is this life already 'the breath of God', and is the embryo already an entity with personhood? Can the relationship between the two be undone? Can there be human life without personhood? Can the human life in the embryo develop to something else than a person with personhood? Does the command in Genesis 9:6 also refer to the early stages of human life? Furthermore, can a person develop gradually from the embryo, which is not human, into a child that only becomes human when it can survive outside the womb of the mother?

These questions are constantly being debated in ethics today within the parameters of what is popularly described as the pro-life–pro-choice debate. The fact that a growing number of countries have legalised abortion on request by mothers as young as 14 years of age indicates that the idea that the embryo is not a person has become widely accepted. It is merely the point in the pregnancy when abortion should not be thought of as an option anymore that is still under discussion. Novak (2007:67) researched the many arguments in this ethics debate that are still held in high esteem and informs us that many bio-ethicists suggest that the life of the person begins when the foetus develops its own functioning nervous system, in other words, when the brain starts to function. This argument is widely accepted and used as a measurement in the legalisation of abortion on request of the mother. However, in this respect, there are also differences of opinion. Some medical scientists see the beginning of life as the formation of the foetus after 14 days when the primitive streak first appears (Waters 2003:68). Others see the beginning of life as the moment when the mother can feel the movement of the foetus in utero. Another group sees the beginning of life as starting at a later stage. Rheeder (1999:324) and Gross (2000:247) discussed these views in the early stages of the debate. I will not enter into the debate amongst medical scientists about the stages of foetal development, because my primary ethical question from the perspective of creational life is: can the

embryo be regarded as a developing human being with human life (the breath of God) from the outset? If not, all the other arguments regarding ensoulment at a later stage, brain function, movement in the uterus and the formation of the primitive streak become relevant and may well be dealt with theologically.

Just as in the case of the Roman Catholic catechism, reformed theologians in the past ventured to look for clear biblical evidence that can guide the Christian–ethical evaluation of the beginning of life. A thorough and informative study in this regard was done by the South African bioethicist, Rheeder (1999:345), with reference to other reformed scholars in this field. He rightly cautions, firstly, that Scripture cannot be used as a biological textbook and be treated in a biblicist way. With this premise in mind, Rheeder (1999:345) explores several biblical passages that can in his view shed light on the matter of the beginning of life. There are indeed several biblical passages that can serve as a Scriptural appeal for the view that the embryo or foetus is fully human. In this respect, he investigates the following biblical passages in a hermeneutically plausible way: Firstly, he refers to Job 3:3, which reads: 'May the day perish on which I was born, and the night in which it was said: "A male child is conceived"'. He explains that the word translated with 'born' can also be translated as 'impregnated'. His viewpoint is supported by the findings of many Old Testament scholars over the years, including Driver and Gray (1921:31–32); Van Selms (1982:39–40) and Hartley (1988:92). All of them reached the same conclusion as Rheeder and their findings support his grammatical-historical exegesis. This passage also features prominently in the argument of the Roman Catholic catechism (1992:2270). Rheeder then argues that the purport of this passage is that human life originates when a woman is impregnated, thus with conception. Kress (1999:37) reaches the same conclusion, but also refers to Isaiah 45 where the power of the immanent reign of God and its impact on human history, also the history of the individual person, is lauded. Of special relevance is verses 6–12 of Isaiah 45:

> I am the LORD, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God. I will strengthen you, though you have not acknowledged me, so that from the rising of the sun to the place of its setting men may know there is none besides me. I am the LORD, and there is no other. I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the LORD, do all these things. 'You, heavens above, rain down righteousness; let the clouds shower it down. Let the earth open wide, let salvation spring up, let righteousness grow with it; I, the LORD, have created it. 'Woe to him who quarrels with his Maker, to him who is but a potsherd among the potsherds on the ground. Does the clay say to the potter, 'What are you making?' Does your work say, 'He has no hands?' Woe to him who says to his father, 'What have you begotten?' or to his mother, 'What have you brought to birth?' 'This is what the LORD says – the Holy One of Israel, and its Maker: Concerning things to come, do you question me about my children, or give me orders about the work of my hands? It is I who made the earth and created mankind upon it. My own hands stretched out the heavens; I marshalled their starry hosts'. (vv. 6–12)

The child is 'begotten' by the father and 'brought to birth' by the mother. Kress contends that these expressions, read against the background of the description of God's creative and ruling power, indicate that the begotten child is a human being from the moment of conception. This view concurs with Rheeder's later interpretation of Job 3:3.

Secondly, consider that Psalm 139 reinforces this argument. These verses (Ps 139) read:

> For You have formed my inward parts; You have covered me in my mother's womb. I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; marvellous are Your works, and that my soul knows very well. My frame was not hidden from You, when I was made in secret, and skilfully wrought in the lowest parts of the earth. Your eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed. (vv. 13–16)

These verses indicate God's involvement with the person from the time of pregnancy. This involvement assigns value to the embryo or foetus. The idea that the embryo is human from the outset can also be found in Psalm 51:7, where the depravity of the person from its inception is affirmed. The embryo or foetus is therefore both an object of God's involvement and is corrupted in original evil from the moment of conception.

Everything that takes place during the development from conception onwards is part of God's formation of the person. The embryo is not something, but someone. For this reason, Exodus 22:21 prescribes a punishment for the one who harms a pregnant woman to such an extent that she has a miscarriage. This Scriptural evidence points to the argument that the person enters the world at conception following intercourse, and not at birth. Rheeder (1999:354) also refers to Christian ethicists that draw conclusions based on other parts of Scripture against the background of congruent biblical theology. They refer to the commandment of love, the biblical teachings of suffering and of a child as a gift from God's hand. These arguments are indeed important. The Bible cannot be used as a biological textbook that is concerned with the physiological and psychological development of humans; it is rather about the specific ongoing revelation of God's redeeming grace in Christ and the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. For this reason, biblical passages ought to be read in the context of this ongoing revelation. In addition to Rheeder's grammatical-historical exegesis and in compliance with the principles of a hermeneutic of congruent biblical theology as discussed previously, I would like to argue a case for a pro-life point of view.

Arguing within the context of the 'breath of life', one could maintain that human life in whatever form is a creational gift of God. No human being initiates their own life, and no one owns their own life. Life, the body and the spirit are gifts from God. God nourishes, liberates and endows the human being with all the creational and recreational gifts of his Spirit. Christ intercedes on the cross for the whole human being from the beginning of life to the end. At no time in this process is the human being without life, that is,

'the breath of God'. This blessedness constitutes sacredness. Wherever there is the breath of God, there is a person with personhood. Wherever there is human life, there is personhood. Therefore, human life is sacred. This sacredness endures through all stages and forms of human life. The spirited life starts at the moment of conception. The life of the embryo and the foetus is more than the life of a plant or an animal. This life is the 'breath of God' and is just as sacred as the life of a developed person. The unborn child in all its stages of development may for this reason be perceived as somebody and as a person with personhood. The embryo is already someone and part of God's communion as echoed in Isaiah 43, which reads:

> But now, this is what the LORD says – he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. (v. 1)

What applies to God's people applies also to the individual because of God's covenant with the person. In other words, life began when God gave human life and personhood to the first created human beings, and it is given to their posterity at fertilisation or conception during reproduction.

Therefore, the biblical view of human life emanating from the congruent biblical theology as it can be constructed from the teachings of the above-mentioned passages and the idea of spirited life as a creational gift, validates the argument that life begins at conception. Arguing that life enters the developing unborn child at a later stage violates the biblical concept of the gift of the 'breath of God' as the sole source of life. This biblical concept gives rise to a moral principle that declares that any form of termination of the human life of the developing unborn child could be regarded as taking a human life. Suffice it to say that the use of the gift of the 'breath of God' as an indication of what human life is all about and the view that this life begins at conception, constitutes an important moral argument to evaluate the practice of abortion on request and other life-terminating practices. This perspective sheds exacting light on the practice of abortion on request of the mother as practised in many countries today.

Abortion must therefore be regarded in general as an immoral act because it violates the gift of life and destroys a person. Christian ethics can participate in the abortion debate from the deontological premise that the embryo has intrinsic value. Such an argument can add value to the consequentialist argument widely accepted in Christian ethics circles and often raised by bio-ethicists in their defence of the value of the embryo and their criticism of abortion. Lee (1996:26) and Brown (2000:103) are exponents of this consequentialist line of thought. Lee (in Stretton 2000) explains this argument by arguing that:

> [S]ince the foetus is identical to the rational, self–conscious being who will exist a few years later, and since this rational, self–conscious being is indisputably

intrinsically valuable, the foetus must already be intrinsically valuable, for nothing can be valueless at one time but become intrinsically valuable at another. (pp. 228–239)

Wendler (1999:33) furthers the consequentialist argument by following a slightly different pattern of reasoning. He argues as follows: The deliberate interruption of a natural process that helps define the fundamental structure of human life is, *prima facie*, seriously immoral. Wendler (1999) emphasises that:

[*F*]oetal development is a natural process that helps to define the fundamental structure of the life of a human being. The act of abortion constitutes a deliberate interruption of an instance of foetal development, and therefore, abortion is *prima facie* seriously immoral. (p. 33)

Stretton, on the other hand, argues that the consequentialist argument fails on two counts. 'First, the crucial premise that a thing's intrinsic value must derive from its essential properties is question–begging and devoid of support. Second, that premise is inconsistent with the pro–life position' (Stretton 2000:239). The consequentialist argument alone is only partly efficient.

To my mind, the proposed deontological argument flowing from the premise of the blessedness and sacredness of human life because of God's 'breath of life' ratifies the inherent value of the embryo, not because of its future value as a human being, but as valuable in itself. This argument can stand up to Stretton's criticism better than the sole consequentialist argument, although the latter still emerges with various nuances in bioethical reasoning when the proponent does not want to use a metaphysical angle of approach.

However, even the deontological argument cannot be applied absolutely when the whole debate about abortion on request and the legal approval of such a practice comes to mind. Pro-choice proponents raise other valid questions, such as what about the moral conflicts that arise from the choices a moral agent is supposed to make when considering abortion on request or when choosing from a pro-life point of view? What about a situation where the life of the mother will be in danger at birth or when medical investigation reveals that the child to be will have serious physical or mental disabilities? What about a case where the child will have no hope of a respectable life because of the extreme poverty of the community into which it will be received or the inability of the parent(s) to raise the child in a dignified and human way? What about a pregnancy that resulted from rape? More frequent nowadays is the argument that embryonic stem cell research, which offers wide-ranging medical benefits for human beings, needs embryos for research purposes. The argument is that these embryos will in the end be destroyed anyway. These questions pose moral dilemmas that should be addressed in a plausible way in Christian ethics.

■ Moral conflict

In my opinion, responsible Christian ethics should be aware that moral conflicts can arise when choices have to be made in the face of moral dilemmas. Absolutist arguments are sometimes inadequate. In the process of ethical decision making, a moral agent has to from time to time choose not in the usual way between moral or immoral but also between the lesser of two evils. In the recent history of Christian ethics, especially after World War II, scholars worldwide have paid attention to the question of how to explain difficult ethical choices in the face of the moral dilemmas that surface in so many areas of modern society. Contemporary medical research and the increasing technological possibilities of genetic manipulation, as well as economic planning and development to the detriment of the environment and the possibilities raised by robotics and other areas of scientific research, expose a range of moral dilemmas. Thielicke's (1966:586) reflection on the dilemmas facing Christians regarding moral choices during World War II is well known and his work guided many through difficult moral choices. He refers to the fact that Christians in Resistance movements were sometimes obliged to execute a traitor without hesitation and even sometimes without communication, since the lives of people in the Resistance Movement or 'the good cause' against Nazi occupation could depend on this destruction of human life. One can add that the nuclear attacks on Japanese cities were justified by arguing that the resulting destruction and human losses ended the war and prevented more destruction and more loss of life. Moral dilemmas and the choices these dilemmas force people to make are a reality because of the incomplete and perverted world we are living in, says Thielicke (1966:596).

In 1978, the astute and widely respected Christian ethicist, Paul Ramsey (1978:70), also debated the dilemmas that moral conflicts pose to all ethical traditions. He posited rightly that moral choices are in most cases incommensurate and indeterminate. The reflections of Thielicke and Ramsey gave rise to a wide range of ideas amongst Christian ethicists about how moral conflicts could be dealt with. The Dutch Reformed ethicist Douma (1992:127) posits that a Christian is sometimes obliged to compromise [*compromittere*], to accept less than God expects. Grenz (1997:256) pleads for a strong sense of Christian realism and a rejection of Christian absolutism, which holds that in every action, no matter how extreme, there is a course of action that is morally right and totally free of sin. A Christian realist must be conscious of the fact that all human responses to grave ethical dilemmas can in the end offer only partial solutions, and sometimes these solutions generate new problems. Roman Catholic theology has since Vatican II entertained the concept of 'double effect', which points to a set of rules for situations where an action brings forth good and bad effects. The same is true in the case of abortion.

However, acknowledging the reality of moral conflicts in the face of the many moral dilemmas occurring in the modern society does not mean that moral decisions may be a matter of relativist, vague, emotion-driven and inconsistent application of ethical norms by the Christian moral agent. The decision making when a moral conflict occurs can also be guided by Christian–ethical principles. McCormick (1978:7) explains the well-developed philosophical–ethical view of the post-Vatican II Roman Catholic theology in this regard. In the case of a moral conflict, the evil caused as the moral agent goes about doing good can be justified or tolerable under certain conditions. The action itself must be good or indifferent, and the intention of the moral agent should be upright. In other words, the evil effect is not intended. Furthermore (Mcormick 1978):

> [*T*]he evil effect must be equally immediate and causal as the good effect, for otherwise it will be a means to the good effect and would be intended. There must also be a proportionally grave reason for allowing the evil to occur. If these conditions are fulfilled, the resultant evil can be referred to as an 'unintended by-product' of the action, only indirectly voluntary and justified by the presence of a proportionately grave reason. (p. 7)

Recently, Bretzke (2018:100) revisited the role of intention as applied in the Roman Catholic tradition since Vatican II with reference to other scholars in this tradition. Bretzke's understanding of intention is 'in the moral sense'. It focuses on the 'fundamental distinction between a voluntary act and an intended act'. He refers to traditional Roman Catholic moral theology where it was constantly maintained that 'this distinction involves a possible consideration of actions which, whilst "foreseen," were nevertheless not "intended" in the moral sense' (Bretzke 2018:100). Such actions (or consequences) were 'said to lie "outside" of the moral intention (*praetor intentionem*), as in the example of killing a molester to save an innocent child' (Bretzke 2018:100). He continues the argument and posits that 'in the traditional language of moral theology, the evil of killing in this case would have been voluntary, but not intended'. There is, of course, no contradiction here. According to Bretzke (2018:100), 'the word "intend" merely has two different meanings'. With reference to Hoose, he explains that 'the evil in the act could therefore be intended in the psychological sense (the usual sense), but was not intended directly in the moral sense'.

He also addresses the concepts 'proportionate' and 'reasonable' when used to refer to the amount of violence used in a situation. Bretzke (2018) says:

> Any excessive use (unreasonable) would not be 'proportionate'. Thus, in the combined terminology of 'proportionate reason'– 'reason' is actually the key aspect that should be kept in mind by the moral agent – if the use of violence is 'reasonable' then it would be *ipso facto* 'proportionate'. 'Proportionate' does not mean 'greater' in a utilitarian sense of consequentialist reasoning. What is 'moral' would be that which gives the greater benefit to the greater number. If our actions and decisions

are truly reasonable, we have already supplied 'proportionate' reason. Thus, we might look at the term 'proportionate' as simply a further specification of what 'reason' means in a real sense. (p. 100)

If we understand proportionate reason in this way, many of the 'charges' against proportionalism by its critics lack a real foundation. Based on the discussed reasoning about intention, greater benefit for the greater number, proportionality, and the good end (consequentialism), Roman Catholic moral theology remains hesitant to ratify abortion on request, because such an act cannot comply with the principles of intention, benefit for the greater number, proportionate and reasonable use of violence and the good end for the subject. From there, we see the Roman Catholic Church's strong view on abortion as explained by Coleman (2013:1). In Roman Catholic moral theology, a direct abortion is never permitted. In this tradition, a case can only be made for an indirect abortion during which a life-threatening pathology is treated, and the treatment inadvertently leads to the death of the foetus. However, such a death could be perceived as ontological death and may be permissible in proportionately grave situations. Even in situations where a mother's life is endangered by the pregnancy before the foetus is viable, there is still, according to Coleman, some debate about whether the termination of the pregnancy is a direct or indirect abortion. Roman Catholic moral theology's contribution to the religious debate about the permissibility and consequent legitimation of abortion solely on the request of the mother is valuable and may well be appreciated as powerful guidelines for the debate.

In reviewing the moral decision making in the case of moral dilemmas and subsequent moral conflicts from a reformed ethical perspective, I venture to offer another view I have touched on in a previous study on moral conflicts in the discourse on human dignity and human rights (J.M. Vorster 2017a:151–172). I take the liberty to present the theory also in this study, but with additional arguments. The question in this case is what moral directives can guide us as we make moral choices when confronted with the moral dilemmas posed by the questions of pro-choice campaigners. To my mind, Christian ethics should accept that an absolutist approach in the casuistic sense in the face of moral conflicts is not always possible. On the other hand, mere pragmatism should also be avoided, because such an approach runs against core biblical–ethical principles and inhibits the plausibility of an Christian–ethical decision in the world today. Christian moral agents could rather endeavour to provide applicable and suitable guidelines, such as the teachings found in the moral theology of the Roman Catholic Church.

The first guideline offered here relates to the circumstance of the perceived moral dilemma and the associated moral conflict. First of all, moral agents must determine whether they are dealing with an urgent situation such as for example a natural disaster, a war or the outbreak of a pandemic, or any other

situation that would inhibit their normal moral decisions and choices. Have circumstances changed to such an extent that a deontological and virtue approach would not be sufficient to deal with an emerging moral problem?

The second guideline put forward entails that a decision on a moral conflict must be driven by the ideal of a good end, as the consequential theory argues. But what is a good end? The definition of a good end depends on and is determined by the definer, who has his or her own ideological or religious persuasions. Many violations of human dignity in history were justified with the argument that these actions will eventually serve good for all people. For example, the 'good' end of 'bringing civilisation' to all often motivated colonial enterprises. During the Apartheid era in South Africa, black communities were removed from inner cities and so-called white residential areas with the argument that in the end this act will benefit all and will result in a good end. The atrocities of the British during the Anglo–Boer War at the beginning of the 20th century was and still is being justified by the argument that women and children were confined to the concentration camps for their own benefit as they could then be protected by the British troops. Their captivity was for their own good. The argument of the 'good end' then justified the horrible genocide in the British concentration camps. Many other examples of a pattern of reasoning that deifies a 'good end' can be mentioned. Therefore, this guideline should not be interpreted in an absolutist sense. A good end cannot justify all the means to reach it. Ghandi (1997:354) reminded us that there can be no wall of separation between the means and the end. We have some control over the means, and nothing over the end. A mere consequential approach to the pro-choice abortion debate can lead to a boundless and unlimited acceptance of abortion on request because in every situation of pregnancy, a case can be argued for abortion on the basis that it will be to the benefit of the mother or the family or the community. A 'good end' can easily be falsified and manipulated.

The argument of the greatest benefit for the largest number of people can be helpful in this regard but can also be misused to justify immoral means. In this case also, one can ask (Douma 1992:19): Who defines what will be the greatest benefit? Can the choice be justified by the aim of rendering a service over and against doing damage? Can the idea of community building be appreciated as the good end as McCormick (1978:20) proposes? These proposals are indeed interesting and valuable, but I think that the old Calvinist dictum about the glorification of God as the eventual goal of human life can assist us in this respect. Human conduct must in the end glorifies God. When arguing from this premise, the question is then: Does the end we envisage glorify God? Will the end signify his immanent reign? Will the end reflect the qualities of his reign, such as life, love, peace, hope, compassion and holiness? The end we want to reach when coming to a decision in a moral conflict must thus still bear the qualities of His reign. But even in this case, one should be hesitant to apply the consequentialist approach

in an absolute way. Consequentialism can be useful when dealing with a moral conflict but might not be appreciated as the only decisive ethics theory. The intention and means may also be analysed. Therefore, more guidelines ought to be considered.

A third guideline deals with the intent of a moral decision in a moral conflict. A moral agent will, of course, intend to reach a good end. What applies to the end may also apply to the intent. The intent should be to honour and glorify God with a respectable and constructive end where the signposts of his reign will become visible, even under difficult circumstances. For this reason, the intent may be directed by the Great Commandment – the love of God and the love of the fellow human being. Driven by the Great Commandment, the Christian moral agent would then avoid selfish aims and will be eager to enter into a process of reaching an end where the signs of God's reign can be discerned. A deed motivated by love can lead to a constructive end (Grenz 1997:295–296).

A fourth guideline deals with the attitude of the Christian moral agent when resolving the morality of the means employed to reach the good end in a moral conflict. Philippians 2 teaches that the attitude of a Christian person must mirror the attitude of Christ:

> In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (vv. 5–11)

In an earlier publication, I reflected on the concept of Christian attitude from the perspective of this hymn of Paul and applied his teaching on attitude to moral conduct in the current South African liberal democracy (see J.M. Vorster 2007). With reference to several scholars in the fields of biblical science and systematic theology, I concluded that Christian attitude based on the model of Christ entails self-sacrifice, servanthood, humility and obedience to God. In ethics, terms such an attitude embodies:

1. The divine calling of Christians to love others by being humane and compassionate and to identify with people in their quest for comfort, justice, dignity and respect.
2. Servanthood and stewardship so that God and the community are served in a peaceful quest for a respectable moral order.
3. Imitating Christ in human relationships by radiating a willingness for self-denial and altruistic presence in solving problems in inhumane conditions.
4. Total obedience to God in pursuit of a chaste life and moral social order.

A good end where signs of the reign of God can be seen, an intent of love and an attitude of servanthood can guide a Christian moral agent when dealing with the moral dilemmas posed by pro-choice supporters in the abortion debate.

Before dealing with the questions of the pro-choice supporters, a very important argument needs to be addressed. We could point out that all pregnancies are preventable, either in a natural way or by medical intervention. Many programmes on responsible reproduction or the prevention of pregnancy and the responsible use contraceptives and birth control are available today. Pregnancies can be planned. Parents have a choice.

□ The life of the mother

Let us then return to the valid questions pro-choice supporters ask: What about a situation where the life of the mother will be in danger at birth? In such a case a choice has to be made on whether one ought to favour the life of the mother over the life of the unborn child. An intent driven by love, responsible means and a constructive end will be served if the abortion is allowed because the mother is important to the well-being of her family and/or community. She is not the person with more intrinsic value that the unborn person, but with more relational value at that stage because of her established contributions and fixed responsibilities as a person. A good and constructive end will be served if such an abortion is allowed.

□ The disabled child

The choice can be different in a case where medical investigation reveals that the child to be will have serious physical or mental disabilities and will not enjoy a quality life and flourishing personhood. Here again the primary question will be who will decide on what a quality life might be? For some people, physical disabilities translate to a poor quality of life, whilst others may be more pliable. The same is true of perceived mental disabilities. The choice here will be between a life of good quality and a life of lower quality in the eyes of the moral agent who is responsible for making the choice. However, quality of life does not determine the intrinsic value of life. Disabled persons are persons with all the ingredients of flourishing personhood. The unborn child with perceived disabilities has the same breath of God and is just as much a person with personhood as the healthy child with a promising life. The disabled child is also a person. Therefore, as much as humanity cares for disabled persons and protects all their human rights, it may well show compassion for the unborn child with possible disabilities. This compassion entails that the child is sanctioned to be born and cared for by a caring community. Parents are obliged to, in the spirit of servanthood and stewardship

and according to the example of the servanthood and stewardship of Christ, take up their obligations to care for their child, irrespective of the child's physical or mental condition.

Furthermore, disrespect for the unborn child with possible physical or mental disabilities can easily spill over into a disrespect for living disabled persons. If the unborn child with possible disabilities is viewed as a person of a 'lower order', why then not also the living disabled person? The growing global human rights discourse condemns discrimination in any form against disabled persons. Why then may people discriminate against the unborn child with possible disabilities? Taking all the above-mentioned arguments into account, one may well conclude that no moral dilemma requiring moral decision making according to the guidelines for a moral conflict is at stake in this instance. The moral agent is dealing with a normal situation – the expectation of a child with the breath of God as a person with personhood. No choice between the lesser of two evils is necessary.

☐ The child with a hopeless future

The pro-choice debate in South Africa, where a large part of the population lives with constraints such as inequality, poverty and unemployment, also raises the argument that if an unborn child would have a hopeless future of impoverishment because of these conditions, abortion may be a moral outcome for the unborn child, the family and the community. The child would in any case have no hope of a respectable life after birth because of the extreme poverty of the community. The parent(s) may be the unable to raise the future child in a dignified and human way. This point of view has severe limitations. The core element of this argument is that a life of comfort is of a higher value than a humble life. Affluence and prosperity add value to life itself. The person with a bleak economic and social future is of a lesser value than a person with a bright future. Just as in the case of the argument in favour of abortion of the unborn child with perceived disabilities, this argument is based on the view that the value of life depends on the quality of life as viewed by the moral agent who has to come to a decision. The following questions can be asked to the pro-choice supporters who hold this opinion in South Africa: Is the life of an affluent person of greater value than the life of a poor person? Does personhood depend on the breath of God, or on the wealth and luxuries a person can accumulate throughout their lifetime? With such a view, are we not right back in the old domain of the theories of human superiority and inferiority that lie behind racism, xenophobia and ethnocentrism? All these theories are based on the idea that some groups of people are innately superior to others because of their genetic inheritance (Marger 1994:26). If the unborn child with a bleak future is of lesser value, why not living persons with bleak futures? The argument is therefore not only

limited but even dangerous. Furthermore, it violates the idea that the value of the person lies in the breath of life given by God and that therefore all people, whether with bleak or bright futures, are of equal value because of the creational gift of personhood.

Moreover, no urgent situation can be discerned in such a situation that will make decision making according to the guidelines of a moral conflict necessary. Reproductions in poor communities are normal and constructive and pose no threat to human life. On the contrary, many young people in South Africa who were born into difficult economic and social situations have become and are becoming leaders in society and are improving the quality of life in their communities. There possibly will be investment in housing and job creation, access to all forms of education, development of communities, and a nurturing of the dignity and equality of persons irrespective of race, creed or social position rather than justify abortion on the basis of the perceived inferiority of some and superiority of others. The argument in favour of abortion on request because of the child's possible bleak future has too many limitations and dangerous traits to be considered a convincing argument in the abortion discourse.

☐ Rape

What about abortion on request when the pregnancy is the result of rape? In answering this question, the essence of sexuality may be considered. Sexual relations cannot be viewed as merely a private matter between two individuals for the purpose of the fulfilment of intrinsic sexual desires. Arguing from a Christian–ethical perspective, the well-known American ethicist Hauerwas (2002:484) reminds us that the claim that sex is a matter of private morality is essentially a political claim dependent on a liberal political ethos. Much more is involved in sexuality than the pleasure of two individuals. Following the argument of Hauerwas, one can rightly say that sex pertains to the deepest levels of our personalities, entails a psychological, spiritual and biological dimension, influences a person's every act and determines our total response to life. It functions within the multi-dimensional relationship between persons and their mutual relationship with God, the giver of life. Sexuality is indeed a deep and powerful determinant of our experience of flourishing personhood. Sexuality without mutual love and the surety of a relationship of mutual trust and commitment can be a violation of the dignity of the person and the cause of the inhibition of a joyful and fulfilling life. Loveless sex degrades the person to a mere body with desires and the urge to reproduce. This view of human sexuality supposes that sexual activity should always be consensual.

How can the action of rape be defined? Hill and Hill (2020) define rape in the US legal system as the crime of sexual intercourse (with actual penetration of a woman's vagina with the man's penis) without consent and accomplished

through force, threat of violence or intimidation (such as a threat to harm a woman's child, husband or boyfriend). Lack of consent usually includes saying 'no' or being too drunk or drug-influenced to be able to resist or consent. 'Date rape' involves rape by an acquaintance who refuses to stop when told to. Legal experts often argue that there should be physical resistance, but the modern view is that fear of harm and the relative strengths of the man and the woman are obvious deterrents to a woman fighting back. Any sexual intercourse with a child is rape and in most US states sexual relations, even with consent involving a girl 14 to 18 years of age (with some variation on ages in a few states), is 'statutory rape' on the basis that the female is unable to give consent. Rape can thus be described as having sexual intercourse with a female without her consent through force, violence, threat or intimidation, or with a girl who is underage. This definition applies to most countries where the rule of law is respected and where an ethos of human rights guides interhuman relationships. In these environments, penalties for this crime are generally strict and perpetrators usually receive long prison sentences.

Rape defers the most important core of sexuality because it is not an act in which the two parties agree to engage voluntarily. The act also leaves no room for the prevention of pregnancy and the execution of responsible planning. The pregnancy is forced by an act of violence and the degradation of the dignity of the female person. The female had no chance to choose or any ability to prevent pregnancy. Furthermore, when bearing a child that results from the inhumane act of rape without compassion for commitment to the child and the secure and protective presence of the father, the mother may experience serious psychological disorders, for instance, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD), such as panic attacks and depression. A recent Australian case study conducted by Tarzia et al. (2018) shows the extreme negative after-effects of rape on the psychological well-being of a woman. The resulting disorders can intensify when the woman continues with a resulting pregnancy and eventually gives birth to the child. In the case of a young girl, her childhood, youthful happiness and idealism can be destroyed.

Taking into consideration the lack of consent, the inability to prevent the pregnancy, and the destructive end of the act of the rape that led to the pregnancy, I would argue that in this case, a choice for abortion can be morally acceptable. The mother deals with a clear moral dilemma as she was forced, against her will and beyond her ability to resist, to have sexual intercourse. She may then choose between the lesser of two evils.

☐ Embryonic stem cell research

More frequent nowadays is the argument by pro-choice supporters that embryonic stem cell research, which offers wide-ranging medical benefits for human beings, use embryos for research purposes. They point out that these

embryos would otherwise be destroyed anyway. Therefore, all forms of abortion on request can be regarded as morally acceptable. This argument depends on how embryos are created and destroyed during stem cell research. The California Institute for Regenerative Medicine (2018) explains that 'all the human embryonic stem cell lines currently in use, come from 4- to 5-day-old embryos left over from in vitro fertilisation (IVF) procedures'. During IVF, researchers mix a man's sperm and a woman's eggs in a lab dish. Some of those eggs will become fertilised. After about 5 days, the egg divides to become a hollow ball of roughly 100 cells called a blastocyst, which is smaller than the size of the dot over an 'i'. It is these very early embryos that are implanted into the woman with the expectation that she would become pregnant. However, each cycle of IVF can produce many blastocysts, of which only some are implanted into the woman. The rest are stored in the IVF clinic freezer. After a successful implantation, the parents must decide what to do with any remaining embryos. There are a number of options, such as continuing to pay to store the embryos, to defrost the embryos, which destroys them, to donate the embryos for adoption or choosing to donate the frozen embryos for research. These donated embryos then become the source of human embryonic stem cell lines.

The argument of pro-life proponents against the use and destruction of embryos during stem cell research is that the same research can be done using adult cells. There is thus no need for embryonic stem cell research. Stem cell researchers acknowledge that adult stem cells are extremely valuable and have great potential for future therapies. However, these cells are restricted in what they can do. Embryonic stem cells can be grown relatively easily in culture. Adult stem cells are rare in mature tissues, so isolating these cells from adult tissue is challenging and methods to expand their numbers in cell culture have not yet been successful. The National Institute of Health of the US Department of Health and Human Services (2016) explains that this distinction is important to consider because large numbers of cells are needed for stem cell replacement therapies. Unlike embryonic stem cells, which can grow into virtually any cell type in the body, adult stem cells can only follow certain routes. For example, blood-forming stem cells can grow into mature blood cells, and brain stem cells may be able to grow into mature neurons, but a blood-forming stem cell cannot grow into a neuron, and vice versa. Furthermore, adult stem cells do not grow indefinitely in the lab, unlike embryonic stem cells, and they are not as flexible in the types of diseases they can treat (cf. The California Institute for Regenerative Medicine 2018). The argument of replacing embryonic stem cells with adult stem cells is not convincing at this stage of research.

But what about the destruction of embryos in stem cell research? Can this practice be used to justify the abortion of a foetus on request of the mother? To my mind, this argument can be refuted by offering the following

counter arguments. Firstly, one destructive act in a certain context with a certain aim cannot be used to justify another destructive act in another context. Would it be valid to argue that torturing prisoners of war can be tolerated because the enemy is doing the same? They torture our prisoners, so we can torture theirs. The morality of the act of torture is not addressed. If an act is inherently immoral, the moral agent might deal with the destructive act within its own orbit. If embryonic stem cell research has the side effect of destroying embryos, then this practice itself might be evaluated from a moral point of view. Two acts within two different contexts ought not to be confused.

In the second place, Douma's (1992:126) argument referred to earlier in the discussion of the consequentialist theory can assist us here. Within the context of a clash of obligations during Christian moral decision making (*collision officiorum*), he uses the example of two ways in which a lie can be used in such a case. A lie can be used as a *mendacium officiosum* (a lie that renders a service) and a *mendacium perniciosum* (a lie that is used to damage). In his view, a lie as a 'lie that renders a service' can be justified during a moral conflict. He refers to various examples in Scripture of the justifiable use of a lie, such as in the narratives in Exodus 1:15–22; Joshua 2; Judges 3:15–21; 4:1–23; 5:23–31; 2 Samuel 17:19–29. In Judges 2:25, the author justifies Rachab's lie to protect the messengers of Israel. The lie was a good act because it rendered a service. Although a prostitute, she was justified because of her act of protection! Douma's distinction can also be applied in the discussion on the legitimacy of destroying the embryo by the act of abortion or by the act of research. The act of abortion is destructive because the embryo is in the uterus and a relational part of the mother. It has a future as a person. Destroying this embryo is destructive. An embryo in a laboratory is in no relationship and has no future itself. It cannot survive since it is outside the womb of a mother. However, it can render a service by being used in research aiming to improve the lives of persons. Destroying an embryo by the act of abortion is a destructive act. Destroying an embryo by the act of research can be perceived as a constructive act.

☐ The effect of abortion

A moral evaluation of the practice of abortion on request can also be enhanced by focusing on the effect of abortion on the mother herself. What might she experience afterwards? Does she remain untouched and unscathed by the act and the memories that remain? A recent French study by Pouliquen (2017) on the psychological effects of requested abortion on some mothers provides interesting answers to this question. She uses the term post-abortion syndrome (PAS) to describe the mental turmoil experienced by the mother after abortion. The term has not been recognised as a scientific term yet and it does not appear in any diagnostic and

statistical manual of psychological disorders. The only terms used by the scientific community to refer to psychological suffering because of abortion are the standard terms associated with anxiety, depression and some corollaries of PTSD. However, she maintains that PTSD and PAS terminology appear not to cover the full scope of the suffering experienced after an abortion. Indeed, the protocols for diagnosing and treating PTSD can be used only if symptoms manifest shortly after the traumatic event. Yet suffering because of abortion often takes time to become manifest and indeed may surface as late as the threshold of death. Therefore, the suffering caused by abortion remains difficult to research. The buried psychological pain requires a strong triggering event to manifest itself and for the person to see the link between her suffering and the abortion in the past. Some testimonials even portray the period immediately after the abortion as a window period in which psychic pain could potentially be expressed. This window closes because of excessive pain and it emerges only years later, for example after a birth, a bereavement, an illness or any other form of suffering. She also explains that the physical and psychological consequences of abortion are diverse, idiosyncratic and difficult to identify and describe precisely. She recommends a broader designation: the psychological consequences of abortion.

Although difficult to research, PAS acknowledges many disturbances that can manifest in the life of the mother. Pouliquen (2017) mentions depression, suicide, withdrawal from relationships, loss of self-esteem, acute feelings of guilt, shame and failure at motherhood. This reaction often indicates an ongoing perinatal bereavement, especially when several symptoms co-occur. The disturbances are always a result of a personal experience, sometimes linked to one's personal history. The list is by no means exhaustive. She concludes her research by asking how we can help people whose suffering is so rarely acknowledged or studied? Helping mothers who present with psychological suffering after an elective abortion consists of recognising its harsh reality and the pressures weighing on all family members. She refers to Clerget, who calls this post-abortion suffering of mothers a real public health problem that is not being taken seriously enough. She then points out that professionals may well be aware of these reactions and says that studying these effects is crucial to assist women to express their pain. It is useful to understand how the life of a mother might unfold after her abortion and the kaleidoscope of reactions that she may experience.

Although the research on a possible PAS is ongoing, the preliminary findings reveal beyond any doubt that some mothers experience psychological and destructive disturbances later in life. This negative effect of abortion on the person can also be used as a reason why abortion on request could be regarded as immoral.

□ Prevention

Lastly, more should be said about the prevention of pregnancy in the pro-life, pro-choice discourse. Abortion would not be necessary if people engage in responsible relationships where sexual activity takes place in the confinement of mutual commitment, responsible future planning and love. Pregnancies can and may be planned according to the abilities and future expectations of a loving couple and by taking the effects of uncontrollable population growth into account. Unplanned pregnancies and pregnancies because of irresponsible sexual behaviour are mostly the cause for requested abortion. In this case also, prevention is better that cure. A responsible person will not engage in promiscuous sexual relations without any commitment and accountability.

Departing from the premise of an ethic of flourishing personhood and the arguments raised above, a Christian moral agent ought to caution against abortion on request, except with the two exceptions mentioned. Christian moral agents could act as the powerful voice of the unborn children because they are the most vulnerable in our societies today. We therefore should not hesitate to remind authorities and medical practitioners that they are dealing with persons who have received the breath of God and therefore any human life at any stage of life should be respected and protected. On the other hand, Christian moral agents must promote the biblical concept of relational sexuality with mutual commitment as an essential part of flourishing personhood, especially in this age with its excessive emphasis on total sexual freedom and uncommitted engagements. Christian moral agents can also be deeply involved in the promotion of the idea of responsible family planning as an alternative to abortion on request.

■ The ending of life

According to Psalm 104:29, human life ends when God takes his life-giving breath away. This biblical principle runs against modern views that defend autonomous personhood and the perceived right to die. Proponents of the idea of autonomous personhood and the right to die raise many arguments in favour of their point of departure. Their main argument deals with the reality of human suffering. When there is considerable suffering, may the suffering person as an autonomous person decide to end their own life or request medical assistance to end life? Also, can a moral agent assist in the ending of a suffering life with the argument that such an act is founded on the noble principle of compassion? More to the point: Is human suffering a valid reason for a Christian to return the borrowed life to God and not to wait for God to take it away in a natural process? This question penetrates the core component of the contemporary global ethics debate on euthanasia or, as the practice has come to be termed in some circles over the past three decades, 'physician-

assisted suicide' (see Allman 1998:22; Tristan Engelhardt 1998:115). In debating this question, the starting point is an exposition of the reasons proponents offer for physician-assisted suicide.

■ Physician-assisted suicide

Ganzini et al. (2002:582–588) conducted a thorough empirical study of the reasons patients provide for requesting physician-assisted suicide from hospice nurses and social workers in the US state of Oregon after the practice was legalised there. The findings of their study are indeed valuable and informative. Ganzini et al. (2002) report that:

> [*A*]ccording to the hospice nurses, the most important reason for requesting assistance with suicide among patients who received prescriptions for lethal medications was a desire to control the circumstances of death – a desire to die at home. These patients have the belief that continuing to live would be pointless and that they were ready to die. (pp. 582–588)

They also reported that depression and other psychiatric disorders, lack of social support and concern about being a financial drain were relatively unimportant. Interesting to note is that 77% of the nurses testified (Ganzini et al. 2002):

> [*T*]hat patients who received prescriptions for lethal medications were more fearful of loss of control over the circumstances of death than were other hospice patients, whereas 8% reported that such patients were less fearful than other hospice patients. Sixty-two percent of the nurses said that patients who received prescriptions for lethal medications were more likely to be concerned about loss of independence than were other hospice patients, whereas 9% said that such patients were less concerned about loss of independence than were other hospice patients. (pp. 582–588)

In addition to the reports of the hospice nurses, hospice social workers reported that the (Ganzini et al. 2002):

> [*D*]esire to control the circumstances of death, the wish to die at home, loss of independence or fear of such loss, and loss of dignity or fear of such loss were the most important reasons for requesting prescriptions for lethal medications; the median score for all these reasons was 5 on the 1-to-5 scale. They also ranked lack of social support and depression as the least important reasons; the median score for both was 1. However, social workers rated fear of loss of dignity as more important (median score, 5; interquartile range, 4 to 5; p = 0.05) than did nurses; and the belief that continuing to live was pointless as less important (median score, 4; interquartile range, 3 to 5; p = 0.05) than did nurses. (pp. 582–588)

As assessed by the hospice nurses, the score for overall pain in the last 2 weeks of life was 3.1±2.3. Many of the nurses reported that (Ganzini et al. 2002):

> [*P*]ain or fear of pain was an important reason for the request for assistance with suicide. Only 15% of the nurses, however, reported that the patient had more pain on average than other hospice patients, whereas 42% reported that the patient had

less pain on average than other hospice patients. Other physical symptoms, such as fatigue and dyspnoea, were reported to be only moderately important reasons for the request, and 58% of the nurses reported that the patients who received prescriptions for lethal medications had less dyspnoea than other hospice patients. (pp. 582–588)

The main reasons for requested physician-requested suicide are fear of an undignified and inhumane death and degradation of their humanity, pain and a loss of interest in life.

A report compiled by the British Broadcasting Corporation (2014) gives a list of arguments that are regularly used in favour of euthanasia by proponents arguing for the legalisation of physician-assisted suicide. According to the report, the arguments can be broken down into a few main categories. The first category includes arguments that are based on the human rights doctrine that is maintained in modern liberal democracies. Their pattern of reasoning is as follows: Because people have an inalienable right to life, they also have an explicit right to die; a separate right to die in a bill of rights is not necessary, because other human rights imply the right to die; death is a private matter and if there is no harm to others, the state and other people have no right to interfere (a libertarian argument). The report then continues by listing the following 'practical arguments': It is possible to regulate euthanasia; allowing people to die may free up scarce health resources (this is a possible argument, but according to the report, no authority has seriously proposed it); euthanasia happens anyway (a utilitarian or consequentialist argument). The following arguments are then listed from what the report terms 'a philosophical point of view': Euthanasia satisfies the criterion that moral rules must be universal; and lastly, death is not necessarily a bad thing.

Before dealing with the question about the right to die, it is necessary to define death. When can a person be considered clinically dead? Definitions and Translations (2020) provides a thorough and clear definition by saying that:

Clinical death is the medical term for cessation of blood circulation and breathing, the two necessary criteria to sustain human and many other organisms' lives. It occurs when the heart stops beating in a regular rhythm, a condition called cardiac arrest. The term is also sometimes used in resuscitation research. Stopped blood circulation has historically proven irreversible in most cases. Prior to the invention of cardiopulmonary resuscitation, defibrillation, epinephrine injection, and other treatments in the 20th century, the absence of blood circulation was historically considered to be the official definition of death. With the advent of these strategies, cardiac arrest came to be called 'clinical death' rather than simply 'death' to reflect the possibility of post-arrest resuscitation; for medical purposes, it is considered to be the final physical state before permanent death. At the onset of clinical death, consciousness is lost within several seconds. Measurable brain activity stops within 20 to 40 seconds. Irregular gasping may occur during this early time period and is sometimes mistaken by rescuers as a sign that CPR is not necessary. During clinical death, all tissues and organs in the body steadily accumulate a type of injury called ischemic injury. (n.p.)

A person is considered legally dead when pronounced dead by a qualified medical practitioner. It is important to consider this definition when entering into the physician-assisted suicide debate. Modern technology enables medical practitioners to keep a person's heart function active after brain function has stopped. When this treatment is stopped, the person would be clinically dead. The damaged brain has no ability to recover to such an extent that the person will survive and depend on their own heart functions. Medical practitioners could then decide to stop the treatment with or without consent. In the past, this action was termed passive euthanasia and was seen as morally acceptable (J. Fischer 1996:110). The same argument can also be raised in the case of a terminally ill patient where there is absolutely no possibility of cure and the delay of death. Medical practitioners can stop the treatment of the illness, treat pain, and ensure a comfortable and dignified death as far as it is possible. The term 'passive euthanasia' has become obsolete. Douma (1996:223) rather distinguishes between ending treatment (passive euthanasia) and ending life (active euthanasia). A moral case can be made for stopping treatment where the brain function of the person has stopped or when the person is terminally ill. In this case, the process of natural death will take its course. No moral agent is involved in taking the life of the person.

☐ Suffering

Intervention with the purpose of ending the life of the person with or without request may perhaps be viewed differently. This intervention boils down to taking a human life, which goes against the principle that the life of a person belongs to God and can only be taken away by God. This viewpoint can be argued as follows: Firstly, what is the meaning of suffering, something that is an unavoidable reality in the life of the person in this broken reality? Does suffering have any meaning? Is suffering worthless and undignified for the person? These questions relate partly to the age-old theodicy debate about the goodness of God and the reality of evil, which ultimately leads to human suffering. Why does God permit evil conduct that can cause suffering?

The barbarity of the Holocaust gave new impetus to this question. It is worthwhile to refer to the answers provided by Barth (1958) and Moltmann (1975) who both attempted to come to terms with evil and suffering by focusing on a *theologia crucis*. In an excellent survey of their respective views, N. Vorster (2007b:194) asserts that Karl Barth can be considered the founding father of this theological movement. Barth emphasised, over and against liberal theology, the centrality of the event of the cross as the defining moment in history that joins history, the present and eternity together. According to Barth (1957:594; cited by N. Vorster 2011):

> evil, sin, wickedness, the devil, death and non-being and suffering exists in its own way by the will of God. Nothing exists outside of the will of God. He distinguishes

between God's *voluntas efficiens* and *voluntas permittens* to explain the way in which evil exists by the will of God. God's *voluntas efficiens* is that which God positively affirms and creates, while his *voluntas permittens* consists in his non-participation, non-prevention, and non-exclusion of suffering. God not only gives the creature its existence and being, freedom and independence (*voluntas efficiens*), but also refrains from making it impossible for man to abuse its independence and freedom (*voluntas permittens*). God creates in such a way that he also permits. The *voluntas permittens* is no less *voluntas divina* than the *voluntas efficiens*, yet it is only a permission, a restricted toleration. (pp. 26–48)

☐ The Augustinian type of theodicy: Is it outdated?

Yet we can ask: Why is God's will for creation not only a *voluntas efficiens*, a good will, that can prevent the destructive force of evil? Barth's answer is that creation ought to be constantly reminded of God's grace (N. Vorster 2011):

> God's grace depends on the existence of a divine *voluntas permittens*, and thus on the reality of disgrace, damnation, and hell (Barth 1957:595). Barth (1961:305) does not see good and evil as two separate domains alongside each other; he sees the whole of creation from the perspective of Christ as one domain. Since everything is created for Jesus Christ and his death and resurrection, everything from the very outset must stand under this twofold and contradictory determination (Barth 1958:376). Barth calls the domain that opposes and resists God's world dominion 'nothingness'. (pp. 26–48)

In Christ, nothingness and evil are finally destroyed. However, the destruction of nothingness does not mean the end of all suffering. Until the second coming, God still permits nothingness to retain its semblance of significance and to manifest its already fragmentary existence, with man being a prey of nothingness (Barth 1961:367). Through the cross, God comes to us in action and Word, thereby identifying himself with our suffering. God permits suffering but identifies with and engages in our suffering. Suffering is real, but not meaningless because we can see and experience God in our suffering and find solace in his grace in Christ. N. Vorster (2007b:197) offers valid criticism of Barth's vies, but the core of Barth's teaching on the theodicy question is helpful when considering human suffering. The argument that can be furthered in the modern euthanasia debate is Barth's view that God permits the suffering of the person, but also engages with the person in suffering. The person never suffers alone and because of God's loving presence in suffering, the suffering person does not become worthless and undignified.

Barth's theology of the cross influenced Jürgen Moltmann's development of an *eschatologia crucis* and the possibility of hope amidst suffering. The resurrection qualifies the cross as an eschatological salvation event (Moltmann 1974:182). This means that history must be understood from the perspective of the eschaton. The *parousia* of God and Christ opens the way for time and sets history in motion through expectation and promise (Moltmann 1965:31, 58). The task of Christian eschatology is to formulate its statements of hope

in contradiction with our present experience of suffering, evil and death (Moltmann 1965:19). Suffering, death and evil must not be justified as part of the divine purpose, nor accepted as part of reality. The resurrection is God's contradiction of suffering and death and the protest of the divine promise against suffering. It sets in motion an eschatologically determined process in history, of which the goal is the annihilation of death and the victory of the life of resurrection, ending in righteousness and salvation. Thus, the believer becomes essentially one who hopes, who lives between the contradiction of the present and future (Moltmann 1965:86–103, 172). The hope that is born on the cross and the resurrection transforms the negative, contradictory and torturing aspects of the world into terms of 'not yet' and not 'nothing' (Moltmann 1965:197). The resurrection provides hope for God's final triumph over evil and suffering because it discloses an eschatological future (Moltmann 1965:21, 163, 181). According to Moltmann, the message of the cross is that God and suffering are not contradictions, but God's being is being in suffering and suffering is in the being of God (Moltmann 1974:227, 230).

This means that God suffers in solidarity with those who suffer. He embraces the God-forsaken reality by giving himself for us (Moltmann 1974:46–47). The cross does not solve the problem of suffering but awakens hope for a new world by meeting suffering with voluntary self-suffering, thereby bringing fellowship to lost beings (Moltmann 1990:175, 178, 193). In one's own pain, we discover the pain of God, creating fellowship with God in one's own suffering and overcoming the suffering in suffering (Moltmann 1974:56, 1990:180). In this way, human history is taken up in the history of God because there is no suffering in the history of the world that is not God's suffering (Moltmann 1974:246). God's suffering gives hope to suffering people. This hope empowers Christians to liberate and transform reality and overcome suffering through Christian praxis and mission (Moltmann 1965:34). According to Moltmann, suffering is not part of God's divine purpose. He maintains that innocent suffering cannot be explained, nor justified. However, the resurrection of Christ provides the hope that God will conquer all evil and suffering. Suffering is therefore not meaningless and negative because there is hope in suffering.

Both Barth and Moltmann refer to the reality of suffering. They explain that suffering is not a reality planned or justified by God, it is merely permitted and tolerated by God. However, God engages with the suffering person and nurtures acceptance, patience and hope. The suffering person does not become worthless and without any meaning because the person remains someone with personhood because of the breath of God, irrespective of the reality of suffering and weakness. The frail person is a complete person in the eyes of God and should therefore also be appreciated as such by fellow persons. In answering the question about the worthiness of the patient and the meaning of suffering, we can thus conclude from the perspective of an ethic of flourishing personhood that no person ever reaches a stage of

insignificance or despondency and hopelessness. Physician-assisted suicide should not be an option based on the argument of the meaninglessness of suffering and the hopelessness of the patient.

☐ Informed consent

Supporters of voluntary physician-assisted suicide argue that the informed consent of the suffering person and the legal limitations inherent to this can serve as a moral argument in favour of the act since the act is then not limitless or irresponsible. However, this argument can also be debated. Scholars in favour of physician-assisted suicide posit that the patient's informed consent is indispensable when reflecting on the morality of the act of the termination of life. With reference to Grover, Jessica McKenney (2018) defines informed consent stating:

> Informed consent entails a voluntary and sufficiently informed decision that protects the right of the patient to be involved in medical decision making and to assign associated duties and obligations to healthcare providers. The patient must have the legal capacity to do so and the legal capacity is realised when a patient can understand, weigh, and retain information to come to such a decision. Adults are assumed to have legal capacity. (p. 123)

McKenney (2018:123) informs us that the rights and limits of informed consent relating to physician-assisted suicide are described in many international human rights documents and implemented by states that have legalised physician-assisted suicide. The right to informed consent not only consists of the right to give consent but also the right to withdraw consent. This right is exemplified in the Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights (UDBHR), the Inter-American Convention on Protecting the Human Rights of Older Persons and the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Dignity of the Human Being with Regard to the Application of Biology and Medicine. She explains that Article 7(a) of the UDBHR also describes the rights of persons who do not have the capacity to consent and it states that these patients should still be involved as much as possible in the process of consenting or terminating consent. According to McKenney (2018), the Convention on Human Rights and Biomedicine goes a step further by stating that:

> a patient is free to terminate consent at any point. Article 11 of the Inter-American Convention on Protecting the Human Rights of Older Persons expresses that patients have the right to terminate or alter consent. No medical procedure can be performed under the auspices of informed consent if the patient who originally consented no longer agrees to the procedure but is still required to endure it. (p. 125)

This makes a procedure involuntary and against patients' right to informed consent. It is indeed true that in countries where physician-assisted suicide is legalised, strict measures are instituted to control the possible abuse of the action.

However, in a widely cited paper published in 2011, palliative care physician Jose Pereira (2011:1–8) argues on the basis of the findings of several empirical studies that the laws and safeguards in countries in which euthanasia or assisted suicide have been legalised are regularly ignored and transgressed in all the jurisdictions, and that transgressions are not prosecuted. He calls the argument about the limitations put on physician-assisted suicide by the requirement of voluntary informed consent a 'slippery-slope argument' because it does not set the limits of the ending of a life very clearly. The argument does not prevent misuse and abuse of informed consent. He purports to demonstrate that the safeguards and controls put in place in the permissive jurisdictions are an 'illusion'. In substantiating his opinion, Pereira (2011) refers to the following examples:

> In 30 years, the Netherlands has moved from euthanasia for people who are terminally ill, to euthanasia for those who are chronically ill; from euthanasia for physical illness, to euthanasia for mental illness; from euthanasia for mental illness, to euthanasia for psychological distress or mental suffering – and now to euthanasia simply if a person is over the age of 70 and 'tired of living'. (p. 6)

Pereira (2011) claims that:

> Dutch euthanasia protocols have also moved from conscious patients providing explicit consent, to unconscious patients unable to provide consent. Denying euthanasia or physician-assisted suicide in the Netherlands is now considered a form of discrimination against people with chronic illness, whether the illness be physical or psychological, because those people will be forced to 'suffer' longer than those who are terminally ill. (p. 6)

Non-voluntary euthanasia is now justified by appealing to the social duty of citizens and the ethics pillar of beneficence. Pereira points out that in 'the Netherlands, euthanasia has moved from being a measure of last resort to being one of early intervention'. Belgium has followed suit and troubling evidence is emerging from Oregon, the first US state that legalised physician-assisted suicide, about the objectivity of the process, specifically with respect to the protection of people with depression.

Pereira (2011:6) also refers to the finding of the United Nations which concluded that the euthanasia law in the Netherlands is in violation of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* because of the risk it poses to the rights of safety and integrity for every person's life.

Pereira explains that the United Nations has also expressed concern that the system may fail 'to detect and to prevent situations where people could be subjected to undue pressure to access or to provide euthanasia and could circumvent the safeguards that are in place' (Pereira 2011:6). In his view, autonomy and choice are important values in any society, but they are not without limits. He points to the fact that democratic societies have many laws that limit individual autonomy and choice to protect the larger community.

These include amongst many other things, limits on excessive driving speeds and the obligation to contribute by way of personal and corporate income taxes (Pereira 2011:6).

Why then should different standards on autonomy and choice apply in the case of physician-assisted suicide? Pereira (2011) concludes his argument about the inefficiency of voluntary informed consent by indicating that legislators in several countries and jurisdictions voted against legalising physician-assisted suicide just the year before his study, in part because of the concerns and evidence of the empirical studies described in his paper. Those jurisdictions include France, Scotland, England, South Australia and New Hampshire. They rather opted to improve palliative care services and to educate health professionals and the public. He characterises the arguments in favour of physician-assisted suicide in current legislations as 'slippery-slope arguments' that cannot contain the increasing number of reasons given for the approval of the voluntary ending of a life. Some of his findings were refuted by a study by Downie, Chambaere and Bernheim (2012:133–138). They consider Pereira's (2011) paper as carelessly researched and inadequately referenced and a deliberate attempt to mislead other scholars. According to their view, such a study contaminates the debate about the morality of euthanasia. However, they do not really prove with valid contradicting empirical research that his 'slippery-slope argument' is invalid. Setting legal limitations as a means to justify euthanasia cannot be regarded as a convincing argument. The limitations can constantly be revised according to definitions of life, death and human rights.

☐ The right to die

The human rights argument that the right of life also constitutes the right to die violates in my opinion the very essence of what the ethos of human rights intends to accomplish. The intention of the human rights doctrine as it developed over the last three centuries was to protect the individual against power abuses by authorities. The whole concept grew out of the right to life and freedom as a reaction to totalitarian regulation of all forms of human conduct. The intention of the human rights campaign, especially after the atrocities, violations and abuses of World War II, was to protect life and to provide a space for people to be fully human and to live in peace and pursue happiness. Would any moral agent be untouched by another person with suicidal tendencies and just stand by and allow the person to commit suicide because of the latter's inalienable right to die? No, the suicidal person has the right to life, and this right compels all moral agents to intervene with compassion and protection and to provide all forms of treatment available to protect the life of the suicidal person. The protection of such a life is our relational duty as persons living under the immanent reign of God and our

response to God's gift of life personhood. Claiming the right to die as an inalienable right runs against the core values of a Christian ethos of human rights. The same is true for the suffering people put forward in the euthanasia debate.

☐ The burden of assisting

As persons who share a common personhood, we all have mutual responsibilities in the sense that we are obliged to display to other persons the values of true personhood. We may not burden other persons with difficult requests that push them towards immoral acts. Requesting another person, in this case, a medical practitioner, to assist as a moral agent in taking your life is to ask them to violate the basic law God gave to humanity in Genesis 9:6. The patient then burdens the assisting medical practitioner with the difficult choice of becoming part in an immoral act. In the end, the assistant is responsible for ending a life. Assisting in suicide either through a direct act or by giving consent in a case where the patient is no longer able to give consent is a violation of the value of life, and is devoid of any responsible moral considerations. Such assistance is driven by mere pragmatism.

Furthermore, suffering at the end of life is not the same as those urgent situations where there is a moral conflict that requires a choice between bad and worse. The approach to euthanasia as a valid end to life is not driven by conflicts such as some circumstances that arise in the moral evaluation of abortion on request. The act is rather determined by ideological presuppositions that favour an anthropology with a negative assessment of human suffering, a limitation of the value of life, a view of the person as an autonomous person with no responsibility to God and others, and the toleration of a mere pragmatic action performed by the assistants involved. Relinquishing one's life and taking a life does not concur with the belief that life is a gift from God and as such is sacred. This belief supposes that persons can not only enjoy life and be happy but possibly will nurture and protect this precious gift of God.

■ Capital punishment

Can a community, by way of its legal structures and institutions, end the life of a person as punishment for that person's transgression of the laws of the community? Capital punishment was widely used throughout the history of humankind to punish various perceived crimes, especially in the case of homicide, treason, war crimes and terrorism. With the rise of the human rights doctrine, more and more moratoriums are being placed on capital punishment in liberal democracies, often followed by a total prohibition of this form of punishment. Historically, Christian ethics regarded capital punishment as justifiable, mostly on the foundation of the ethics of the Old Testament (Van

Wyk 1991:267). Supporters of capital punishment in the Christian moral tradition refer to two proof texts, namely Genesis 9:6 and Romans 13 to prove their arguments. Furthermore, they refer to the many laws in the Old Testament that approve of capital punishment for various sins. A list of these can be found in J.M. Vorster (2017a:184–185). De Vaux (1988:158) says that these atrocities can be divided into three groups, namely sins against God, sins against people and sins against parents.

Reasoned within the context of a congruent biblical theology, all these directives pose a hermeneutical problem when they are used as a directive for a Christian perspective on jurisprudence for all ages and in all circumstances. Douma (1996:236) highlights the many limitations, conditions and exemptions related to punishing murderers in the life of Israel. For instance, one witness alone was not regarded as enough to award the death penalty according to Numbers 35:30. The elders and a competent aggregation had to be involved in the hearing and it had to be established whether the murder was committed with premeditation (Dt 19:12; Nb 35:12; Jos 20:4, 6). If manslaughter had been committed, the person who committed the crime had the opportunity to flee to one of the cities of asylum with impunity. There were also cases of amnesty for people guilty of a crime that deserved the death penalty. Cain was not punished for Abel's murder (Gn 4:14); Moses committed murder and was not executed for this deed (Ex 2); David arranged the death of Uria and was not prosecuted. He even had the opportunity for repentance and reconciliation with God (Ps 51). Applying the Old Testament jurisprudence as prescriptions for today leads to more questions than answers when dealt with in a literalist or biblicist way. It will be fair to conclude that the jurisprudence of the Old Testament cannot be used as affixed standard for all times. The jurisprudence of the Old Testament must be evaluated within the context of biblical anthropology flowing from the congruent biblical theology and the illumination of the New Testament.

☐ Shedding blood should result in bloodshed

What might then be said about the command God gives the person in Genesis 9:6? This passage has long been used in the Christian tradition to condone capital punishment in certain circumstances. Today scholars still defend capital punishment based on this first law given by God. Feser and Besetta (2017) defend this age-old teaching of the Roman Catholic Church by drawing on this biblical passage as well as other related philosophical, scriptural, theological and social scientific arguments. They explain that the perennial teaching of the Church that capital punishment can in principle be legitimate not only to protect society from immediate physical danger but also to administer retributive justice and to deter capital crimes. Therefore, they argue that capital punishment is morally acceptable and still valid. Feser and Besetta (2017) contend that some recent statements of Roman Catholic

Church leaders in opposition to capital punishment are prudential judgements rather than dogma. In their view, Catholics may in good conscience disagree about the application of the capital punishment, but not on the morality of the age-old teaching. This point of view is also held in many orthodox Protestant traditions, especially in the United States where capital punishment is still in force in some states.

Genesis 9 reads as follows:

> And for your lifeblood I will surely demand an accounting. I will demand an accounting from every animal. And from each human being, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of another human being. Whoever sheds human blood, by humans shall their blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made mankind. (vv. 5–6)

Read within the context of God's new covenant with Noah, it becomes clear that this passage has two focal points. One focal point is the act of accountability and retaliation when the blood of a person has been shed. The other focal point is the value of human life flowing from its creation in the image of God. To my mind, the second focal point, when evaluated within the context, reveals the essence of this passage. It reaffirms the high regard God has for human life as explained in the creational narrative. It is all about human life and how a person can view and treat the lives of others. The value of one life is only equalled by the life of another person. The value of life, and not retaliation, stands at the forefront. It is important to note that the sixth commandment expressed in Exodus 20:13 and Deuteronomy 5:17 forbids the taking of a person's life, but says nothing about retaliation. I thus agree with Westermann (1972:90) that the emphasis in this passage is rather on the command not to kill than it on punishment. Furthermore, nothing is said about the who, how and when of the retaliation. Arguing that this passage can be used to legitimate capital punishment today is dubious and can thus not be regarded as an uncontested and convincing argument.

☐ The sword of justice

Supporters of capital punishment also refer to Romans 13 to prove their point of view:

> For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended. For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience. (vv. 3–5)

For a long time, reformed moral teaching followed Calvin (2008:*Inst*. IV. XX.10.568), who held the view that the sword that is spoken of in Romans

13:4 indicates the right of the authority to enact the death penalty. God is the ultimate legislator who gives the rulers the sword to use against murderers. As validation for this view, he refers to the jurisprudence of the Old Testament. As explained earlier, the application of the death penalty in the Old Testament cannot be normative for today, like many other morals and laws for holiness. Douma (1996:157) is correct in his assessment that these laws were time-bound and unique to the culture of Israel. One can also ask: why do we see the 'sword' mentioned here as an indication of the right to execute capital punishment? Is it only because of the symbolism in ancient Rome that the 'sword' was appreciated as an emblem of power over life and death? This power vested in the civil magistrate and included all sorts of punishment the magistrate could inflict. Since this power is not lodged in him in vain; he may and ought to make use of it at proper times and upon proper persons. The Greek word in Romans 14:4 for sword is *machairan* and this Greek word can be translated as a knife, dirk or sword (NASB Lexicon 2020). The translation as a 'sword' is thus ambivalent. The research of Botha (1991:241) sheds light on the meaning of this passage. He refers to the importance of the historical situation of the Jews in the ancient Roman Empire. As a minority group and despite their circumstances, the Jews had no regard for the Roman authorities as servants of God. The apostle reminds them to be obedient even to a foreign authority. They had to recognise the jurisprudence of the Roman authorities because God institutes all authority. Botha concludes that Romans 13 deals with healthy jurisprudence and it cannot necessarily be inferred that the authority has the right to infer capital punishment. I would rather say that the mention of the sword in Romans 13 refers to general jurisprudence and the task of the ruler to maintain law and order in society so that people can have a peaceful life.

Besides, jurisprudence in the New Testament does not refer to capital punishment, but to retribution within the confines of remorse, forgiveness and reconciliation. Jesus sets the best example of this kind of jurisprudence during his encounter with the adulterous woman. The Gospel of John 8:1–11 narrates this occasion where Jesus pardons the adulterous woman irrespective of the Jewish law, which required death by stoning for this transgression (Lv 20:10).

☐ Other options for retribution

There are several other ethical arguments in favour of the abolition of capital punishment and the use of other means of punishment. Firstly, it is valid to argue that a biased application of capital punishment is an eminent danger. Already in 1997, the International Commission of Jurists (1997:174) found that in the United States, the poor, the sick, the ignorant and the powerless are more prone to receive the death penalty than the affluent who have the money

to afford good legal representation. Judge Brennan expressed this view as early as 1980 (International Commission of Jurists 1997:176). In 2004, the German parliamentarian, Rolf, revealed before the session of the Workshop of the Friedrich Erbert Stiftung that since 1973, 113 people sentenced to death by US courts has been released because they were proven innocent because of the development of modern DNA tests. The same sentiment was expressed by the Governor of Illinois, Ryan, after he commuted the death sentences of 167 men to life sentences without parole because he became convinced that the system is 'broken, racist and inaccurate' (Ryan 2004:1).

Other arguments can also be raised in favour of the abolition of capital punishment. For one thing, there are numerous other ways of severely punishing people who committed homicide, such as life-long prison sentences. Jurists have become hesitant about the application of the death penalty because they are becoming suspicious about governments' ability to come to these decisions wisely. It happens all too often that this kind of punishment is used to wipe out political opposition. Another view is that capital punishment is irrevocable and a mistake made during jurisprudence cannot be rectified, and that capital punishment has little deterring power.

Ultimately, capital punishment should be evaluated from the perspective of the value of the life of a person. As an important moral agent in society, a government has the vocation to uphold the noble principle that human life is sacred and ought to be respected and protected. Capital punishment violates this principle and furthers the idea that life is cheap, as well as the attitude of vengeance. That is not what jurisprudence should be about. In this respect, modern Roman Catholic moral teachings are worthwhile to consider. Pope John Paul II (1995) maintained in his *Evangelium Vitae* (The Gospel of Life) that:

> It is clear that, for these purposes (of fair punishment) to be achieved, the nature and extent of the punishment must be carefully evaluated and decided upon, and ought not go to the extreme of executing the offender except in cases of absolute necessity: in other words, when it would not be possible otherwise to defend society. Today however, as a result of steady improvements in the organization of the penal system, such cases are very rare, if not practically non-existent. In any event, the principle set forth in the new Catechism of the Catholic Church remains valid: 'If bloodless means are sufficient to defend human lives against an aggressor and to protect public order and the safety of persons, public authority must limit itself to such means, because they better correspond to the concrete conditions of the common good and are more in conformity to the dignity of the person'. (para. 56)

Drawing from his statement, Dinn (2000:33) maintains that the abolishment of capital punishment is more in line with the value of humanity because authorities have to encourage human dignity also in their punitive systems. Capital punishment does not comply with this principle.

Notwithstanding the softer line taken by Pope John Paul II, Roman Catholic moral teaching still leaves a door open for the justification of capital punishment in extreme cases with the aim to protect innocent lives. From a reformed ethical point of view that is founded on the value of the life of a person as explained earlier in this book, I venture to go a step further and argue that when taking into account the biblical teaching about the value of the life of the person, the ambiguousness of biblical teachings about capital punishment and the proven limitations in its execution, capital punishment can in no circumstances be justified. Moral agents ought to campaign for the abolishment of capital punishment worldwide in favour of more humane forms of punishment that correlates with the severity of the crime. Rather sharpen and polish the consciences of people to respect life and all that it entails than calling vengeance and expecting authorities to end the lives of people.

■ Conclusion
■ Choosing life

The noble idea of the sacredness of the life of all persons must be promoted in our modern society with its many life-threatening and inhumane currents fuelled by hatred, disrespect and plain carelessness. Christian moral agents have the God-given vocation to be the moral and rational voice of humanity to act on behalf of the sacred lives of all people – those enslaved in luxury and affluence, but especially the needy, the vulnerable, the destitute, the unborn child, the suffering sick and the captives. The call when facing all these life-threatening currents is to choose life and to protect the value of life. In doing this, we do it to Christ (Mt 25:31–46), and that is the essence of the Christian religion. Such a choice adds value to the pursuit of flourishing personhood.

A dignified life

■ Introduction[3]

The breath of God to the human creature authenticates the creature as a person with personhood and with the innate ability to pursue flourishing personhood by way of dynamic moral agency. This moral agency is enthused, amongst other things, by an added characteristic of human life. This is that human life is, apart from being a unique and sacred life, also a dignified life. Personhood entails living a dignified life, and an ethic of flourishing personhood entails the foundation, furtherance and protection of human dignity and its derivative values under the immanent reign of God. The derivative values are equality and freedom. These values have been threatened on many occasions during the history of humankind. We are seeing a resurgence of these age-old threats in the rise of modern-day populism and identity politics. There is an undercurrent that has all the traits of the old phenomenon of racial prejudice that led to institutionalised racism in the past. Populism is emerging in many modern and influential democracies as a defence against the migration of people from poor to wealthy countries. Nationalism, cultural identity, ethnocentrism, xenophobia

3. This chapter, entitled *A dignified life*, presents research findings from a previous article and chapter written by Professor JM Vorster and published (J.M. Vorster 2017, 2019). The content in this chapter has been substantially reworked. The article as well as the chapter have been used with the author's permission and have been duly cited in the reference list.

and racism are once again a rising threat against the value and inherent dignity of the person and the blossoming of personhood in many communities. It also seems as if the constitutional protection of human rights does not necessarily change people's attitudes; the numerous upheavals about systemic racism and ethnocentrism in well-developed democracies bear testimony to this. The circumstances leading to the recent #BlackLivesMatter campaign in the United States and European countries is a good example of perennial systemic injustices despite the constitutional protection of human rights. It is clear that democratic structures do not necessarily change attitudes. Changing attitudes is the result of changing ideas, convictions and beliefs.

Reflection on a dignified life and its moral consequences is therefore indeed a necessity in this age of increasing social disruption and turmoil. An ethic of flourishing personhood should constantly revisit the implications of the basic values of a dignified life in a changing society and the role of Christian moral agents in this respect. For this reason, I reflect in this chapter on human dignity, equality and freedom in view of the valuable research already done in the past. This chapter focuses on a reformed perspective of the theological foundations of human dignity, equality and freedom and its implications for an ethic of flourishing personhood.

■ Human dignity

With the steady emergence of the doctrine of human rights as a legal and political framework for modern democracies over the past few centuries, especially since World War II, the concept of human dignity has come to the fore as a prominent political, social and philosophical–ethical value. The United Nations moulded the concept into a core directive for political planning after World War II in their Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). In the preamble, the declaration starts with the statement that the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world is the recognition of the inherent dignity and the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family (United Nations 1948:1, 1995:33). The first article in this declaration then asserts that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights, and they are endowed with reason and conscience and need to act toward one another in a spirit of brotherhood. Various rights are then formulated as a common standard based on this point of departure, and the United Nations (1948) appeals to all nations and all people that:

> [*E*]very organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance, both among the peoples of member States themselves and among the peoples of territories under their jurisdiction. (p. 1)

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 can be described as one of the most important turning points in the history of the world. After centuries of abuse by totalitarian political systems, through religious persecutions, colonialism and slavery, and especially the atrocities of the 20th century's two world wars, people realised that peace depends on the recognition and protection of the dignity of every person. The ethos of human dignity as the foundation of human rights has a long philosophical and theological history. A short historical survey of its development is beneficial to an understanding of the concept and its political use. The roots can be traced back to ancient times, particularly in Greece and Rome.

■ Ancient times

The concept of dignity as a designation that describes the value of a person can be found in some of the philosophical schools of Greek and Roman antiquity. Modern philosophers revived these ideas, as indicated later in this study. In Roman law, human dignity served as a legal concept to define and describe the position of some of the prominent people in Roman society. In his historic survey of the concept, Miguel (2002:283) expounds that the Roman concept *dignitas* was used in a moral sense and in a socio-political sense. In a moral sense, it referred to merit, integrity to the indifference to profit and loyalty. In a socio-political sense, it was related to the law and was used to refer to relevant personalities and their status before the law. The Roman magistrates, such as the *Cuestors*, the *Cencors*, the *Magistratures,* the *Senators* and all ranked officials were associated with the *dignitas*, over and against the *humilitas* of the lower classes and the slaves. *Dignitas* was conferred to people by law but could be taken away because of a condemnation or exile. It mostly referred to the idea of elevation, excellence or merit. The concept of human dignity was well known, but it was not valued as an innate natural quality of the person irrespective of social status and political position.

■ Early Christianity

Following the same pattern of reasoning, the early Christians linked *dignitas* to baptism, claiming that a baptised person receives a certain *dignitas*, in other words, an elevated status. According to Lewis (2007:94), Pope Leo I (390–461) contributed greatly to the early Christian understanding of human dignity in two ways, namely his proposition that baptism confers dignity on Christians and his proposition that because humans are made in the image of God and God became human, all humans have dignity. Having been born with dignity means that all humans have equal dignity. Drawing from the thesis of Lewis, one can agree that Pope Leo I's main contribution at that stage was that human dignity is an ontological category. Still, human dignity, although a

latent ontological category, must develop into moral content, and in his view, this could be done through baptism and entrance to the body of Christ. Hence his (Pope Leo I 2019) call to Christians:

> Christian, remember your dignity, and now that you share in God's own nature, do not return by evil to your former base condition. Bear in mind who is your head and of whose body you are a member. Do not forget that you have been rescued from the power of darkness and brought into the light of God's kingdom. (p. 1ff.)

At the same time, the church father Augustine (354–430) developed a different view of human dignity. Augustine argued that human dignity is a creational gift of God, but that evil seriously corrupts God's image in humans. The ability of the person to be virtuous can only be restored with the atonement. Evil destroys human dignity and atonement revives it. The person's triune soul, composed of memory, intellect and will, corresponds with the Holy Trinity who created him. But, intellect and will could be either good or evil, depending on how they are exercised; good if directed towards divinity and evil if directed elsewhere. Human dignity can thus be gained or lost (see Lewis 2007:94).

In the medieval period, Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) furthered the idea of Pope Leo I by claiming that dignity should not be associated with the status of the human being, but with nature. Created in the image of God, the human being has potential inherent value and can become worthy. Therefore, dignity can be won, riskeda or lost. As a person, a human being is naturally free. Aquinas founded his justification of capital punishment on his idea that human dignity can decay when the human being becomes morally corrupt. Dignity is lost when evil is committed. The rational human then assumes the status of a non-rational beast. The idea of winning or losing dignity became very prominent in the later Roman Catholic critique lodged by Pope Leo XIII on the idea of inherent inalienable dignity, rights and liberties of the person. He conveyed the message that human beings have a free will and are the 'lords of their actions' and if the mind:

> [A]ssents to false opinions, and the will chooses and follows after what is wrong, neither can attain its native fullness, but both must fall from their native dignity into an abyss of corruption. (Pope Leo XIII 1885, para. 32)

If persons embrace evil, instead of perfection, they fall from their inherent dignity and become perverted and corrupt. Two lines of thought about the origin, loss, regaining and exercise of human dignity developed in Roman Catholic moral theology. In his research on the concept of human dignity in this tradition, Miguel (2002:286) concludes that the Roman Catholic view of human dignity since Vatican II (1961–1964) became confusing since some documents hold the thesis that human dignity has a divine basis, whilst others proclaim that it may perhaps be founded in nature. Certain documents defend the human dignity of all people, whilst others attach dignity only to the baptised.

Since the Reformation, Christian theology in all ecclesiastical traditions have been paying more attention to the idea of the dignity of the person and the relevance of this human trait for the political structuring of society and social relations. This theological reflection was mostly a reaction to the philosophical discourses about a just society and fair jurisprudence that emerged in modern philosophy. A short survey of the modern philosophical reasoning will be helpful for a better understanding of this trend.

■ Modern philosophy

Since the Renaissance, philosophers have deviated from the ancient Roman and Christian ideas that human dignity is something that can be gained or lost, or that dignity situates in what a person does or does not do. Post-Renaissance philosophers maintained that human dignity is an innate natural quality of all human beings. Persons have human dignity because they are human. Human dignity is deeply rooted in nature. For the sake of the elaboration in the rest of this chapter, I refer John Locke (1631–1704) and his followers and to Immanuel Kant (1724–1804).

In his political philosophy, Locke departed from the premise that the human being has an innately and inalienable human dignity because of its state of nature. This inherent dignity must be respected by the state because the formation of the state is a social contract between individuals. He was greatly influenced by his Puritan heritage where the idea of a political covenant between God, the state and the individuals formed the foundation of new ideas about the role and calling of the civil authority. He applied these ideas in his contribution to the development of democracy over and against the totalitarian systems of his time. Van der Vyver (1975:2) indicates that Locke relied on many exponents of the idea of natural law and natural human dignity, such as the ancient philosophies of Anaximander (611 BC–547 BC); Heraclitus (540 BC–480 BC); Parmenides (540 BC–451 BC), and Pythagoras (540 BC–504 BC) as well as the Christians Augustine (354–430); Aquinas (*c.* 1224–1274) and Calvin (1509–1564) (see also Pearson 1978:244).

Locke presented his view on human dignity and its application to political reasoning in his influential *Two Treatises of Government* (Locke 1988). His angle of approach was based on the premise that the human being lives as a natural dignified person in a state of freedom and equality within the limits of natural law. Locke (1988) said:

> God having made Man such a creature, that, in his own Judgement it was not good for him to be alone, put him under strong Obligations of Necessity, Convenience and Inclination to drive him into Society, as well as fitted with Understanding and Language to continue and enjoy it. (p. 271)

Civil authorities are bound to execute this truth as part of a political system where the dignity of human beings is protected by respecting basic rights and the promotion of the common good. Locke (1988) continues to explain that:

> Man being born, as has been proved, with a Title to perfect Freedom, and an uncontrolled enjoyment of all Rights and Privileges of the Law of Nature, equally with every other man, or Number of Men in the World, hath by nature a Power, not only to preserve his Property that is, his Life, Liberty and Estate, against the Injuries and Attempts of other Men; but to judge of, and punish the breaches of that Law in others, as he is persuaded the Offence deserves, even with death itself, in Crimes where the heinousness of the Fact, in His opinion, requires it. (pp. 323–324)

Therefore, civil authorities cannot execute absolute power, such as in the case of the monarchies of Locke's day. Where these authorities abuse power and violate the dignity of the person, they become a tyranny and that is in breach of the 'social contract' with the citizens. In such a case, the citizenry must have the means to dissolve the civil authority and form a new one by way of a new social contract with the aim to build a just society and to promote the common good.

John Locke's understanding of the state as a 'social contract' was not popular at the time of the totalitarian systems of his age. However, his emphasis on the dignity of every human being and that it needs to be respected and protected by the civil authority and his view that the civil authority can be dissolved by the people if it fails to do so, became influential. These ideas were furthered by exponents such as Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), Wolff (1679–175), Blackstone (1723–1780), Kant (1724–1804) and Fichte (1762–1814) (see Koorntz 1981:95–119; Van der Vyver 1975:5–7). Emmanuel Kant's contribution to the idea of human dignity deserves special mention.

Kant argued that the natural dignity of the human being is the foundation of human reason and the abilities of the 'human will'. Dignity implies 'implanted' instinct and reason as practical faculties that drive the human will to act morally. Kant (2008) said:

> Reason is given to us as a practical faculty, that is, one that is meant to have an influence on the will. Its proper function must be to produce a will that is good itself and not good as a means. Why? Because nature has everywhere distributed capacities suitable to the functions they are to perform, the means to good·are, as I have pointed out, better provided for by instinct, and reason and it alone can produce a will that is good in itself. (p. 7)

In his criticism of pure reason as the determining factor of morality, he said that reason alone cannot act as a guide to lead the will to obtain its objectives and to satisfy human needs. 'Implanted instinct' does better. There is no higher moral authority than the rational autonomous person with an autonomous will. Morality is not a matter of following rules laid down by some higher authority. It is rather a matter of humans writing rules for themselves that are compatible with the rational autonomous nature they share with other persons.

They show respect for others through restraining their own will in ways that demonstrate their recognition of others as moral equals. A good will is not good because of reason, it is good in itself (Kant 2008:5). Will is autonomous. From this presumption, he developed his idea of the 'categorical imperative' in interhuman relations and says (Kant 2008):

> So this is how categorical imperatives are possible: The idea of freedom makes me a member of an intelligible world, if I were a member only of that world, all my actions would always conform to the autonomy of the will; but since I confront myself also as a member of the world of sense, my actions ought to conform to it. This categorical 'ought' to present a prioria synthetic proposition. It is synthetic because in it (1) my will affected by my sensuous desires has added to it the idea of (2) something that reason says contains its supreme condition, namely that very same will considered as pure, self-sufficiently practical, and belonging to the intelligible world. (p. 46)

In interhuman moral action, this idea has two rules, firstly always treat persons (including yourself) as ends in themselves, never merely as a means to an end and, secondly, act only on that truism that 'you can consistently will' to be a universal law (see Payne 2021:1). Kant took these rules to be different ways of expressing the same underlying principle of respect for persons. The first rule instructs people to treat other individuals as ends in themselves. Persons have to be treated as beings that have intrinsic value (dignity). Saying that persons have intrinsic value is to say that they have value independent of their usefulness for this or that purpose. The rule does not state that a person can never use another person for their own purposes. People use other persons merely as a means to an end if they force them to do their will, or if they deceive them into doing their will. Coercion and deception are paradigm violations of the categorical imperative. In coercing or deceiving other persons, they disrupt their autonomy and their will (Kant 2008:42).

This is what the categorical imperative forbids in the first rule. Respecting persons requires refraining from violating their autonomy.

Rule 2 is the formula of the universal law and essentially instructs persons to act only on that precept that they are able to 'will the good'. Human life and conduct are rooted in the intrinsic value (dignity) of a person. This is a universal law. Therefore, the intentions with actions are crucial because intentions determine the morality of an action. Kant (in Payne 2021) evaluates the moral status of actions not according to the action itself or pure reason or according to its consequences, but according to the intention of the action, which emanates from the autonomous will. Kant (2008) explains that:

> [7]he moral status of an action is determined by the actor's intentions or reasons for acting. According to the formula of the universal law, what makes an action morally acceptable is that its maxim is universalisable. That is, morally permissible action is action that is motivated by an intention where persons can 'rationally will' others to act similarly. A morally prohibited action is one where the person cannot 'rationally will' the maxim to be universally followed. (pp. 42–46)

According to Kant (in Payne 2021):

> [*D*]eception and coercion are both paradigm cases of acting wrongly. In both cases, our acts involve violating the autonomy of another rational being. This is something that we, as rationally autonomous beings ourselves, cannot do because it violates the universal law of 'willing the good'. According to Kant, it is contradictory when a rational autonomous being wills autonomy to be universally, coercively or deceptively violated. This would involve a rational autonomous being willing the violation of its own rational autonomy. Acting out of moral duty is a matter of acting only on maxims that we can 'rationally will' others to act on as well. The persons of good will recognise the humanity of others by not making any special exception for themselves, even when their interests or inclination would be served by doing so. (p. 1)

Locke (1632–1704) and Kant (1724–1804) were influential exponents of the philosophical idea of human dignity and its meaning for politics and social justice. These applications of the idea of the innate dignity of the person were not popular in the totalitarian states of their time, nor in Christian theology. The concept was initially regarded with suspicion in the reformed theological tradition because of its perceived foundation in humanism and an optimistic view of the human will and capacity to act morally without the spirit of God. However, the idea of a social contract, which accentuates the voice of the citizenry, gained popularity amongst intellectuals who questioned the monarchies. The 18th century became known as the century of revolution and the pre-modern thinking about state and politics was steadily replaced by democratic ideas. These political developments gradually put the nature of personhood on the agenda of theological reflection.

■ Modern theology

Although the idea of the dignity of the human being, created in the image of God, was held in high esteem by some of the church fathers in early Christianity, influential medieval theological scholars and the Protestant reformers, it was not developed to its fullest extent into an anthropological model suitable for application in politics and interhuman relations. In many instances, Christian teachings were even employed to justify persecutions of apostates, the power abuses of the monarchies, religious wars, colonialism, slavery and the slave trade. Christianity largely sided with authoritarian European political rulers and did not generally act as the voice of the citizenry, and amongst them the oppressed and the vulnerable. Guided by the spirit of the time, many inhumane policies and ideologies were justified and regarded as morally acceptable. In this respect, the undignified practice of slavery and policies founded on the idea of the superiority and inferiority of people along class and racial lines cast a shadow over Christianity as a humane religion. The era of religious persecutions, justification of colonisation and political alignment with monarchical regimes can be regarded as the darkest age of Christianity.

The 20th century continued on this trajectory of devastating human abuse. Here again, the quietism of Christian churches, with minor exceptions, was remarkable. Christian nations became involved as enemies in World War I and created a human disaster. Fascist regimes with no respect for human dignity and human rights emerged out of the turmoil and led the world again into a destructive war amongst Christian nations. Christian churches sat back, some even co-opted and aided genocides and man-made human disasters. The atrocities of the Holocaust, the killings of large numbers of civilians in communist regimes and the brutal rule of Japan in Asia typified the 'modern age' as even more violent than previous centuries, irrespective of the development of science and technology. Furthermore, in most of the European colonies, racist policies of social stratification violated the rights and liberties of indigenous peoples. One of the most prominent of these was the emergence of the Apartheid policy in South Africa, partly driven by a partisan Apartheid theology supported by some churches (see De Gruchy 2005).

These inhumane policies and practices and the lack of criticism from Christian moral agents, with minor exceptions, have caused a deep-rooted suspicion of Christianity. Modern thinkers started to question the major tenets of the Christian faith, the ability of the church to stand up for humanity and peace, and the integrity of religion at large. 'Protest atheism', a view that denies God's existence because of the evils of the World Wars, has confronted Christianity with a huge wave of secularism, especially in Western Europe. Taylor (2007:20) concludes in his seminal research on secularism that the Western World has entered a post-Christian secular age and the Christian church is rapidly losing its influence (see also J.M. Vorster 2014:1–20).

Realising the effect of the suspicion against Christian faith and the decline of the church, Protestant theologians experimented with new ideas in reaction to secularisation. Modern theologians are questioning some of the deeply rooted traditional beliefs of the Christian faith. This process is resulting in what Welker (2013:44) identifies as the 'self-secularisation' of neo-Protestant theology. Protestantism is deviating from its roots. Also, many political theologies have been developing with new perspectives of a vibrant, actual and worldliness theology that focuses on the improvement of people's lives and changing the predicament of many people in distressing situations. This movement has culminated in what is called public theology – a theology that focuses on the present reality and motivates Christians and Christian institutions to be active moral agents in the socio-political and economic domains with the aim to further justice, human rights and peace. Smit (2007), a prominent South African exponent of this movement, provides an interesting and thought-provoking analysis of this modern movement.

Much can be learnt from this modern form of Christian belief without becoming part of the destructive process of 'self-secularisation' by disregarding

the deep impressions of the traditional theology of creation, Christology, pneumatology and eschatology. Kingdom theology, covenant theology, traditional moral theology and other currents within Protestantism, reformed theology in particular, can benefit from the call of public theology to become actively involved with the issues of the day. As said earlier, reformed theology is not a fixed set of beliefs cemented into an inflexible spirituality, but a theology with penetrating and transformative social tools. Reformed theology has been moulding foundational beliefs into applicable principles for vibrant moral agency for as long as it has been around.

True to this tradition, reformed theological research after the World Wars has accentuated the basic human dignity of the person and the need to translate this principle into ethical and socio-political terms for modern society. Whilst the motivation for the basic dignity of the person differs from the historic philosophical exposition, the idea of human dignity has been accepted in reformed anthropology. This acceptance of human dignity in reformed theology inspired theologians to elaborate productively on the concept of the God-given dignity of the person and its meaning for a dignified life of equality, freedom and the protection of human rights. We can indeed refer to positive work done in this respect after World War II by several influential reformed theologians. These theologians helped to define and apply the old Christian concept of human dignity in a modern environment. Below I explain the contributions of a few scholars who gave new impetus to the concept of human dignity without falling into the trap of 'self-secularisation' and disregarding the roots of the reformed tradition. First, the contribution of Barth (1886–1968) comes to mind.

☐ Barth (1886–1968)

In his criticism of the modernist foundation of human dignity in the natural order and the anthropology embedded in the Roman Catholic position, Barth (1960a:244–248) initiated the post-War rejuvenation of the Christian idea of the dignity of the person. He founded the dignity not in creation theology alone, but especially in Christology. For Barth, the image of God is not the rational, autonomous and totally independent person. God as a triune deity is God-self, a relationship of beings-for-one-another. Jesus as the God-man, as the incarnation of that relationship, embodies God's covenant relationship with humanity. He argued that in Christ, God initiated a relationship with the person and that true humanity is rooted in this relationship. As divine entity, Jesus is for and with God; as human, he is for and with humanity; as both human and divine, humanity is definitively drawn into the relationship of the Trinity. The person of Jesus is the incarnated image of the divine ontological relatedness of God, and so, through Jesus, true humanity is the *imago Dei*, which is revealed as 'a being of the one person for the other'. The value of the

human being is not situated in nature, but in relationships between God and humans and between humans themselves. In short, humanity is the image of God to the extent that it is always in and for relationship with God and with the other.

It is in the light of this biblical–theological understanding of universal human value that we are to understand Barth's criticism of the modernist understanding of human dignity as founded on the alleged natural value of human reason and freedom. For Barth, it is not because human beings are capable of reason and free choice that they have dignity. In fact, he sees the emphasis on these capacities a stumbling block because it raises questions about those who do not develop or display these capacities in the appropriate way. For Barth, all persons, irrespective of their rational capabilities, talents, social standing, class, sex, race or age, have dignity because God so loved them that in Jesus Christ, God suffered the ultimate humiliation so as to bind them forever to Christ's destiny and exaltation to lordship (see Kirchhoffer 2013:62–76).

Barth (1960a:344) regards this relational characteristic of the person as the foundation of all ethical conduct in interhuman relationships. From the status of the persons as relational beings flow their God-given obligations. The duty of the person is to protect and promote human life and all this entails, such as humaneness, compassion, caring and concern.

☐ Moltmann (1926–)

Moltmann is another influential exponent of Reformed theology who indicates the value and importance of the biblical concept of human dignity for social and political ethics. He confirms the popular idea in modern theology that human dignity is founded on the creation of the human being in the image of God. He contends in this respect that the whole person, not merely the person's soul; the true human community, not only the individual; humanity as it is bound up with nature – all these contexts are the 'image of God and his glory' (Moltmann 1993:221). He develops the argument further to cover a wide scope – an anthropology of dignity, human rights, equality and human responsibility in a setting of human and environmental suffering. Amongst his many publications, Moltmann's *Theologie der Hoffnung* (1965)*, On Human Dignity* (1984) and *Ethics of Hope* (2012) especially deal with the depth and extent of a dignified life and how human dignity may possibly fashion human responsibilities, especially the social responsibilities of Christian moral agents (see also Harvie 2009). For his seminal view of the concept hope within a constant changing world, he has drawn on the philosophy of Bloch (1961). This social responsibility becomes apparent when human dignity is not founded in creation (*imago Dei*) alone, but just as

much in eschatology (*hope*), Christology (*imago Christi*) and pneumatology (*the healed person*). The *imago Christi* indicates that the crucified Christ has always been the Christ of the poor and the suffering, and that his followers find in him (Moltmann 1993):

> [*T*]he brother who put off his divine form and took on the form of a slave (Phlp 2) to be with them and to love them. They see in God a God who does not torture them as their masters do but becomes their brother and companion. Where their own lives have been deprived of freedom, dignity and humanity, they find in fellowship with him respect, recognition, a dignified life and hope. (p. 49)

The Spirit brings about a dignified life that is rich, but also challenging. Moltmann (1997) talks about the richness of a dignified life with the following moving words:

> The gift and the presence of the Holy Spirit is the greatest and most wonderful thing which we can experience – we ourselves, the human community, all living things and this earth. For with the Holy Spirit it is not just one random spirit that is present, among all the many good and evil spirits there are. It is *God himself*, the creative and life-giving, redeeming and saving God. Where the Holy Spirit is present, God is present in a special way, and we experience God through our lives, which become wholly living from within. We experience whole, healed, and redeemed life experience, with all our senses. We feel and taste, we touch and see our life in God and God in our life. (p. 10)

Furthermore, the Spirit moves out (Moltmann 1997):

> [*I*]nto the world from the event of the cross as both a witness to suffering and a force that empowers suffering peoples to resist and transcend their suffering. The Spirit witnesses all the wrongs of the world so that all can be put right in the coming of God's kingdom. (p. 10)

The dignified life brought about by the Spirit, also challenges the church. The church lives in the power of the Spirit and this reality discharges a politically charged ecclesiology. The church, empowered by the Spirit, according to Moltmann, stands 'as the physical manifestation of the Spirit in the world and thus has a duty to speak out against oppressive regimes and to support oppressed peoples working towards freedom in the political sphere'. Moltmann (1984) encourages churches to offer their voices to political struggles aiming for liberation and justice:

> [*B*]ecause in the name of the creation of the human being in the image of God, in the name of the incarnation of God for the reconciliation of the world, and in the name of the coming kingdom of God for the fulfilment of history, the church empowered by the Spirit is charged with responsibility for the humanity of persons as well as for their rights and duties in time. (p. 15)

The hope flourishing from the crucifixion and vindication of Christ and the liberating power of the Spirit also encourages and enables all persons to live a dignified life by dignifying the lives of others whom they met as part of the relationship of humanity created by God. In this way we can all serve and reflect the glory of God (Moltmann 1993:216).

☐ Berkouwer (1919–1992)

The contributions of the Dutch Reformed systematic theologian Berkouwer are also visited as his perspectives became highly influential in the Dutch Reformed tradition. At the same time as Barth (see J.M. Vorster 2009), he reflected on the relevance of the *imago Dei* for modern ethics and social concern. Berkouwer (see J.M. Vorster 2009) also maintains that:

> [*The*] doctrine of *imago Dei* is essential for the development of a relevant Christian anthropology for society today. As a result of the *imago Dei* and the atonement in Christ, a human being becomes a being of God and receives as such the ability to strive after the justice of the kingdom of God. (p. 372)

However, in his opinion, the main ethical implication of the *imago Dei* is that it sets the possibility for humans to be free from any form of slavery and lack of freedom because of the blemishes of evil and feelings of guilt. Therefore, any person who uses the *imago Dei* as an angle of approach must support a nations' call to freedom. The Christian church may well support their desire for freedom (Berkouwer 1957:369). The consequence of Berkouwer's view within the framework of the topic under discussion is that the *imago Dei* sets the stage for people to seek liberation by way of repentance and forgiveness – also in a socio-political context. This doctrine says that in a world of suffering and hardship, people can achieve peace by respecting human dignity, seeking the kingdom of God and embodying forgiveness. Just like Barth, Berkouwer applies Calvin's ideas about the social relevance of the *imago Dei* to a relevant Christian ethic of personhood.

Berkouwer (1957:95) introduced a new direction in Dutch Reformed ethical thinking. He makes a case against the idea found in orthodox tenets of reformed theology, especially in South Africa and the United States, that the *imago Dei* of the person was destroyed by the fall and that the idea has no relevance for modern Christian anthropology. He argues that any denial of the basic dignity of the person abstracts the person from its relationship with God, fellow persons and the earth, thus rendering a responsible Christian anthropology impossible (Berkouwer 1957:95). In this respect, Berkouwer supports Barth's ideas. He furthermore identifies the many social and ethical implications of the *imago Dei* and argues that Christians can find solace in the fact that the depraved person can become a renewed being by way of the sacrificial work of Christ. The transformed person becomes capable of fulfilling its calling to be a steward in God's creation. The person becomes capable of seeking the justice of the kingdom of God. He or she becomes a moral agent in God's world with the unique calling to seek justice, peace, reconciliation and freedom (Berkouwer 1957:369).

The reformed theologians discussed above prove that the dignified life of the person consists of a certain quality of life, but also a life for others with the aim to dignify the lives of others, not only in the spiritual but also in the socio-

political domain. Human dignity inspires human equality, human freedom and human rights in the political domain. Therefore, an ethic of flourishing personhood has the responsibility to also elaborate on these crucial tenets of a dignified life, especially when dealing with the new forms of racism in today's populist politics. The section on 'Equality' (cf. J.M. Vorster 2019b) elaborates on human equality as a core ingredient of a dignified life.

■ Equality

The emerging modern forms of fundamentalist religion and spirituality are causing a fair amount of concern because they are accompanied by the advancement of extremist and populist theologies. These theologies pose a threat to the human rights discourse since they offer religious justifications for the inequality of persons based on religion, race, gender, class and the resurgence of patriarchal systems. Furthermore, the rising new interest in extremist religion and its perceived role in the public domain offers new credibility to the mounting political campaign for the recognition of the 'undisputable right' of personal identity above all other rights. This emphasis on personal identity relates to ethnic, sexual, gender, racial, tribal, religious, cultural and other social identities. The quest for an expression of personal identity even feeds and justifies certain partisan ideologies. The religiously motivated resurgence of patriarchy, xenophobia, racism, homophobia and androcentric preferences in the arrangement of social structures come to mind (see Howland 2005:157). This trend is strengthened by the fact that some mainline Christian traditions still question the concept of equality, justify androcentric and patriarchal family structures, and nullify the role and place of women in church structures. Furthermore, 'in' and 'out' group identification is still present amongst conservative Christians. This identification colours their view of people of other persuasions, religions and creeds, and inhibits association and cooperation with the 'others' in the social domain. The tendency to view women as inferior and to reject the otherness of the 'outsiders' is also apparent in many other fundamentalist religions, as Gudorf (2007:9) elucidates in her study.

These theologies depart from the total depravity of the human being and people's inability to love God and the neighbour and to be equal and humane. They raise questions such as: Can the naturalist definitions of human dignity and equality as presented in the democratic philosophy and the human rights discourse be translated into a religious value, taking into account that some religions operate with this pessimistic view of the nature of humans? Are all people really equal by nature, and is social cohesion over and against human differences possible? How can the apparent God-given value of social stratification as found in religious texts be accommodated in an egalitarian society? These and other questions have entered the human rights discourse because of the new relevance of emerging fundamentalist forms of religion (see Bucar & Barnett 2005:3).

A biblical–theological perspective using a hermeneutic of congruent biblical theology ought to highlight the meaning of human equality in the face of the new identity and partisan theologies. From a reformed perspective, I argue in favour of the egalitarian approach. My contention is that Galatians 3:28, seen in the context of *tota Scriptura* (congruent biblical theology), offers a valuable perspective on the equality of human beings as an essential part of their dignified life.[4] This perspective can be advantageous to the foundation of the constitutional value of equality in the present post-secular worldview. In an effort to interpret the passage through a lens of congruent biblical theology, the subsequent sections deal with the following topics: the formation of the principle of equality according to the doctrine of creation, the deformation of the principle of equality according to the doctrine of sin and the restoration of the principle of equality according to the doctrine of salvation.

◾ The formation of equality

The human being was created in the image of God and thus has a dignity that needs to be respected and protected by other human beings. This dignity is not a divine attribute, but part of God's gift of life. This gift enables persons to be humane beings in their relationship with God, other persons and creation. In the development of theology in the biblical text, human dignity is a vital theme that determines the ethic of interhuman relationships and human conduct. The human being was also created with certain capacities, such as a sense for religion and morality or as male and female as equals in a heterogeneous, monogamous marital relationship with distinctive obligations.

Both male and female bear the same creational gifts of God. God assigns them representative rule and this rule is the joint function of the man and the woman. Köstenberger and Jones (2004:34) point out that plural pronouns are used in Genesis 1:28: 'God blessed them and said to them …'. Both receive the same mandate. The woman is created as a suitable helper of the man. Köstenberger and Jones (2004:35) are of the opinion that a contextual reading of the expression suggests that the woman is placed alongside the man as his associate. The word helper (Hebrews *Ezer*) does not entail subordination, as the same word is sometimes applied to God himself as helper. They refer to Exodus 18:4 and Psalms 20:2, 33:20, 70:5, 115:9–11, 121:1–2, and 146:5. N. Vorster (2010:601) and Schwarz (2013:28) both comment that the Yahwist creation narrative (Gn 2) does not intend to devalue women, but to express a personal correspondence between men and women. Also, in the priestly account in Genesis 1:27, there is no indication of a primal archetypal

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4. This discussion on equality is based on research I published in 2019 (see J.M. Vorster 2019b). I re-submit some of the research results in this study. My intention is to take the argumentation of the previous research further in this study and to the apply the results of the 2019 research within the framework of the constitutional values of human dignity, equality and freedom and to point to their relevance for an ethic of flourishing personhood.

A dignified life

androgynous being, because sexual differentiation is something given with creation. In consideration of the viewpoints of N. Vorster and Schwarz as well as Köstenberger and Jones, we can conclude that 'helper' merely indicates a functional differentiation between a husband and wife within the margins of marriage – a differentiation that can change according to time and context. The functional differentiation has no universal social meaning that limits the dignity, mandate and freedom of all women.

The above-mentioned characteristics of the person culminate in an additional distinct qualification of the created person, and that is the God-given equality of all people. God created men and women as equals. Genesis 1:27 refers to the creation of the human beings as male and female. They both receive the 'breath of life' and are created in the image of God. They have the same mandate. In the second creational narrative, Genesis 2:18 indicates that Eve was created as Adam's equal (Vriezen 1966:445). The equality of men and women could thus be seen as an additional creational gift. Nowhere in the creation of humankind can any indication of the inequality or subordination of women be found. Early Protestant thought regarded Genesis 2:18 as the institution of marriage and as a covenant that entails a true contract of mutual obligation (Johnson 2005:131). Equality lies beneath mutuality and human activity. It will be fair to argue that in the creational order, the principle of equality is the foundation of the marital relationship. However, this creational gift of essential equality does not apply to the gender relations only. Ontologically, it applies to all people. The gift of equality extends to humanity as a whole. People are born equal. They are not alike in gender, capabilities, character and culture, but they are inherently equal in the most basic features of human life, namely in being moral, rational and religious beings with a God-given dignified life. Equality as part of the dignity of persons overarches all differences imposed on them by history, such as amongst others, racial, ethnic, cultural, social and any other differences that may emerge in the life and existence of persons. This principle might therefore be the ethical benchmark for the evaluation of political and economic systems and ideologies that favour forms of superiority and inferiority. Christian anthropology may well approach human relationships from the premise of the equality of all people as a creational principle.

But what then about the effects of the destructive forces of evil on human dignity, the gifts of sense of religion and morality, the dignified life, equality, and the call to be humane and to dignify the lives of other persons? Have these qualities been deformed? Have the creational gifts of God been destroyed?

■ The deformation of equality

Genesis 3 describes the entrance of evil and its effect on God's good creation and the characteristics of the gift of life and personhood. Because of the

person's revolt against God, both humanity and the good creation fell into evil and lost their created splendour. Reformed theology developed a doctrine of evil (hamartiology), although a confession of evil is not a separate article in the Apostolicum. Only two crucial aspects of this doctrine are mentioned here as they relate to the theme of this chapter. In this doctrine, the effect of evil is described by the dictums *original evil* and *total depravity*. Firstly, as descendants of the first Adam, all persons 'inherited' an evil nature and the judgement of God upon it. Jesus describes this evil nature as follows (Mark 7):

> For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance, and folly. All these evils come from the inside and make a man unclean. (vv. 21–23)

Humankind has been surrendered to a depraved mind (Rm 1:28). Regarding the effect of evil on creation, Paul says: 'We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time' (Rm 8:22). Thorns and thistles impede the person's mandate as caretaker of creation. Evil has distorted the nature of the human being and the nature of creation. Secondly, this total depravity means the 'total misdirection' and 'complete disorientation' of the person in its attempt to find meaning and purpose in life and to pursue flourishing personhood. Because of their sinful inclination, persons defame God and defy their neighbours, and are unable to fulfil their creational mandate of humaneness and serving God (see Spykman 1995:322).

Van der Kooi and Van den Brink (2017:294) raise a valuable point in their explanation of evil as a phenomenon in the history of humankind. Their argument deals with the involvement of humans in the continuation of evil. The biblical story about evil does not portray people as naïve spectators or mere victims. Humans play a key role in this drama as they permit evil to continue. The biblical narrative portrays the fallen person as a transgressor of God's commandments, thus as evil-doer. Immediately after the description of the fall, the biblical narrative reveals how people got involved in the destruction of God's glory and the dignity of fellow persons. Disobedience to God, violence against each other and the vandalisation of creation became the essence of human conduct.

Van der Kooi and Van den Brink (2017:305) define evil as an act, power and estrangement. The third depiction is important to the argument put forward in this chapter. Reference to evil as estrangement explains how persons become strangers to each other when they violate the relationship with which God created them. It refers to a withdrawal from communion with God, other persons and from creation into isolation, with the attitude of self-centredness and self-interest. In the grip of sin, the person withdraws from the covenant. Furthermore, by withdrawing to its own supposed autonomy, the persons fail to do justice to people, relationships, animals, the environment, themselves and above all, God (Van der Kooi & Van den Brink 2017:308).

The authors also argue that estrangement is not a passive condition, but may take an active form, namely that of rebellion. Taking their argument further, it will be fair to reason that because of the fall into the grip of evil, human beings aggressively and resolutely rebel against their own nature, their God-given mandate, their fellow persons and against the reign of God. In this process, the virtues of God's kingdom are rejected and replaced with vices emanating from persons' urge to reign and to replace God and God's kingdom with a human-made utopia. In this revolutionary process, the God-given creational gifts of dignity, humaneness, compassion, equality, servanthood and accountability are replaced by self-serving ideals. Self-centred human ideologies, resulting in discriminatory social institutions, enter the stage of creation in this manner.

The first institution distorted by evil was the marital relationship. God created husband and wife as equals in a symbiotic relationship to fulfil their cultural mandate. The creational heterosexual monogamous marriage reflects a relationship of love, mutual respect and life-long commitment (see Geisler 2010:300). The equality of male and female has fallen by the wayside and has made way for patriarchal marriage and family structures. In the early history of Israel, it was apparent that women were treated as inferiors. In his seminal study of the life and institutions of ancient Israel, De Vaux (1988:39) indicates that women had to call their husbands 'master' as was the case with slaves, as she was the possession of her husband; he could repudiate her, but she could not claim a divorce; she remained a minor all her life; she and the girl-children did not inherit from the husband; the vow made by a girl or a married woman had to be validated by the father or husband, otherwise it was null and void. The social and legal position of an Israeli wife with respect to her husband was even more inferior than the position she occupied in the surrounding countries. Over the centuries, the inferiority of women became part and parcel of virtually all social institutions in the Mediterranean world. Despite the various constructs of monogamous and polygamous marriages in the ancient Mediterranean world, women were marginalised in the formation of the developing ecclesiastical structures, had limited rights in political processes and were inhibited in economic activities. Modern society inherited many social structures marred by male domination and female exclusion or unequal treatment. The creational principle of equality has been intrinsically deformed by evil surging into the active transgression of God's will for humanity.

The same distortions have touched on other social relations. The fallen persons' urge for domination overshadows the God-given creational gifts. Domination replaced the creational covenantal relationship of equality. In interhuman relationships, dominances lead to the idea of the superiority of some and the inferiority of others. Besides the establishment of patriarchy, domination resulted in slavery where some people took ownership of others. It also resulted in forms of social stratification between in-groups and out-groups based on all kinds of

differences between human beings. Human history is tarnished by wars between nations, tribes and religious groups. Colonisation of vulnerable peoples and countries by 'superior' powers has formed part of the development of humankind, and ideologies such as racism, xenophobia, homophobia, ethnocentrism, colonisation and sexism have led to the oppression and exploitation of the 'inferior' by the 'superior' and to other inhuman conduct. People have revolted, not only against God but also against each other in search of power. The person has rejected the core ingredients of a flourishing personhood.

Despite this revolt, God has not abolished the equality of human beings, nor has God withdrawn 'the breath of life'. God's grace and love for God's creation have burst through the fallen creation. The basic creational gifts to the person remain intact, but the enactment of these virtues has become deeply disturbed. The person has rejected the reign of God, and as a result, evil has tarnished the *imago Dei*, challenged equality, discarded human dignity and revolted against the mandate of stewardship and obedience to God. Nevertheless, equality still stands as a creational gift, but in the realisation of this gift, persons fail because of their incapacity to be as they had been created, to do what they are intended to do, and to fulfil their divine calling in love and obedience. Notwithstanding this condition, God calls God's people endlessly to respect the vulnerable, such as the stranger, the widow, the poor, the children and the slaves. God, as the God of grace and love, resolved to restore the creational order and the covenantal relationships in a new creation. He sent the 'second Adam' to break the yoke of rebellion and to restore the creational gift of the equality of all persons.

■ The restoration of equality

Galatians 3:28 can be regarded as the foundation of human relationships under the reign of God in the present dispensation because this passage expresses the nucleus of congruent biblical theology regarding the equality of people under the immanent reign of God. The equality of all people in Christ is the heart of all human relationships in the new covenant. I argue this statement in the next paragraphs with reference to relevant new research.

In his exposition of new research, Keener (2018:3) explains that the theme of the gospel, law and promise dominates the argumentative section in Galatians 1–4 and the theme of the Spirit dominates the ethics section in Galatians 5–6, although these themes are interrelated in the theological focus of the epistle. In broad terms, the epistle can be described as an apologetic discourse against certain Judean teachers in the congregations of Galatia who questioned Paul's authority and taught that non-Jews (Gentiles) can only be redeemed by observing the law (Gl 3:1–5). They believed and taught that Gentiles who wished to become children of Abraham and heirs of Israel's promised covenant blessings had to convert, starting with the initiation ritual

of circumcision. Over and against this religious sentiment, the apostle proclaims that true redemption is possible only by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law. Gentile converts are full heirs of Israel's promises because they have embraced Christ and received the Spirit just like Jewish believers. They also receive the gifts of the Spirit and are called upon to live by the Spirit by bearing the 'fruits' of the Spirit. It is the Spirit and not external laws that enables true righteousness and freedom. The theology of Galatians is to some extent comparable with the theology of Romans, where the apostle explains the doctrine of justification by faith alone and not by observing the law as a condition to inherit salvation.

The argumentation of the apostle in his letter to the Galatians is well structured and can be encapsulated as:

1. Greetings and the distinctiveness of the gospel of Christ. The judgement of God on everyone who teaches another gospel (Gl 1:1–10).
2. The apostle defends his apostolic authority (Gl 1:11–2:10).
3. Justification by faith alone and the gift of faith by the Holy Spirit (Gl 2:11–3:14).
4. The promise of God to Abraham and the true purpose of the law. The law did not contradict God's promises and led God's children to Christ (Gl 3:15–25).
5. The baptism into Christ and its outcomes: freedom from the supervision of the law, equality in Christ, children of God and heirs of the gifts of the Spirit (Gl 3:26–4:7).
6. His concern for the Galatians (Gl 4:8–20).
7. The covenant of slavery (Hagar) and the covenant of freedom (Gl 4:21–5:1).
8. The ethic of Christian freedom and its consequences – the life by the Spirit. The acts of the sinful nature and the fruits of the Spirit; the fulfilment of the law of Christ (Gl 5:2–6:10).
9. The importance of being a new creation (person) (Gl 6:11–17).
10. Benediction (Gl 6:18).

Galatians 3:28 is part of the argument about the baptism in Christ and its outcomes. In his thorough research on the grammatical structure of Galatians 3:26–29, Hove (1999:52) notes that verse 28 is not an isolated saying, but rather an integral part of a larger argument that is framed by the two clauses in verses 26–27 and 29. Three expressions are prominent in verses 26 and 27, namely 'sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus'; 'baptised into Christ' and 'clothed yourselves with Christ'. The believers are no longer under the supervision of the law, but children of God, and there is no distinction when it comes to the household of God. The basis of this blessing is that they are in Christ by accepting Christ in faith. Paul uses the expression 'in Christ' more than 80 times in his corpus of epistles. He employs this saying in Galatians for churches (Gl 1:22), freedom (Gl 2:4), justification (Gl 2:17),

Abraham's blessing (Gl 3:14), being God's children in the Son (Gl 3:26) and unity (Gl 3:28) (Keener 2018:163). Being 'in Christ' entails a new relationship with God. This new relationship changes all other relationships profoundly. This status also exceeds the historic differences between Jews and Gentiles.

'Baptised into Christ' as a baptismal formula or as an indication of the believer's initiation into Christ expresses the union with Christ that comes from faith. Unlike circumcision, baptism applied to women and men in biblical times. According to Keener (2018:166), the expression points to the 'non-differentiation of gender with respect to membership of God's people'. 'Baptised into Christ' is explained by the expression 'cloth yourselves with Christ' (Betz 1979:187). Paul is possibly using an old Semitic idiom (see Is 52:1, 61:10; Zch 3:3–4) that points to a life-changing event. This metaphor indicates that people who become immersed in Christ undergo a change of character and a change in relationships (Hove 1999:60). Galatians 3:26–27 therefore points to the new life and new relationships of Christians that must be realised in a world of alienation and moral decay. Paul explains this new life as a life of freedom 'by the Spirit' in Galatians 5 and 6. Galatians 3:29 uses the image of inheritance. There were limitations with respect to inheritance in the Old Testament. God promised an 'inheritance' of the land to Israel and not to Gentiles, and women were permitted to inherit only under certain circumstances (Nm 27:8, 36:6–9). Furthermore, in Roman law, a slave's last will and testament was not legally binding. The apostle deals with the changes in these limitations as a result of becoming 'sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus'; being 'baptised into Christ' and 'clothed yourselves with Christ'. 'Now, in Christ Jesus, all – Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female – are heirs according to the promise' (Gl 3:29; Keener 2018:166). The inheritance language strengthens the argument of the new relationships established by Christ (Cutler 2016:24).

Galatians 3:28 moves from this foundation to the field of political and social ideals and practices (Betz 1979:189). The verse explains, in the present tense, the consequence of these three expressions in terms of race, gender and class. The new relationships encompass the whole of humanity (Snodgrass 1986:174). This statement corresponds with passages such as 1 Corinthians 7:21–24, 12:13 and Colossians 3:9–11.8 The anthropological principle becomes clear: Jew and Gentile, male and female, and slave and freeman are equal in the eyes of God. In a thorough scholarly article, Lategan (2012) explains the principle as follows:

> If all believers are children of God through faith in Christ Jesus, if all who have been baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ (3:26–27), there can be no longer Jew or Greek, slave nor free, male nor female (3:28). Verse 28 is the climax of a carefully constructed theological argument – consistent with the precepts of an alternative symbolic universe and prepares the ground for ethical implications for believers that will be elaborated in Gl 5–6. (p. 282)

Lategan's explanation corresponds with the earlier view of Ridderbos (1971:56) that the coming of a new age (2 Cor 5:17), a new reality and a new social

dispensation on the strength of the cross and resurrection of Christ is one of the foundational and driving principles in the theology of Paul. A new society (new creation) with a new ethic, encompassing everything, emerged. This nullifies all the previous prescriptions regarding the limitations of equality (see also Fee 2005:179). The principle of equality in Christ cuts through the social structures that came into being after the fall.

Galatians 3:28 was indeed a revolutionary statement in the social milieu of the early Christian churches (Betz 1979:190). The Mediterranean world at that time was a male-dominated hierarchical society where people were perceived and treated according to the social standards of superiority and inferiority (see also the sociohistorical reading of Aune 2010:176). This caste system was founded on the belief in the intrinsic inferiority of women, non-Greeks and slaves, brought about by the influential philosophical-anthropological ideas of Aristotle and his school of thought (Downing 2006:178). According to Lategan (2012:279) and Rahe (2012:14), Paul intends with his statement to oppose certain degrading statements in Greek and Rabbinic sayings of gratitude. In the 'three sayings of gratitude' in Greek sources, ascribed to Thales and Plato, a man could express his gratitude for 'being born as a human being and not as an animal, as a man and not a woman, and as a Greek and not a barbarian'. In Rabbinic literature, a male in his morning prayer could thank God that he 'was not made a woman or a slave'. Paul could not have been unaware of this ethos and therefore his statement in Galatians 3:28 is indeed revolutionary (Lategan 2012:278–279; see also Campbell 2003:62; Chopp 2017:259 who responds to the latter's eschatological interpretation of Paul's ethics). Alexander (2013:14) describes this statement as a radical deconstruction of the basic divisions that structured ancient society, namely divisions of race, class and gender. Campbell (2003:69) defines it as an: '… irreducible radical and therefore also a political and liberationist text' and Snodgrass (1986:161) maintains that this verse contains the 'most socially explosive statement in the New Testament'. Also arguing from this egalitarian point of view, Eisenbaum (2001:506) describes the apostle Paul as '… one of the first people in the Western civilisation to deal directly with the problem of multiculturalism'.

The equality of all people is a creational principle. This principle has been deformed by evil and this distortion has resulted in inhumane social institutions. However, Christ brought a new immanent reign and a new humanity that overarches the dispensation of evil with all its destructive forces (see Ridderbos 1971:377; Snodgrass 1986:174). The dispensation of evil is known for inhumane relationships such as patriarchy, racism and exploitation, amongst others. The new immanent reign of God in Christ restores the creational principle of the equality of all people. This equality must be realised amongst the people of God but must also be pursued as a universal principle for all human relationships. The equality of all persons is a new condition for human life brought forward by the

reality of God's kingdom in human history. This passage is indeed the Magna Charta of Christianity.

The Christian anthropological principle of equality is thus in concert with the idea of equality in modern political philosophy and can add value to the political debate on equality as a foundational value in the human rights discourse. In political philosophy and the theory of justice, equality is seen as a natural condition which, according to Rawls (1999:441), determines the range and application of conceptions of justice. Persons have the natural capacity 'of moral personality' and are therefore entitled to equal justice. Rawls (1999:442 footnote 30) explains that equality applies to three levels. The first is the administration of institutions as public systems of rules. The second is the substantive structures of institutions and the third is moral beings who are entitled to equal justice. Moral beings are capable of having a 'conception of their good' and they are capable of having 'a sense of justice, a normally effective desire to apply and to act upon the principles of justice, at least to a certain minimum degree' (Rawls 1999:442). These ideas are in line with the creational gifts of the basic dignity of the person, the person as a moral agent and equality as a foundational principle in the relations of persons.

Equality is central to the dignified life of the person and needs to be pursued by all moral agents in the modern society amidst the current upheaval of racism, discrimination and disrespect. The third ingredient of the dignified life of the person is the value of freedom.

◼ Freedom

The Christian concept of freedom has been a prominent idea throughout the history of Christian theologies. It has also taken on different meanings for different historic Christian traditions. A recent study by N. Vorster (2019a:46–101) offers a concise and interesting discussion and evaluation of these developments. Although argued in different ways over the centuries, all the views that form part of Christian theologies depart from certain basic beliefs. Underlying these traditional different points of view are four beliefs that determine the value of freedom as part of the dignified life of the person. These are:

1. The belief that humans are creatures in bondage who are slaves of sin, evil and death.
2. The belief that persons find their redemption in Christ, who alone is able to overcome the principalities and powers of this world.
3. The belief that the Spirit of Christ draws human beings into communion with Christ and empowers them to enact a praxis of freedom in their lives.
4. The belief that freedom is a gift of God's grace that invokes in the believer a sense of responsibility and discipleship (N. Vorster 2019a:50).

For the purposes of this study, the fourth belief is relevant. Many theological controversies have arisen within Christian theology with regard to the innate free will (or not) of the human being in accepting God's gift of grace and choosing to become a child of God. This study does not deal with these controversies, but rather with the fact that the close relationship between freedom and responsibility is emphasised all the way through the biblical traditions and applied by the various Christian traditions in different ways.

What is essential in the biblical understanding of freedom is that the created person was furnished with a free will to choose between God's command and the person's own will. The person chose to be like God, totally free and divine – the ruler of its own destiny free from the 'burden' of obedience to God. The person did not respect its limited freedom in obedience to God but opted for total freedom without God. This choice had dire consequences for human nature (Rm 8):

> They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant, and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy. Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them. (vv. 29–32)

This act of disobedience and revolution evoked the judgement of God over the person because it misused its freedom to be obedient to God to choose evil. The revolution has led to bondage. The free person became a slave of evil and a subject that suffers under the burdens and afflictions of the struggle of living in a reality afflicted by the onslaughts of destructive natural forces. Paul reminds us that: 'We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time' (Rm 8:22). Evil captures the person, rules over life, distorts any vision of the good and inhibits any form of freedom. The cry for unlimited freedom has resulted in unlimited bondage.

The person has to pay a price for the upliftment of the judgement of God – a price for the restoration of freedom in obedience. The evil person cannot pay the price, and therefore God became a person without the bondage of evil to liberate God's suffering creation. The suffering Jesus pays and accepts the price on behalf of the person in bondage. The crucifixion of Jesus and his resurrection as the post-Easter exalted Christ restores freedom in obedience. This freedom is not the unlimited freedom the person chose, but a freedom that can be executed within the parameters of God's will. Christ is the Liberator who acts as the 'second Adam' in obedience to God (1 Cr 15) to bring about a new limited freedom for the person – a freedom under the immanent reign of God. This freedom in obedience is powered by the Spirit of God who bestows gifts on the person and enables it to bear the 'fruits of the Spirit' as described by Paul in Galatians 5:

> But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking, and envying each other. (vv. 22–26)

Important in this passage about the fruits of the Spirit is the word 'self-control'. In my opinion, this concept describes the essence of Christian freedom in obedience to God. The life of the liberated person is no longer under the bondage of evil. The person has the ability and freedom to control (resist) the forces of evil. The liberated person can resist all the forms of the enslaving powers that emerge from inner desires, reason or external influences and the pressures of ideologies and movements with new forms of enslavement and dependence. Therefore, freedom should not be seen only as a passive condition of life, but as an active tool of resistance, not only focusing on controlling one's own individual life but on the threats enslaving the lives of others. Just as the liberated person practices the art of resistance to the enslaving forces threatening its own life, it has the vocation to resist all enslaving forces threatening the lives of others. This vocation features prominently in the moral code of Israel (Dt 15:15). The Israelites ought to remember that they were slaves in Israel and that God liberated them from their bondage. As a freed people, the Israelites have a responsibility to care for those who experience similar conditions of bondage. The New Testament follows the same line of thought. Jesus is depicted as the Messiah who liberates us from the bondage of sin. He directs the liberating message of the gospel at the poor, sick and outcasts of society (Lk 4:18–19).

The Christian moral agent therefore has the vocation to pursue a quest for freedom in the socio-political sphere as an undeniable result of liberty in Christ and the power of the Spirit of God. Several prominent Protestant theologians echoed this important Christian principle. Luther's famous dictum in his book 'The Freedom of the Christian' (1520) was that the Christian is a free lord over all things and subject to no one, yet the Christian is also a servant of all things and subject to everyone (Luther 1917:358). Christians are subject to none because they share in the resurrection of Christ and the victory over evil. This freedom cannot be taken away from the liberated person, no matter the circumstances. Yet, Christians are also subject to all in the sense that they are freed to serve others. The inner freedom we gain in Christ leads to an outer servitude to the neighbour and the world (Largen 2013:236; N. Vorster 2019a:75). Freedom and servitude do not diminish or constrain each other, but freedom realises itself as a compassionate servitude to others.

N. Vorster (2019a:76) detects the same idea about the condition and application of Christian freedom in the social theory of Calvin. He posits that in Calvin's eyes, freedom is to obey God's will and entails that, freed from the yoke of the law, the Christian is free to serve God spontaneously. True freedom

is firstly to love God wholeheartedly, to serve and obey God keenly and to submit willingly to God's spirit. But Calvin's positive understanding of freedom led him to develop a doctrine on the vocation of the person. Every person receives a vocation in life, a divine calling to a distinct duty and mode of living within a specific context. Calvin regarded society as a neighbourhood where individuals serve each other through their respective gifts within their assigned vocational context. Christian responsibility and ethical appropriateness of our actions are therefore determined by the type of vocation we receive from God. The responsibility of the liberated person to be an advocate of freedom as a moral agent in all situations where freedom is inhibited by forces of enslavement was also high on the agendas of the social ethics of Barth (1960b) and Bonhoeffer (1995) as a Christian response to the power abuses of the Fascist regimes of their time. The liberation theologies that developed from the seventies of the previous century onwards went even further. They use the quest for liberation of oppressed people as a hermeneutical tool that asks for a reading of the Bible bottom-up instead of top-down – from the experiences of marginalised people as a result of sexism, homophobia, racism and xenophobia. Liberation theologies can be criticised for many of its foundational beliefs, such as, amongst others, the justification of reactionary violence, but these theologies can be commended for drawing the Christian concept of freedom out of the mystical and spiritual sphere and setting it as a core value in the socio-political domain. The liberated person ought to heed the call of oppressed people for freedom should resist all forms of controlling forces and be the voice of the marginalised.

Human dignity, equality and freedom are not vague values in the search for a dignified life but are supposed to be encapsulated in political and social structures to create an environment where flourishing personhood can be pursued. The campaign by moral agents for the implementation of bills of human rights that model the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) has made a tremendous contribution. Human dignity, equality and freedom have become enshrined as core values in a number of modern-day liberal democracies and this has enabled persons to pursue flourishing personhood in the political domain. The dignified life of the person comes to the fore where human rights are held in high esteem. This point of view is clarified in the section 'Human rights'.

■ Human rights

The person's dignified life is a gift from God that enriches personhood, not only within the confines of individual experience but also in relation with others. The distortion of the person's dignified life is a revolt against God and a rejection of his saving and renewing grace. With the cosmic regenerative act at the cross and the powerful actions of his Spirit, God has again dignified the

human life by bestowing the qualities of human dignity, human freedom in obedience and equality on humankind. These are the characteristics of the life under His immanent reign and the culture of his Kingdom.

This gift also entails the vocation to promote these values in society. The dignified life cannot blossom when other persons experience the degradation and destruction of their personhood. Christian moral agents cannot reach flourishing personhood when their neighbours live a life of destitution and neglect. Then their own dignity becomes cheap, their equality limited and their freedom constrained. Personhood cannot come to fruition in an environment of inhumanity. The values of dignity, equality and freedom in obedience must thus be discharged to humanity in all situations where the forces of evil destructs these values.

This vocation permits Christian moral agents to embrace the ethos of human rights that has developed over the past three centuries and that has become a potent socio-political concept since World War II. The assertion in art. 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations (1948), namely, 'All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights…' reverberates the Christian view of the qualities of the dignified life of the person, although the philosophical grounding differs. A Christian ethic of flourishing personhood can and should take part in the promotion of constitutional democracies with legal protection of people's rights in a just bill of rights. Christian moral agents must be the voice of the oppressed and the prophets against abusing socio-political power and violent systems. They must be on the lookout for political systems of power and control, economic practices that enslave the poor and destroy equality, and jurisprudence that favours the affluent under the guise of law and order and democracy.

First-generation rights have been reasonably well settled in liberal democracies. Second-generation rights, especially the rights of women in the corporate world, are still in progress. There are persisting pockets of unfair discrimination against women, even in developed countries, as the research of Bøsterud (2019:6) indicates. Third-generation rights, or socio-economic rights, are still largely inhibited in neo-liberal economies where the emphasis on privatisation of state entities, free global trade, incentives for an expanding consumer culture and the quest for profit are prioritised and disadvantage poor communities. It also seems that the 'trickle-down effect' of prosperity predicted by the Friedman (1971) doctrine of the control of economies by the markets does not deliver the goods predicted. It perhaps even causes more and more inequality. However, the overall human rights philosophy and implementation in one-party states, socialist states, religious fundamentalist states and dictatorships in the developing world are still not held in high regard and are even viewed with suspicion because it may interfere with long-held cultural customs and traditions.

The annual meetings of the Human Rights Council of the United Nations in Geneva regularly deal with reports of special rapporteurs, commissions of investigations and various global civil societies for human rights where perennial abuses of human rights occur over the world (United Nations 2019). These documents reveal depressing and incredible violations of human rights around the globe. In war zones, civilian people are evicted from their homes and become refugees. They live in dreadful conditions in other countries where they often become victims of xenophobic attacks. They are threatened and killed with biological and chemical weapons, although these uses are hypocritically denied by the warring regimes. Civilian habitats are bombed indiscriminately, and schools and hospitals are destroyed.

Even in countries without the turmoil of war, immense violations of human dignity and human rights occur regularly. Democracies can also be disposed to abuses of human rights. These UN reports refer, amongst other things, to religious intolerance in Pakistan, child labour in China, honour killings of women in some radical Muslim societies, human trafficking in Eastern Europe and sub-Saharan Africa, abuses of girls in Nigeria, land seizures in Zimbabwe, ill-treatment of immigrants in some European countries, homophobia in some African communities and much more. Added to these atrocities is the impoverishment of many indigenous communities by global corporations, especially in the field of mining mineral resources in their places of living, as well as the neglect of the poor because of corruption by the ruling elite. South Africa is a good example of the latter. State capture by outside forces in cooperation with the Zuma administration (2009–2018) led to the swindling huge sums of money destined for the development of the poor for their own benefit. This disastrous deep-rooted corruption took place notwithstanding the fact that South Africa is a modern liberal democracy with a bill of rights and the rule of law.

When people cannot live a dignified life because of all these dehumanising actions, it affects all of us. A dehumanisation of a dignified life revolts against the immanent reign of God with his graceful gifts and his will for people under his rule. It distorts everything Christian moral agents admire. Therefore, the vocation of Christian moral agents to be custodians of human rights is so important for each of the societies we are living in. God commands us to protect and promote the dignified life of persons in the face of dehumanising powers. Christian moral agents must be the voice of the homeless, the refugees, the poor, the displaced child, the abused and disadvantaged women, and all other people in dire circumstances because of neglect by the powers in control. They are duty-bound to raise awareness, to demand restitution, to remind authorities of their God-given responsibilities to rule with justice and fairness and to stand up for the plight of the destitute in the face of the approaching waves of economic progress that disregard the marginalised and the vulnerable. Christian moral action is more than talking

and preaching, more than spiritual experiences and mystic self-isolation – practices that were so common amongst churches in the past in times of social turmoil. In a moving poem, Banana (1981) laments the quietism and hesitation to act decisively amongst so many Christian moral agents when facing social evils:

When I was lonely,

You left me alone.

When I was homeless,

You preached to me about the shelter of God's love.

When I was hungry.

You formed a humanity's club and discussed my hunger,

When I was naked,

You debated about the morality of my nakedness.

When I was in prison,

You guiltily crept into a cellar and prayed for my release.

When I was sick.

You fell on your knees and thanked God for your health.

You seem to be so Holy, so close to God,

But I am still hungry, lonely and cold. (pp. 19–20)

Christian moral agents worldwide have a duty to support the endeavours of civil societies that campaign for human rights and the political and judicial institution of bills of human rights protected by constitutional courts. Up to this point in time, liberal democracies seem to be the best way to enhance the real values of dignity, equality and freedom, and to see to it that persons can enjoy a dignified life. The vocation of Christian moral agents will be revisited in Chapter 6 of this study, but it is mentioned here with respect to the task to advance the values of human dignity, equality and freedom within a human rights dispensation and to indicate what Christian moral agents can contribute to the discourse about the development of an ethos of human rights in oppressive societies.

The greatest threat to the value of human dignity and the ensuing values of equality and freedom in society today is the phenomenon of racism. Even in liberal democracies with their high regard for human dignity, racism constantly raises its head in many forms. The recent worldwide protest under the dictum #BlackLivesMatter painted a disparaging picture of perennial racism in societies today. Racism is all about the violation of the dignified character of the life of a person and therefore this phenomenon is discussed in more detail in the section on 'Racism'.

◼ Racism

In the past, the term racism was used to describe a belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences can be used as a basis for the inherent superiority of a particular race. From this angle of approach, the concept describes attitudes of prejudice, bias, intolerance and enmity between people because of differences in race and colour. A race was seen as a 'grouping of humans based on shared physical or social qualities into categories generally viewed as distinct by society' (Barnshaw 2008:1091–1093). The term was first used to refer to speakers of a common language and then to denote national affiliations (cf. Barnshaw 2008). Later, under the influence of scientific research of 'natural species', the term began to refer to physical (phenotypical) traits of human beings, such as skin colour and facial forms (Barnshaw 2008). Nowadays, anthropological scholarship regards race as a 'social construct', and that is assigned on the basis of rules made by society. Whilst partially based on physical similarities within groups, race does not have an inherent physical or biological meaning (Barnshaw 2008). In other words, all forms of 'otherness' lie in the eyes of the beholders.

Modiamo (1996) defines race as:

> Reasonably large groups of individuals which differ from each other (from group to group) for as 'sufficient large' number of independent 'mayor' anthropological markers (inter-groups, discontinuous, inherited, self-evident characteristics) which in spite of being independently determined lead to a strongly concordant subdivision. (p. 146)

His definition is to the point. The concept can, according to this definition, also pertain to groups other than racial groups, such as groups that construct themselves on the basis of language, religion, culture, descent or a combination of these and other features (Schutte 1995:18). Referring to the population of the United States of America, Marger (1994:28) indicates that racism as an expression of superiority and inferiority of groups can refer to groups identified as Jews, Italians, Americans, Northern Irish, Catholics, French Canadians as much as African Americans, North American Indians or other more salient groups. Racism has to do with group-forming around self-defined identities with the aim to promote solidarity, group identity and in-group consciousness out of fear or defence, or to exert power over the out-group(s). Racism includes all social conditions where people are treated as the 'out-group' because of socially defined differences.

Racism in the sense of group consciousness can also become the defining principle in the formation of political and social structures along the lines of identity-forming. Marger (1994:26) is correct with his statement that racism is not only the belief that persons are subdivided into hereditary groups that are innately different in their social behaviour and capacities and that can therefore

be ranked as superior and inferior, but also that the presumed superiority of some groups and inferiority of others may well be used to legitimise the unequal distribution of society's resources, specifically various forms of wealth, prestige and power. Marger sites many examples of this. Social stratification in the European colonies in the past, racial policies in the Southern States of the United States and the politics of Apartheid in South Africa (1948–1994) are clear examples of *de uire* racist political engineering where political institutions and social life was arranged to protect and empower Europeans (white people) at the cost of the rest, who were labelled as 'non-American' or 'non-European' or 'non-white'. Race and racism are nowadays used as broad terms to indicate ethnocentrism, tribalism, xenophobia, religiophobia, homophobia and class struggles. It also refers to the political and social realisation of structures founded on exclusive and constricting identity politics. Racism in this *de facto* sense is well and alive in the world today. 'In-group, out-group', 'togetherness–otherness' and 'us and them' patterns are nurtured with the intention to idolise the 'us' and demonise the 'them' and to formalise these patterns into lifestyles and politics. All of these can eventually become a slippery slope heading towards attitudes and policies of discrimination and even genocide, infanticide and religious persecutions.

Whilst *de uire* racism has to a large extent been abolished because of the doctrine of human rights and the establishment of liberal democracies, *de facto* racism is still present in many forms worldwide. This is evident from the discrimination against religious minorities in mid-eastern European countries, tribalism in central Africa, religious intolerance against the Muslim minority in China, the dehumanising treatment of refugees from war-torn countries in Europe and Mexican immigrants to the United States. The surge of populism and identity politics in the United States and in many European and African countries can be ascribed to the reality (and growth) of *de facto* racism in these and other societies. South Africa is a good example of the fact that the removal of *de uire* racism by abolishing a political system of institutionalised racism does not necessarily lead to the disappearance of *de facto* racism in the actions and attitudes of people. Apartheid is gone, but not racism. The oppressed are sometimes liberated from an enslaving system, but not from dehumanising attitudes, hate speech and prejudice. And those who themselves suffered under institutionalised racism can become fierce perpetrators of *de facto* racism. The new democratic administrations in South Africa have even created new policies based on racial classification. South Africans are still officially classified as either black, white, coloured, etcetera, and not merely as South Africans.

In another piece, I deal with the question whether we in South Africa have reached a tipping point where the non-racial democracy can once again tilt back to *de uire* racism because of racial classification (see J.M. Vorster 2017c). The main findings are listed concisely in this chapter. It is fair to ask whether

the maintenance of racial classifications in a post-1994 South Africa do not pave the way for new forms of institutionalised racism? Lefko-Everett (2012:144) found in a qualitative study that South Africans still think in terms of race. In my opinion, this phenomenon is largely fuelled by political debates. A most potent example of a post-1994 classification was the well-known two nations theory of former president Thabo Mbeki (1998:71–72). Although former president Mbeki softened his viewpoint later on by speaking about two economies rather than two nations, he planted the idea that rich and poor can be classified as white and black in the psyche of the nation. This kind of classification formed the basis of laws on affirmative action and black economic empowerment. How did this classification theory affect the post-1994 developments with respect to racism?

In her empirical research about racism in business and employment, Holborn (2010) found that the legislation on affirmative action and black economic empowerment has re-introduced the Apartheid era categorisation of races. Racial categorisation in laws affects two significant areas of the South African society, namely business and the workplace. She concludes by stating that racial identity is a deciding criterion for employment, promotion, ownership, and control of enterprises and assets. According to her, the policies of the post-Apartheid government have done little to promote the de-racialisation of society. It is clear that racial classification has a negative effect on society since it is still used to promote certain economic ideals.

The aim of the policies of social transformation based on the re-introduction of racial classification is to limit white representation to 9%, coloured to 9%, Indian to 2% and black people to 80% (Eloff 2016:71). These limitations are clear forms of racial classification that have the potential to develop into racial stratifications in all social domains. Eloff (2016:72) reminds us that these classifications are exactly the same as the classifications expressed in the Population Registration Act in the Apartheid era which forced parents to register their newborns according to racial categories. Discrimination is inevitable because of the pursuit of these quotas in South Africa today. It means that merit is set aside and that for example white applicants' access to universities might be limited. Access is decided solely on the foundation of racial categories. Racial quotas at universities can therefore be regarded as a form of racial classification with the potential of renewed racial stratifications. South African society is dangerously close to tipping back to a pattern of racial stratifications and institutionalised racism.

Sport is another area of concern when the issue of resurging racism is debated. In the Apartheid era, black people, with only a few exceptions, were not selected to represent South Africa in national sport teams. After 1994, the various administrations of the democratic government endeavoured, rightly so, to transform sport. Various policies were introduced (Holborn 2010:117). Racial

quotas were introduced because 61% of people favoured a quota system in 2007. Since then, this number has dropped. In 2016, responses in the South African Institute of Race Relations' (SAIRR) survey showed that 77% of all South Africans support purely merit-based selection without reference to racial quotas. 'No fewer than 74.2% of black South Africans endorsed this view' (SAIRR 2016:3). The report concludes that politicians may be seeking to compel quota-based selections, but this is not what most of the black population wants. Yet, the Zuma administration (2008–2018) introduced harsh new policies on transformation in sport based on racial classification. Since 1994, sport has contributed greatly to nation-building in South Africa. Many black sport people have emerged as icons and role models for the youth because of their achievements and not because of their race. Despite this positive development, racial quotas were re-introduced. This is another example of the negative effects of renewed racial classifications introduced by the Zuma administration.

Although recent developments, especially during the Zuma administration, have not been investigated in a valid scientific manner, Harvey (2016) posits with reference to various examples that incidences of racist behaviour have increased, especially on social media (Harvey 2016). Although scholars should be wary of stating extreme cases of racist behaviour perpetrated by radicals as the rule, it does seem as if racist behaviour has risen to alarming levels. An alarming aspect of this trend is the way in which former president Zuma used racial classifications in his propaganda before the 2016 local elections when he depicted white people as the enemy of progress and the reason for the poverty of African people (ENCA 2016:1). He has stated on several occasions that the economic problems of South Africa started with the coming of the Dutch colonists in 1652, calling on black voters not to vote for white political leaders and parties with a large component of white politicians. He introduced the slogan of 'white monopoly capital' to demonise white people in enterprises and to hold them responsible for the perennial poverty of some black people. This was done in an effort to conceal the vast irregularities, corruption and failures of his own administration. He is still emulated in this by many black politicians who use the demonisation of white and Indian people to further their political support in poor communities and to hide their lack of service delivery to these communities. As the people in control of state institutions, their re-racialisation of society has paved the way for a new surge in racism along the lines of 'us' and 'them'.

On the assumption that people are classified by law along the lines of race for whatever reason, the 'us' and 'them' phenomenon will feature irrespective of the abolishment of institutionalised racism. South Africa will not heal from racism and its resulting behaviours of hate speech, alienation, prejudice and ill-treatment of the 'others' as long as racial classification is the norm for social identity. We must learn to speak of 'South Africans' without referring to racial categories. Such a radical change in mindset may pave the way to true

reconciliation and healing and can serve the ideal of national unity. The same is true of other societies in countries where the influx of immigrants and refugees causes a 'we-feeling' that becomes intertwined with identity politics and a populism that fuels xenophobia. Persons are persons, regardless of differences. Persons must therefore be defined as persons and nothing else. An ethic of flourishing personhood ought to enhance this criterium all the time and in all situations.

■ Respect for human dignity

The dignified life of the person comes to the fore in the values of dignity, equality and freedom. Where these values are distorted by '*de iure*' or '*de facto*' racism, persons cannot attain flourishing personhood, not the victim nor the perpetrator. Flourishing personhood cannot blossom amidst racism in any of its forms. A person cannot live a dignified life when the people around him or her are being dehumanised. Abusing the God-given dignity of others inhibits the dignified life of all. White people in South Africa experienced the deflation of their own dignity and humaneness as a result of their disrespect of the human dignity of black people. Acting superior, being a master, becoming rich at the expense of others, living in excess, being free amongst subjugated people, having the franchise amongst the disenfranchised and speaking freely amongst the voiceless, is a life without dignity itself. On the other hand, the liberation of black people was not only a liberation from their undignified lives, but also a liberation for white people from indecorous extravagance and an atrocious sensation of being superior.

The gift of life characterises human life as a dignified life. Flourishing personhood depends on the experience and enhancement of personal dignity. An ethic of flourishing personhood is duty-bound to enhance human dignity, equality and freedom by nurturing the ethos and juristic protection of human rights and by being the constant force against racism in all its forms. The pulsating energy of such an ethic becomes even more explicit when human life is approached from an angle that also defines the life of the person as a relational life. Chapter 5 explores this perspective.

A relational life

■ Introduction[5]

The creation of the person in the image of God is the foundation of human dignity. The deeper meaning of human dignity becomes even more distinct when also viewed from a Christological and pneumatological perspective. With the creation of the person, God established a relationship with this creature. The God–human relationship, which goes as far back as creation, is a prominent theme in Barth (1960b:344) and Moltmann's (1993:221) discussions of the *imago Dei* and its anthropological meaning within the ambit of relationships. Moltmann argues that the creation of the person says essentially that God created his image and then set up a special relationship with the person. Moltmann also draws attention to the relational nature of people. It manifests in their role as representatives of God who can rule as stewards over creation in God's name. They are partners of God with whom God wants to enter into dialogue and as a visible image of the majesty of God. This relationship has been tarnished by evil, but not destroyed. The relationship is the foundation of the vocation of the person to take care of creation as to serve God in the spirit of stewardship and personhood.

5. This chapter, entitled *A relational life*, presents research findings from J.M. Vorster's previous articles (J.M. Vorster 2016, 2018). The manuscript has been substantially reworked. These articles have been used with the author's permission and have been duly cited in the reference list.

When evil alienated the person from God, God took the initiative to restore the relationship without any form of human appeasement. In an effort to restore the splendour of creation, God willed the intervention of Christ. Christ died on the cross, was resurrected and was bestowed with the Spirit to heal the person's alienation from God because of evil. In many ways, God reveals himself as the healer of relationships. Firstly, God reconciles the alienated person with himself according to a graceful plan of liberation from evil and its forces. He erects covenants, and when humans revolt against the contents of the covenants in disobedience and flee again into alienation, he renews his covenant time and again, until the final sacrifice of the lamb of God on the cross and the permanent effacement of human alienation. The suffering Christ becomes alienated on the cross to restore the created relational life of the person. This relational life can blossom in communion with the Spirit of God.

God's liberating action on behalf of the created person is an act of re-creation and reconciliation that has tremendous consequences. The reconciliation restores the goodness of creation in principle. God, persons and the whole creation, alienated by evil, become a new reconciled community. The original splendour of creation returns in the new reconciled world and will develop to its fullness when God completes his restoration of his Kingdom at the end of history. God is the sole author of reconciliation, just as God is the sole author of creation. Reconciliation is a gift to an alienated world and to persons living in alienation, hostility and loneliness. The essence of reconciliation becomes clear in 2 Corinthians 9:

> Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. (vv. 17–19)

Ridderbos (1971:44) describes this passage as the foundation of the theology of Paul. Gloer (2007:589) in turn says that it is one of the most important expositions of Christianity in Scripture. Christian religion is all about reconciliation with God, and as a result with fellow persons who embrace this gift in faith. There is a new relationship with all people and with God's creation. These relationships are the essence of the renewal 'in Christ'.

In his good and complete creation and in his restoration of his creation after the destruction of evil, God reveals himself as a relational God, a God with God's people and his creation – not a god cast in stone and imprisoned by people in faraway temples on mountains or human-made holy places. God is not a silent statue that has to be fed and clothed by admirers. God is alive, omnipresent, caring, speaking and calling people into a relationship with God-self, which is possible because of God's suffering, death and

resurrection in Christ and the presence of the liberating Spirit in the world amongst people in their constant alienation and distorted relationships. Because of God's relational actions in creation and reconciliation, stemming from the creation of the person in God's image, the person is essentially a relational being. Human life is thus a relational life and in God's dealing with the person the concept of relationship and the comfort, blessings, spiritual enrichment, joy and peace, as well as the immense responsibilities it entails, come to the fore. The person is created and liberated by God to be a relational being – a being in an intense loving relationship with the triune God, a being in relationship with fellow persons and a steward with a deeply rooted relationship with nature.

These relationships and their effect on an ethic of personhood are explored in this chapter. I use the metaphor of concentric circles to explain the relational life of the person as follows:

1. The centre of the concentric circle is the person's relationship with God as the gift of reconciliation.
2. The inner circle signifies the marital relationship as a creational institution of God.
3. The second circle indicates the new reconciled community in Christ established by the Spirit of God.
4. The third circle points to civil relationships prescribed and equipped by God to prevent chaos and total disorder.
5. The outer circle designates the relationship with the natural environment.

The relationship with God as the essence of the relational life of the person is addressed in the chapter on the life of the person as a blessed life. This chapter attends to the outer circles, namely the relationship in marriage as the inner circle, the relationship amongst the people of God (church) as the second circle, the relationship amongst people in civil life as the third circle and the relationship of the person with nature as the outer circle.

■ Marriage and family[6]

Marriage and family can be appreciated as the inner circle of the person's relational life. God instituted this relationship when God created the person as male and female in a marital relationship of equality and mutual responsibilities. According to Scripture, God instituted the heterosexual, monogamous marriage and no other marital relationships, such as polygamous or same-sex marriages. Whilst polygamous marriages are described in Scripture as practices of the ancient societies and no mention is made of same-sex marriages, the monogamous heterosexual marriage is

6. The reflection on 'marital relationship of equality and mutual responsibilities' in section 10 is an extension and further application of the research presented in Vorster (2016).

presented as a creational institution and a prescription for a chaste marital life. This is a principle for marriage and not a prescription that a person has a duty to marry. A person may choose to remain single and can still enjoy the splendour of a relational life. For persons in a marital relationship, all aspects of this relationship attest to the fact that marriage is a creational institution. These aspects are described later on in this section. Moreover, this heterosexual monogamous institution of wife and husband is the foundation of other institutions, namely the church, the state and civil society. An exposition of the relational character of the gift of life to the person could thus start with this inner circle of God's endowment of relationships.

What are the current trends with respect to marriage and family in society today? The last four decades have witnessed a far-reaching change in family patterns in modern societies that in the past claimed to uphold a Christian ethos for social life. Modern life is known for growing rates of divorce, out-of-wedlock births, father absence because of globalisation, cohabitation of couples without commitment and the legitimisation of same-sex marriages. Already in 1997 Gill (1997:81) expressed a concern shared by many Christians, namely that societies in the Western world are faced with a rapid decline in two-parent families and a rise in alternative forms of sexual relations. In two well-researched articles, Browning (2001a:4, 2001b:247) publishes findings that show that these developments have been damaging to large numbers of people. On the other hand, some scholars today regard the traditional concept of marriage as outdated and challenged by new postmodern forms of marriage (see Van Eck 2007:83). Dreyer (2008) claims that marriage should be understood as a mere social construct that can take different forms in different social and cultural contexts and that it is therefore presumptuous to speak of the 'sanctity of marriage' in this day and age.

To my mind, marriage is inherently part of the relational life of the person. It cannot be evaluated without considering God's covenantal relationship with the person. The Protestants resisted the doctrine of marriage as a sacrament, but they did not downplay the importance of marriage as a creational institution. They founded the idea of a monogamous heterosexual marriage in the theology of creation and emphasised sexuality as an essential part of marriage, over and against Augustine's plea of virginity and the Roman Catholic doctrine of celibacy (Roberts 2007:132). However, the Protestants regarded the purpose of marriage as procreational only. Luther discussed marriage within his idea of the two kingdoms. Although he did not use the covenant concept, he regarded marriage as one of the orders of creation, as an essential relationship for the well-being of the civil state. He argued that the state should exercise authority over husbands and wives' act of entering into the bondage of marriage and over the dissolution of marriage. He took the position that entering the bond of marriage should require parental permission, witnesses and public profession of the marriage vows (see

Johnson 2005:129). He contended that marriage should be appreciated as an essential building block of a healthy state and of the church.

Stackhouse (2005:159) describes how Calvin and others in the reformed tradition, especially Bullinger and Bucer, followed Luther at first, but gradually developed the theory of overlapping covenants. The theory of overlapping covenants entails that God enters in a covenant relationship with the marriage partners and with their families. This covenant forms a bond between the parents of the couple and the couple, and between the larger society and the married couple, with God present in all these relationships. According to Stackhouse, this is the idea that was celebrated and made known to all in public worship services, and various rites acknowledge these creational and covenantal relationships.

The rite of marriage in the time of the Reformation is described by Witte (2001) as follows:

> Marriage was a covenantal association of the entire community. A variety of parties played a part in the formation of the marriage covenant. The marital couple themselves swore their betrothals and espousals before each other and God – rendering all marriage triparty agreements with God as party, witness, and judge. The couple's parents, as God's bishops and children, gave their consent to the union. Two witnesses, as God's priest to their peers, served as witnesses to the marriage. The minister, holding the spiritual power of the Word, blessed the couple and admonished them in their spiritual duties. The magistrate, holding the temporal power of the sword, registered the parties and their properties and ensured the legality of their union. (p. 6)

■ A covenantal relationship

Since the Reformation, the concept of marriage as a covenant has been developed even further. It found expression in the formulas used in the liturgies of the worship services during which marriage ceremonies were celebrated. Covenantal wedding liturgies developed. Most of these liturgies are still used in reformed churches today. However, some tension developed within the Protestant traditions. Whilst recognising the rites of all other religious persuasions, Lutherans made marriage more a matter of civil law, whilst the reformed and puritan traditions promoted the church-centred wedding as the important event, to be then registered by civil authority (Stackhouse 2005:164). Despite this, the idea of marriage as a covenant remained the most important definition of marriage. Central to this idea is the vow of both partners to a life-long commitment and a functional differentiation in marital roles and responsibilities.

An important contemporary exponent of the idea of marriage as covenant in the Protestant tradition is Köstenberger, who is regarded as an 'evangelical ethicist'. He and Jones have published a thought-provoking book about God, marriage and family. The value of this study is their exegesis of the biblical

passages on marriage and related matters. True to the Protestant tradition, they highlight the covenantal and contractual nature of marriage. The concept of marriage as a covenant involves firstly the permanence of marriage. In this respect, they refer to Matthew 19:6 and Mark 10:9 to prove that marriage could be appreciated as a creational institution of God that prescribes a permanent relationship of mutual love and commitment between husband and wife. God is the author of every marriage. They continue to argue that marriage constitutes a serious commitment that should not be entered into lightly or unadvisedly. It involves a solemn promise or pledge of fidelity and responsibilities, not merely to one's marriage partner, but before God (Köstenberger & Jones 2004:89).

Secondly, they remind us that, because of its covenantal character, marriage should be observed as sacred. It is not merely a human agreement between two consenting individuals, but a relationship before and under God. In this respect, they refer to the creational history in Genesis 2:22. Sacred does not mean sacramental, 'because it is not a mystical union under the church's auspices serving as a vehicle for securing or sustaining one's salvation'. Thirdly, the concept of marriage as a covenant refers to the intimacy of marriage. They refer to Genesis 2:23–25 and contend that marriage involves leaving one's household and cleaving to one's spouse in a new household, which thus signifies the establishment of a new family unit distinct from the two original families. The expression 'one flesh' suggests not only sexual intercourse but 'entails the establishment of a new kinship between two previously unrelated individuals by the most intimate of human bonds' (Köstenberger & Jones 2004:90).

Fourthly, they contend that marriage as a covenant indicates the mutuality of marriage. It is a relationship that entails the self-giving of one human being to another as it is explained in the household codes (Eph 5:25–30). The marriage partners are to be first and foremost concerned about the well-being of the other person and to be committed to each other in steadfast love and devotion. However, they maintain also that mutuality does not mean 'sameness in role'. Women could be perceived as the 'suitable helpers' of their husbands, whilst husbands bear the ultimate responsibility for their marriage before God. This point of view is derived from the household codes as explained in Ephesians 5:22–24 and Colossians 3:18 and they also refer to Genesis 2:18, 20 in this regard. In this respect, Köstenberger and Jones follow the early Protestant tradition in its view of the subordination of women in the marital relationship, a point of view that can be questioned, also from the premise of marriage as a covenant. This aspect of marriage in the early Protestant tradition can be regarded as a weak point in its ethic of marriage, an issue revisited later in this chapter.

Köstenberger and Jones (2004:90–91) conclude their description of the covenantal marriage by pointing to the exclusiveness of marriage. They say

that covenantal marriage is not only permanent, sacred, intimate and mutual, but also exclusive, according to Genesis 2:22–25 and 1 Corinthians 7:2–5. No other relationship might interfere with the marriage commitment between husband and wife. All forms of sexual relations outside wedlock may well be regarded as illegitimate. They refer to the Song of Solomon and say that free and complete giving of oneself in marriage can only take place in the secure context of an exclusive marital bond. Their conclusion is that marriage can best be described as a covenant (or a creation ordinance with covenantal features), a sacred bond between a man and a woman, instituted by and publicly entered before God (whether or not this is acknowledged by the married couple), normally consummated by sexual intercourse (Köstenberger & Jones 2004:91). In their opinion, Scripture presents marriage as a sacred bond that is characterised by permanence, sacredness, intimacy, mutuality and exclusiveness. Their description of marriage with reference to several biblical passages is a very good reflection of how marriage has been portrayed in reformed theology over the centuries.

I agree with this tradition but with certain minor alterations. The doctrine of the covenant as an expression of the relational life of the person enriches our understanding of marriage. It provides a good foundation for how we could present marriage in today's secularising communities and for the maintenance of marriage and family life in society today. Yet, in spite of the great value of the view of the covenantal character of marriage in Protestant traditions, marriage as such has in the past and can presently and in future develop into an androcentric and patriarchal institution where wives are regarded as their husbands' subordinates. Dreyer and Van Aarde (2007:631) raise this argument as an objection to the covenant metaphor. They indicate that the scriptural material used to defend the model of marriage as a covenant, founded in the relationship between God and humans, implies an unequal relationship between husband and wife because the relationship between God and humans is unequal. Marriage viewed as a covenant is, in their opinion, prone to taking the form of a patriarchal marriage. This observation of Dreyer and Van Aarde is important, and the question can be asked: Should the covenantal model of marriage be disregarded? In my view, the model as developed in Protestant traditions can be redefined and presented in such a way that the unacceptable patriarchalism attached to it can be avoided and the precious contents of the model can be maintained and applied in an ethic of personhood. The covenant can be regarded as a triangular relationship with God as the apex and husband and wife as two equal partners on the horizontal level. I argue this idea from the premise of Galatians 3:28 as discussed in Chapter 4 where I posit that the restored equality of all people is the foundation of the life of the person. This overrules social constructs such as patriarchalism and the subordination of women in marital relationships.

■ An equal relationship

Barth's marriage ethic offers valuable and functional arguments to modify the traditional idea of marriage as a covenant. This is discussed in the seminal work of Roberts (2007:139) and also in Sonderegger (2000:258). They explain how Barth defines the covenant within the framework of creation and Christology. When studying Barth's viewpoints on the relationship between husband and wife, it becomes clear that Barth chooses as the first focal point in the understanding of this relationship that God created humans in his image and this act implies an equal relationship (Barth 1960a:116). Thus, creation has a purpose, and secondly, this purpose is revealed to be a covenantal relationship with God and other persons, which becomes a reality because of humankind's creation in the image of God. The creator of the universe is 'this God' and we meet this God in Christ. This self-disclosure of God indicates that God has a loving purpose, which includes mutuality between the Creator and the created and between husband and wife. The God who exists as a triune Being in relationship creates for the sake of enjoying further relationships with his creatures.

For Barth, Jesus as the Word of God discloses not only what we know about God and creation, but also what we know about ourselves (Roberts 2007:140–141). Jesus's humanity becomes the standard of our own and people exist for the sake of relationships with God and their neighbours. This is the basic form of humanity (Barth 1960a:285). The creation of persons in the image of God also entails that God desires persons who are beings-in-relations. Persons cannot escape their relationship with fellow persons. They can forget and misconstrue it. They can scorn and dishonour it, but 'they cannot slough it off or break free from it' (Barth 1960a:285). Persons have no choice but to be fellow persons or something else. Being human has this basic form (Barth 1960a:286).

Within this framework, Barth explains the character and purpose of marriage. Personhood exists in the differentiation and duality of male and female. This differentiation is the only structural differentiation within which people exist. So-called races of (hu)mankind are only variations of one and the same structure, allowing at any time the practical intermingling of the one with the other and consisting only in fleeting transitions from the one to the other, so that they cannot be fixed and differentiated with any precision but only very approximately, and certainly cannot be compared with the distinct species of the animal kingdom (Barth 1960a:286). The only structural differentiation in human existence is male and female.

However, he warns against any physiological or psychological attempt to describe the distinctiveness of male and female, respectively: 'because real men and real women are far too complex and contradictory to be summed up in portrayals of this nature' (Barth 1960a:287). Man speaks against himself if

he assesses and treats women as inferior beings. In this respect, Barth deviates from the view of the subordination of women as expressed in the reformed tradition. Barth (1960a) says:

> [/]t is obvious that the encounter between man and woman is fully and properly achieved only where there is the special connection of one man loving this woman and one woman loving this man in free choice and with a view to a full life-partnership; a connection which is on both sides so clear and strong as to make their marriage both possible and necessary as a unique and definite attachment. (p. 288)

Barth (1960a:301) acknowledges that marriage is a covenant that is founded on the covenant between Creator and creature. But in his exposition of the household code in Ephesians 5, he concludes that marriage has nothing to do with the subordination of women because it demands mutual subordination in respect before the Lord in a life of praising the Lord and loving each other. He warns against androcracy and criticises Bovet and Brunner who attempted to justify the subordination of women based on a kind of natural theology (see Roberts 2007:146; Sonderegger 2000:267). Marriage needs to emulate God-in-relationship and it is up to husbands and wives to realise this principle. In this relation, sexual or gender differences or functional differentiations are not the most important aspects. It is up to men and women themselves to create their social roles within the covenantal relationship, which is a relationship of equals before God (see also Sonderegger 2000:268). What the content of the marital relationship would be, what men and women may well do as they encounter one another and live together in a marital relationship, is left up to actual men and women to discover and unfold from what God has given (see Roberts 2007:144). In this way, the divine command permits husband and wife to continually and particularly discover their specific sexual natures and to be faithful to it in a form that is true before God without being enslaved to any preconceived opinions (Barth 1960a:153; see also Gollwitzer 1994:194).

Barth thus paves the way for a reassessment of the androcentric and patriarchal character of the covenantal marriage that was the result of the post-Reformation evaluation of marriage as covenant. The concept of marriage as covenant does not necessarily entail patriarchalism and androcentrism, although many of the reformed ethicists who entertain the idea of marriage as a covenant support the notion of the subordination of women (see for example Brighton 2005:264). Many marriage formulas in reformed traditions still express this idea (see Botha & Dreyer 2007).

◼ A marvellous relationship

A hermeneutic of congruent biblical theology in my view validates Barth's ideas. Drawing on what has been argued earlier about the deformation of

equality, I venture to say that the idea of marriage as a covenant is not only valid but also an indication of the marvel of the monogamous heterosexual marriage. The view of marriage as covenant can form part of an ethic of flourishing personhood without falling into the androcentrism and patriarchalism that mark so many streams in the Reformed traditions. The argument proceeds from Barth's idea of creational order discussed above, as well as Brueggemann's (1997:452) more recent view. He affirms that being created in the image of God supposes the communal intersexual character of the person. The consequence of this point of view is that the equality brought about by the *imago Dei* and the person's dominion over creation is most important as part of the relationship between husband and wife. The functional differentiation between men and women is of secondary concern and can take different forms in different situations.

Inequality between husbands and wives as found in marriages in the ancient East and throughout history is a result of the deformation of the creational equality because of the destructive force of evil. The entrance of evil brought about a change in the God-created order. Because of sin, equality became inequality. Evil distorted cooperation in marriage into the subordination of women and her 'sameness' into inferiority. She was regarded as inferior in jurisprudence, as is evident in Exodus 17:20; Deuteronomy 5:11 and Numbers 27:8. She was looked upon as a subordinate in social life (Ex 21:3; 2 Sm 11:26; Pr 12:4; Gn 18:12; Jd 19:26). The Dutch Old Testament scholar Vriezen (1966:446) concludes convincingly that all forms of patriarchism in Old Israel and in the time of the New Testament resulted from evil and do not reflect the creational order. Patriarchy is an expression of the distorted relationship and can thus not be elevated to a prescription for marital relationships. The wife's relationship of dependency on her husband is punishment for evil, just like the curse on the husband to labour with strain and sweat. The curse on the female in Genesis 3:16 is not an instruction to the husband to rule as a master over his wife, but a description of the consequence of the evil for their relationship. This is also true for the curse on the male person's labour in Genesis 3:17–19. In managing these consequences of sin, God forbids the buying and selling of wives, as was the case in the ancient East. This argument is valid because it proclaims the importance of the *imago Dei* after the fall. God's redeeming and renewing work aims to break through the barriers of patriarchalism and restore the creational relationships of mutual dependency and submission to one another (Eph 5:21).

In addition to the creational order, the idea of the covenant entails that God included men, women and children in his restoration of the equality of all persons. This contract applies to everyone in the household of grace. In this arrangement, which constitutes the new relationship between God and the faithful and between the faithful in their own midst, no discrimination may occur. God does not discriminate. The covenant was erected with every single

person – man, woman and child. In this relationship, there is no superiority or inferiority, everyone is equal as children of Yahweh. Thus, the covenant is an expression of the equality between the male and the female in the most essential aspect of God's involvement with personhood. The logical consequence of this fact is that believers need to treat each other as equals, especially in marriage as the place where the agreement of the covenant glitters as a sign of God's grace. The covenant emblematises the equality of God's people within the household of grace and obliges the faithful to manifest this equality in the fulfilment of the commands of the covenant in marital life.

God also sets up a sign of the covenant. In the Old Testament dispensation, the practice of circumcision served as an outward sign of the covenant (Gn 17:10–12). In the New Testament, the sacrament of baptism became the sign denoting God's promises to parents and their children (Ac 2:39). When people turned to the faith, they were baptised together with their children as a sign of their new relationship with God (Ac 16:33). This sign signifies the incorporation of people into the covenant, which creates a new community. This new community bridges all social barriers, such as race, gender, ethnicity and class (Bosch 1991:172). People become 'one in Christ' and their status should then be understood in terms of their baptism and not in terms of their birth (Breytenbach 1986:21). Baptism as the sign of the covenant also indicates the equality of husband and wife.

Our reconciliation in Christ introduces us to the new covenant of equality that includes the intrinsic equality of men and women, which should manifest in the marital relationship. The concept of redemption teaches the restoration of fallen humankind and thus the restoration of the ability to do the will of God and live as new people in obedience to God's rule. Christ reconciled people with God and with one another. This reconciliation becomes, according to Galatians 3:28, the foundation of all social relationships, such as marital relationships, family relationships and labour relationships. The household codes must be understood within the context of redemption and reconciliation and serve as mere pastoral guidelines in a society that is still in the grip of social inequalities because of sin (Eph 5:21–33; Cl 3:18–19; 1 Pt 3:1–7). They do not present the principles on how relationships should function in all times and situations.

As a covenantal relationship, marriage can be described as a marvellous relationship that ought to be treated as such in Christian moral agency. Part of this marvellous relationship is sexuality. The ethics of sexuality is currently a prominent debate in anthropology and theology because of the sexual revolution of the past decades and the projection of free sex and gay sex as normal and morally acceptable conduct. An increasing number of countries are legalising same-sex marriages and civil unions. Churches are involved in fiery debates about the acceptance of same-sex marriages and allowing

persons in these relationships to serve in ecclesiastical offices. The topic of sexual identity is addressed in the section 'Sanctified sexuality', in Chapter 6, where the focus is rather on the covenantal character of marriage and family and the implications of the covenant for this creational relationship.

■ An inspirational relationship

A pneumatological perspective is also crucial to our understanding of the relationship between husband of wife as equals with mutual obligations and gifts. For the fulfilment of their calling as stewards under the immanent reign of God, husbands and wives are bestowed with the gifts of the Holy Spirit, irrespective of gender. Male and female believers are indiscriminately blessed with the gifts of the message of wisdom, the message of knowledge, the gift of faith, healing, miraculous powers, prophecy (Ac 21:9), distinguishing between spirits, speaking in different tongues and the interpretation of tongues (1 Cr 12:8–11). Other gifts include the gifts of serving, teaching (admonishing), encouraging, contributing to the needs of others, leadership and showing mercy (Rm 12:6–8; see also 1 Cr 13:2, 14:6; Cl 1:28). Particularly interesting is the fact that female persons are also bestowed with the gifts of teaching, prophecy and leadership – gifts of particular interest to the ministry of the Word (Merkel 1999:402). These gifts are also given to wives, without any form of discrimination or exclusion. All persons who receive these gifts are encouraged to use them to edify the community and to promote each other's spiritual growth. Husband and wife ought to inspire each other with their mutual gifts of the Spirit to enrich their marital relationship. The gifts of the Spirit serve as another clear indication of the equality of husbands and wives and their ability and vocation to mutually strengthen their marital and family relationships.

The concepts of the creational order, the covenant, the reign of Christ, redemption, reconciliation and the gifts of the Spirit indicate that the relationship between husband and wife in biblical terms is a relationship between equals before God and should also be regarded as such in social life. Although patriarchalism and androcentrism are described in biblical narratives, they cannot be regarded as biblical instructions for marital life because such a view would contradict the core principles of marriage as expressed in the above-mentioned biblical–theological concepts.

For this reason, I am of the opinion that the biblical idea of marriage as a covenant, considered from the point of view of a congruent biblical theology, is still a powerful and a solid foundation for Christian marriages in a time when a new ethic of marriage is needed because of the postmodern, post-secular and post-ecclesiastical paradigms. The idea of marriage as covenant not only denotes the deep spiritual character of the marital relationship, but this idea and everything it entails provides the liberty for husband and wife to realise their relationship according to their own wishes and circumstances as equals and gifted servants

of God. This concept, when theologically expounded, runs against patriarchalism and androcentrism, and enriches marital relationships as permanent relationships of mutual trust, stewardship and love on an equal basis. Neither husband nor wife is superior or inferior; they are equal partners in an inspiring relationship of mutual trust, fidelity and permanence. The latter needs more reflection.

■ A committed relationship

The marital relationship ought to be a free choice between a man and a woman before God. This choice is driven by mutual love, trust and respect, and not by external factors such as arranged marriages or social pressures. The intention of marriage as a covenant before the Lord is aimed at moving into an enduring and permanent relationship that is stable and that can offer a sheltered place for the extension of the family. The spouses are dedicated to fidelity and committed to each other. They need to constantly endeavour to fulfil their ideals and make their choices with the prerequisite of a permanent relationship in mind. This permanent relationship is the only sphere of sexuality. The topic of sexuality is addressed in Chapter 6 that deals with the gift of life as a dedicated life.

Different Christian communities have clothed the essentials of the covenantal marriage into different patterns of marriage. Witte (1997:2–12) provides a thorough and interesting survey on how Christian traditions have formalised the biblical teachings on marriage as a covenantal relationship. Roman Catholicism administers marriage as a sacrament. Reformed traditions require that marital vows have to be taken in the presence of witnesses and, although not as a sacrament, must be solemnised before the congregation of believers in a local church. Marriage is also regarded as a legal contract that ought to be regarded as such by the civil authorities. In modern society, some couples desire to stay true to the essentials of marriage as a covenant but see their decision and their vows as a private matter between them and God. They do not consider their decision as a matter for witnesses, the congregation of believers or the civil authorities. To my mind such a privatisation of the marital relationship is not immoral, but it can run the risk of missing the spiritually enriching influence of their fellow persons. However, cohabitation without a pledge of commitment to a life-long partnership can be questioned from a moral point of view. Moreover, the lack of a pertinent pledge of commitment to permanence in the relationship inhibits mutual trust, breeds constant suspicion and impedes the children's experience of a secure home. The pledge of life-long commitment is essential for a covenantal marital relationship.

Commitment within the ambit of equality, mutuality and God's indiscriminate bestowment of the gifts of the Spirit to husband and wife, creates pure and fertile ground for spiritual growth in the marriage and family. A committed husband will make room and create an atmosphere where his wife can use her gifts and talents and can blossom as a complete

person without the burden of patriarchal restraints or social restrictions on her freedom and equality. She must be given the opportunity to exercise her freedom to use her gifts and talents in the fields of business, education, politics and all other social spheres without the inhibition of old fashioned religious and cultural role identities. On the same foundation of mutuality, a committed wife as an equal person will help her husband to become a complete person in his field of interest and expertise. In a mutually committed relationship where husband and wife respect each other's personalities, expectations and gifts, the couple can plan their roles in the marital relationship according to time and place. The traditional idea of 'housewife' and 'wage earner' inhibits the flourishing personhood of both the husband and the wife.

■ An educating relationship

Marriage as a covenantal relationship of two equal and committed persons as husband and wife is the ideal sphere for planning a family and raising children according to the Christian baptismal vows. In a thorough study of the reformed views on the sacrament of baptism, Leith (1977:5, 9) indicates that influential reformed scholars were not like-minded about the foundation, meaning and implications of infant baptism as a sacrament for Christian life. Over the years, the topic has evoked various discussions, from being seen as a sign and a seal of the covenant and the promises attached to it, to the view of this sacrament as a presentation, a sign, the copy, the symbol of the believer's redemption (Barth 1965:212). This chapter does not enter into the debate about the differences with respect to infant baptism because the outcome of the debate would not make a difference to the way in which the sacrament of baptism is used in this study, namely as a sign and a vow.

I argue that as a sign, the administration of the sacrament of baptism visibly depicts the truth of the gospel, including amongst other things the blessings that come to those who exercise saving faith in the preached Word. God extends these promises to people's children (Ac 2:39). When reformed theology speaks of baptism in a covenantal sense, the sacrament is viewed in the context of the unity of the covenant of grace in the congruent biblical theology. As a seal, it confirms that saving grace is found only in Christ. Therefore, the meaning of infant baptism is not founded on the teachings of the New Testament alone; it is also inferred from the way in which baptism fulfils the Old Testament patterns of faith. Infant baptism administers the New Testament dispensation of the covenant of grace in ways that are analogous to the administration of the Old Testament dispensation of that same covenant (see Pratt 2005). Children are not incomplete persons but have to grow within the sphere of the covenant to blossom under the caring commitment of the parents in a covenantal marital relationship.

The relationship between infant baptism and Christian life is founded in the parents' vow to raise the child 'in the Lord'. After taking this vow the parents ought to be committed to the moral and spiritual upbringing of their children. Responsible parenthood entails that both the father and mother are mutually involved in loving, nurturing and teaching their children. Scripture provides many principles pertaining to childrearing.

Although not all the material can be viewed as prescriptive and the Bible cannot be used as a scientific text for the spiritual, psychological and academic education of children, it clearly delineates the values of the Christian life that parents could aim for in the instruction of their children. Köstenberger and Jones (2004:104) comment that Christian parents are obliged to teach their children to love God and to love their fellow persons. This foundational instruction implies many life skills, which are, amongst others, brilliantly exposed in the wisdom literature. Children should be taught, inter alia, the attributes of industriousness and diligence (Pv 6:6–11); justice and kindness (Pv 11:1, 17); generosity (Pv 11:24); self-control (Pv 14:17); righteousness, truthfulness and honesty Pv 12); gentleness and integrity of character (Pv 15); graciousness (Pv 16:13); vigorous pursuit of what is good and right (Pv 20:29); and other attributes.

In an effort to be true to their covenantal vow during the sacrament of baptism, parents in the reformed tradition formed day schools for their children's academic training according to the ethos of the covenant. Differences in the establishment and control of these schools have developed over the history of the reformed tradition. In the Dutch Kuyperian tradition, Christian schools were envisioned as extensions of the Church as an organism. They were established as separate entities, sovereign in own sphere. The Dutch Reformed philosophy of the *idea of law* formalised these entities as social institutions. Many independent Christian primary and secondary schools as well as Christian universities emerged where this tradition took root in the Netherlands, the United States, South Africa and in other Dutch colonies. These institutions were thought of as 'assistants' to the parents in their endeavour to fulfil their baptismal vow. In other reformed traditions, people began to see the school not so much as an extension of the influence of the church, but rather as an extension of the home where covenant life begins and grows. Parents themselves established schools to work together on their divine covenantal calling to teach their children. This association of parents would hire teachers and managers and control the admission of children to the school. The covenant community could pool together its efforts and resources to give children a solid biblical and academically rigorous education.

Both these approaches rest on the idea that the covenant determines that children have to be educated as Christians on the way to maturity as persons. The principle of parental control over children's education remain a highly valued determinant in Christian education. The rise of the state-

controlled 'neutral' public school challenged Christian education. Neutrality is a myth and public schools usually function within the confines of the ruling political ideology. The state-inspired Christian-National education during Apartheid was a good example of education motivated by an ideology. Under a thin veneer of being 'Christian', an educational policy was followed with the aim to pursue and develop racial identities and to motivate racial separation as the only solution for the country's social ills. With the emergence of the liberal democratic dispensation, a new educational policy was implemented under the banner of active neutrality. But, as said earlier, neutrality is a myth. Learners who attend public schools in South Africa today face secular moral norms about sexuality, abortion, evolutionism and culture. It is a challenge for Christian parents to maintain Christian values in the face of this wave of secularism in public educational institutions. This so-called neutrality is driven by the current political argument of the rulers that the state and other state institutions are not moral agents and morality has to be entrusted to religious institutions and private civil societies. The postmodern worldview today correctly claims that moral neutrality is not possible. Every person approaches reality and everything it entails from a certain paradigm. State institutions are always moral agents, whether politicians desire it or not. They further some kind of morality. In the case of contemporary South Africa, and in most Western liberal democratic societies, this morality springs from secular humanism.

The ideal of Christian education as a logical outflow of the covenantal baptismal vow, which was held in high esteem in the reformed tradition, could still be the ideal of parents in a committed marital relationship. Christian parents can establish Christian schools under their control with high quality academic education within the parameters of a Christian worldview and morality. Churches and like-minded social societies are duty-bound to assist these endeavours. South Africa has in recent times seen a surge in private Christian educational institutions. Yet, many concerned Christians do not have the financial means to fulfil the ideal of parent-controlled education of their children. Therefore, it remains an important duty of all Christian moral agents to be actively involved in policymaking and the planning and execution of public education. The South African Constitution recognises the rights of cultural and religious groups to observe their culture and religion in the public sphere. As a result of this provision, parental governing bodies can take part in the governance of public schools. In many instances, these bodies have done excellent and powerful work. Christian parents ought to be willing to sacrifice time and energy to avail themselves to these bodies. They should not give in to the temptation to hand over their children to secular-humanist public schools and hope for the best.

Lastly, the quest for Christian education today reaffirms the calling of Christians to pursue a career in education. Christianity over the centuries

was not only furthered by pastors and missionaries, but also by Christian educators at schools and universities. In our highly structured, technocratic and information-driven modern society, the role of the Christian teacher, researcher and academic is of immense importance. Committed Christian parents cannot raise their children as covenantal persons without the assistance and contribution of committed Christian educators. The calling of Christians to the field of education is sounding loud and clear in the secularising societies of this day and age.

The second concentric circle in the relational life of the person is the circle of people who have embraced the gift of reconciliation in faith and who have become a reconciled new community with God and each other. This new community is the church, and it adds a new dimension to the relational life of the person. This relationship and its effect on flourishing personhood will be examined in the section 'Church'.

■ Church

The doctrine of the church is one of the most discussed and prominent topics in the history of Christian dogmatics. Different periods in the history of the church have resulted in varying models or paradigms of the church according to the challenges of the times. Dulles (1987) said that:

> At various times in the history of the Church it has seemed possible to construct a whole theology, or at least a total ecclesiology, on the foundation of a single model. Such a dominant model is a paradigm. (p. 29)

Models for churches emerged because of the rich variety of images and metaphors used in Scripture to describe the church. Even in a smaller tradition such as the reformed tradition, ecclesiology has been a vibrant theological subject since the work of Calvin. Debates in church governance, church polity, missiology and practical theology boil down to the one question: What is the church? Views on the church determine many other discourses in theology, philosophy, and sociology. In the Dutch Reformed tradition of the early 20th century, ecclesiology was dominated by the Kuyperian neo-Calvinist model of church as visible (institute) and invisible (universal communion of believers), as well as an organism and institute (Kuyper 1909a:205, 1909b:204). With these models, Kuyper and his followers attempted to design a Christian civil order. Another influential ecclesiology was later introduced by Van Ruler (1954) with his idea that the church ought to be an apostolate church in service of the kingdom of God in the world. Some even spoke of a theology of the apostolate. Because of the ecumenical theologians, with Kraemer and Hoekendijk in the frontline, this theology became the motivating force in the missiology of the World Council of Churches in the fifties of the previous century. Since the seventies of the previous century, public theologies have used various terminologies to define the church in terms of its role as an agent

of social transformation. Other ecclesiologies also emerged from the pentecostal and charismatic traditions.

◼ A unique community

In the time of Apartheid in South Africa, the idea of the church as an alternative society was promoted by the missiologist Bosch 1991:172). He urged churches in the time of the struggle against Apartheid to be examples of communities of racial harmony and of effective racial integration and to exert an influence in society against Apartheid. However, he did not view this model as the only way for the church to exist, but as the most important one in the segregated society at that time. Another prominent proponent of the idea of the church as an alternative community is Moltmann (1990:122), who speaks about the church as a *kontrastgemeinschaft* and an *Exodusgemeinde.* According to these views, the church must reflect a new way of life to the world so that something of the hope of the eschatology can become visible. The South African theologian Van Wyk (2015:347) fostered the same idea with his concept of the church as an 'exemplary community' that needs to function as an example of the morality of the renewed world as God would like the world to be. The church is (and ought to be) a community where love, hope, liberation and reconciliation are received, shared and proclaimed in an exceptional way. All these exponents accentuated the uniqueness of the church as a community of believers in Christ.

In response to the social activism in churches that emerged from the various constituents of public theologies over the last five decades and the social activism of the World Council of Churches, Hauerwas (2000:313) and Van de Beek (2012:13) make other valuable and influential contributions with their proposals to define the calling of the church as solely being a foretaste of the eschatological future in the present world. They correspond with part of Moltmann's ecclesiology but contrasting Moltmann, they are cautious to add to the church a social commitment and transformative agency. Hauerwas (1981, 1983) defines the church as a community of character and a peaceable kingdom. He maintains that the main task of the church is to *be* a social ethic with an alternative story and not to '*have* a social ethic'. In his view, the church can act as a moral community and ought to be an example of a peaceable society. The prime task of the church is to follow Jesus' way of life and teaching; in this way showing the world that it is 'world'. God becomes visible through the holiness of the church; the church must leave it to God to change the world. The heart of the church is worship and to be a peaceable community.

In the same vein, Van de Beek (2012:13) proclaims that the church is unique and a new community that no longer belongs to people, but to Christ. Believers are strangers and pilgrims in the world who no longer belong to the reality of this world but to the eschatological reality of Christ, and this reality is strange to the ways of the world. In this respect, he refers to the contributions of

church fathers who highlighted the deep divide between the church and the world. The true existence of believers is in the eternal life. By baptism, believers are incorporated into the church and their old life of evil is no longer a part of them. Within the framework of the Apostolicum, Van de Beek discusses the holiness, catholicity, apostolicity and calling of the church. Little can be seen of these attributes in the life of the church through the centuries, but nevertheless these attributes constitute the uniqueness of the church. This uniqueness of the church must be considered in any assessment of the existence and role of the church in the world. Believers are pilgrims and strangers in the world. The church is a pilgrim church that can exert influence by honouring and expressing the attributes of holiness and Christian identity.

In Van de Beek's opinion, the uniqueness of the church determines the role of the church. The unique character of the church as a pilgrim in a hostile world should never be compromised by politics or ideologies. In this respect, Van de Beek warns against various proposed models of social action by the church. Firstly, he deals with the idea of an apostolate theology introduced by Barth and expanded by Van Ruler and Berkhof. In this model, the concept of the Kingdom of God is the foundation for the calling of the church to seek justice and peace in the world. The church must realise the immanent reign of God in a broken world and a Christian culture and Christian social spheres need to be cultivated. This view, says Van de Beek, runs against the biblical idea of the church as a stranger and a pilgrim pointing to the real world that lies ahead. Having any social influence means being a holy church where the Christian persons live in peace and harmony, raise their children accordingly in their own way, are compassionate towards each other and maintain their own high moral standards. Secondly, he criticises public theologies because these theologies add to the church an ulterior motive that contradicts the character of the church as a stranger and pilgrim in the world (Van de Beek 2006:7). The church ought to be a holy congregation without an ulterior motive such as being an agent of social transformation, political change or a force in socio-economic planning.

This study does not and need not engage in the pulsing debates within the recent reformed tradition about ecclesiology and especially the social calling of the church. Many thought-provoking views have been presented by reformed theologians over the past few decades and these ideas can be appreciated and need to be discussed thoroughly as part of the current ecclesiological discourse. My intention is to approach ecclesiology from the perspective of the Apostolicum, where believers in the triune God confess that they believe in the Holy Catholic (universal) Church and the Communion of Saints as an essential part of the sanctifying work of the third person of the trinity – the Holy Spirit. The holiness and universality of the past, present and future church are the foundational attributes of the church. These have been discussed and explained thoroughly in reformed ecclesiology. I tend to align myself to some extent with the renewed emphasis of Van de Beek on the

church as an example of holiness. My interest is in the second part of the Apostolic Creed about the church as a communion of believers in Christ because I view this expression as a rich and powerful explanation of the relational character of the church as a covenantal body of believers and as another expression of the relational life of the person. Living in a relationship with fellow persons within the reconciled communion of the body of believers is an immense blessing that flows from the death and resurrection of the liberating God. The church is therefore a unique community of persons that lives according to the moral standards of the immanent reign of God. It has a unique character and calling, and this uniqueness may not be relinquished with the intent to serve other lords. The rest of this section focuses on this unique relationship and its relevance.

■ A local community

The immanent reign of God by Word and Spirit calls people to a new reconciled relationship with God and with fellow persons. Those who listen to this call, answer with faith and accept reconciliation (1 Cor 5:20) become a new community. This community overarches all differences that may exist in humankind. Believers become one in Christ and the people of his present Kingdom on earth. The reconciliation between persons and God in Christ and between persons themselves is a glimpse of the eschatological future. But this new community is not a universal spiritual entity only. It manifests in local churches – a church at a specific place at a certain time. In his study about the church in the New Testament, Snyman (1977:25) concludes that the concept ecclesia was mainly used to describe the visible, real community of believers at a certain locality, such as Jerusalem, Antioch and Ephesus. In his influential and controversial (in Roman Catholic circles) book on the church, the Roman Catholic theologian Hans Küng (1992) also emphasises the prominence the New Testament gives to the church as a local visible community of believers who assembles to worship the Lord and to see to each other's needs. The local congregation is not perceived as a subordinated branch of a larger entity but as a unique community in its abundance and vitality. It is not viewed as an incomplete church either, for it bears all the attributes of the universal church confessed in the Apostolic Creed. Every local congregation, even the smallest where two or three assembles in the name of Christ, is the reconciled people of God, the body of Christ and the building of the Holy Spirit. The local church as a unique lively community belongs to God and has to reflect its God-given character of holiness. It has to pursue its vocation as a worshipping, loving, caring and peaceable community that can give the world a glimpse of what God's kingdom is about and how persons could relate to each other. In this respect, I appreciate the ideas of Hauerwas and Van de Beek. But, having said that, it is also important to point out that the church in the New Testament

received the Great Commission from the risen Christ to be his witnesses. He instructed his followers (Mt 28):

> Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. (vv. 18–19)

And (Ac 1):

> But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (v. 8)

Apart from being an example, the church is called to be an active testifying prophet of the immanent reign of God and what this reign entails in the world. Every local church needs to be, apart from a holy church, a witnessing community – a reconciled community carrying the message of reconciliation to all people and urging them to grasp the gift of reconciliation from God.

To my mind, speaking of the church is to speak of the local congregation and the testimony of individual Christian persons in the world. The traditional view of the church as an international council, or synod, or institute with a figurehead, or an ecumenical body with a programme found in virtually all the ecclesiological traditions, is not part of my argument, because I am convinced that these structures deviated fundamentally from what the church is meant to be in the New Testament. This deviation is largely responsible for the deformation of the church today and the demise of the vitality of Christian faith at the grassroots level of society. The big and powerful structures tarnished the light and pulsating life of the local congregations because accomplishment in the church is now being measured by the secular values of quantity above quality. 'The more the better' and 'the bigger the most prestigious' have become the main ideals in church ministry. As a result, seeking persons tend to view the church as a faraway institute with symbols, rites and proclamations without radiating the energy of the plain gospel and vibrant Christian life in their own midst.

Therefore, drawing on some of the perspectives of Van de Beek and Hauerwas, and to a certain extent on Moltmann's idea of the hope-giving exodus church, I elaborate on the abundant spiritual and real-life wealth of the relational character of the church (local congregation) and the meaning of this relationship for Christian persons in their challenging social environments. This discussion divides into the headings of the church as a therapeutic community and the church as a prophetic community.

■ A therapeutic community

Therapy implies healing wounds and dislocations in the body of a living creature. Just as a body can be injured or become dysfunctional, the local

congregation of believers can become dysfunctional and eventually distorted. Injuries in the church are usually the result of a breach of the relational character of the church. When the reconciled community of the saints is disturbed, the church bleeds. When the church bleeds, the body of Christ bleeds. The metaphors used in the New Testament to describe the church have all the inherent meaning of a new relationship between believers. All the trinitarian metaphors of the church, namely people of God, body of Christ and building of the Spirit denotes a unity of the triune God and his renewed persons in a new exceptional relational entity with abundant attributes, far-reaching and wide-ranging implications. The disciples identified themselves as the *People of God* over and against other groups, such as the Essenes and Pharisees (Küng 1992:107). Other New Testament expressions illuminates this metaphor, such as 'Israel' (Rm 9:6); 'people' (Tt 2:14); 'priesthood' (1 Pt 2:5,9); 'temple' (1 Cor 3:16); 'building' (1 Cor 3:9) and 'body' (Col 1:18) (see Theron 1978:42). Persons are 'elected' (Eph 1:4) (see Stott 1992:220; Tillich 1967:142; Versteeg 1985:9) or 'called' (Rm 1:6,7; 1 Cor 1:2; Jd 1:1; Rv 17;14) (see Küng 1992:82) to this special relationship. They are 'believers' (Eph 1:1) (see Bultmann 1968:203) and they are 'loved by God' (Rm 1:7; Eph 5:1; 1 Tm 6:2; Jd 1:20). This metaphor emphasises elected, called and believing persons as the exclusive property of God. The congregation of believers belongs to God and to no one else.

The Christological metaphor *Body of Christ* is a very rich expression of the unity of Christ as the 'head' of the body with the congregation as the body and the individual believers as the 'limbs' of the body (1 Cor 6:12–20, 10:14–22, 12:4–8 and several instances in Ephesians and Colossians). Romans 12:5 reads: 'so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others'. This metaphor, with certain variations, depicts the relationship between Christ and his followers with the image of a human body, which functions overall under the life-giving function of the head (see Schweizer 1971:1024). The word used in Corinthians 1:18 for 'head' is *kephalē*, which is translated as the head of a human body. Christ is the head, not in the sense of the head of an organisation or school, but of his body, which is the congregation. The image head–body denotes the close relationship between Christ and the believer. Without the head there can be no life in the body and the limbs can perform no functions. The relationship between the limbs is also through the head of the living body. The body metaphor expresses the deep-seated unity of the congregation, which is on the one hand mystical because emanating from the head, all and everyone in the body is filled by the Spirit.

However, the congregation is not only a mystical body but a unified gathering that receives the instruction to realise this unity in true communion. In many instances in the New Testament, the members of the church are called upon to practise visible communion to build the community up in true holiness

and joy. The community in Christ must grow in fullness of the Spirit. This should be done by loving (He 13:1), doing good (Mk 10:44; Gl 6:10), admonishing, encouraging and supporting each other (1 Th 5:14; 1 Tm 4:13; 2 Tm 4:2). They are encouraged to confess their sins to their fellow believers, to pray for each other (Jn 5:16) and to (Rm 12):

> Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. (vv. 13–18)

Believers must be completely humble and gentle, be patient and bearing with one another in love (Eph 4:2). They must be forgiving. These directives indicate the importance of being not only a mystical body, but a living community in an inspiring and energetic relationship.

Other metaphors describing the relationship Christ–congregation are 'bride of Christ' and 'vine and branches' and 'building of the spirit'. The metaphor of the church as the 'bride of Christ' (Rv 18:23, 21:2, 9, 22:17) is used to portray the multifaceted relational character of the church. This metaphor denotes the faithfulness of the bridegroom, his love for the bride (Eph 5:25, 26) and the exclusiveness of this relationship. In John 15, Jesus explains the vitality of this relationship by using the metaphor of the 'vine and the branch':

> I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit, he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. (vv. 1–5)

The branch must be implanted into the vine to bear fruit. Without the life-giving nourishment of the vine, there can be no life in the branch and no fruit from the branch. Without Christ the church will be without nutrition and thus without vitality, piety, dedication and godliness (Hendriksen 1973:300).

Ephesians 2 expands on the pneumatological metaphor 'building of the Spirit' with the words:

> Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit. (vv. 19–22)

Although the Spirit of God is omnipresent and keeps God's world intact, the congregation is described as the dwelling where the Spirit of God resides.

The spirit of God does not reside in a structure and is not encapsulated in a demarcated 'holy' space or an alleged 'sanctified' abode, but in persons – in congregations of believers and in individuals.

Amongst other things, the presence of the Spirit also determines the holiness of the church. The congregation is holy because God is holy, and every believer must therefore strive to be holy (1 Pt 1:15–16 with reference to Lv 19). Holiness means to have an own identity in the world. The people of God in the Old Testament were called to be a unique people, different from the nations around them. God gave them their own codes of culture and lifestyle. They had to refrain from worshipping the gods of the nations around them and not desire their ways of living. They received the Decalogue as the foundation of their public life and many ceremonial and cultic laws to manifest their holiness as the unique people of God. Although Christ fulfilled the ceremonial laws and gave a new meaning to the Decalogue, the unique character of his followers as the new people of God remains intact. They have a new King, a driving Spirit, they are part of a new reality under the immanent reign of God, they have a new way of living according to the Great Commandment, and they have new hope, ideals, relationships, future and ethics. They are in the world, but not from the world, and they are gifted and equipped to be a unique community amongst the nations. They do not become another reality separate from the world, but a new reality in the world. They are holy (other worldliness) and are obliged to embody this holiness (this-worldliness). Seen from the perspective of the pneumatological metaphor of the congregation as a dwelling place of the Spirit and the idea of the church as a social ethic, the words of Hauerwas (1983:99) make sense. The same can be said of the idea of the church as a contrasting society (Moltmann 1990:122), as an alternative community (Bosch 1991:172) and as an exemplary community (Van Wyk 2015:347). The church is obliged to show to the world what holiness is. However, there is more to the church than being an example. The spirit-filled congregation is also a moral agent, a prophet and an envoy in the world.

As a loving, caring and compassionate community of believers – equipped and gifted by the Holy Spirit within the bond of the deep and renewed relationship in Christ – the congregation needs to act as a therapeutic, compassionate community where persons can be healed from the ills that are still part of this evil-infested society. Although being renewed in Christ and gifted by the Spirit, Christian persons can still be victims of the destructive powers of this age. They can lose hope in the turmoil of wars and violence. They can become lonely in the modern society driven by individualism and selfishness, their marriages and families can be injured by the forces of division and anger, they can suffer depression, anxiety and distress. They can be poor and dispossessed. They are prone to vulnerability and sickness. Although the church is a new community in the harsh world, the divisions, anger, brutal conduct of people, alienation and loneliness of the world can invade the

community of believers and leave the scars of the 'other law' that the apostle Paul laments in Romans 7:

> So, I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of evil at work within me. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in my sinful nature a slave to the law of sin. (vv. 20–23)

The church has been delivered by Christ, but it is still struggling with the spiritual wars of this age. It is underway to the completely restored Kingdom, but still struggling with the forces of this age.

Christian persons need constant therapy to heal the wounds the forces of evil inflict on the new creation. This therapy may well be available in the local congregation. In the congregation of love and compassion, the distressed and the vulnerable might find solace. Christian persons are called to serve each other with their distinctive gifts of the Spirit. They must comfort the sick, feed the hungry, heal the broken marriages and families, be companions for the lonely and nurture the Christian hope and joy. They must be a haven for the poor and the needy, because fighting for the poor is the blessing of which Jesus speaks in his Sermon on the Plain in Luke 6:20. The blessing of the poor is extensively discussed in the chapter dealing with the life of the person as a blessed life.

The administration of the sacraments of baptism and holy communion aims to strengthen the faith of the believers by reminding them of their new relationship in Christ. But the sacraments are more than symbols. They are therapeutic actions. During the baptism, God claims the child of Christian parents or the baptised persons who have accepted Christ in faith and obedience as his property. God includes them in the new covenant as part of the church and heir of all the blessings of Christ. They become part of the caring community and they share in the constant therapeutic impulses of the enriching body and vine. Also therapeutic is the sharing of the bread and the wine. As bread and wine feed the human body, the body and blood of Christ feed the person to be holy and to stand firm amidst the troubles of human life. Receiving the cup and the bread means receiving the peace and the comfort of belonging to Christ and receiving out of the hand of a fellow believer the sense of belonging to a new unique caring community. Handing over the cup and the bread to someone else is to promise care and compassion and love. In the sacraments, the living, vibrant and pulsating community share what they receive. They receive the blessings of the crucified and resurrected Christ, the life-enriching gifts of his reign as their therapy for a joyous, meaningful and peaceful life, and they share the peace and joy with their fellow believers for their journey in life. The administration of the sacraments reveals the

therapeutic quality of the congregation as a relationship of persons that bridges all forms of social divides where men and women, old and young, rich and poor, black and white, straight and gay become one compassionate, caring community of struggling sinners with the mutual promise and strive to be holy. Togetherness on the journey gives hope and comfort.

In this time and age where ecclesiologists and Christian sociologists express grief about the demise of the Christian church, the sleepwalking of formalised church structures, emptying church buildings, cold Christian religion and the dawn of the post-Christian age in the Western world, the therapeutic value of the local congregation must be revisited and restored. This restoration will not come from the top down, but from the inspired and dedicated Christians themselves. Reformation of the contemporary church as a therapeutic community must start in the local church with visionary pastors and dedicated Christians. This is where the vitality of the church could be nurtured. Christian persons in the local congregation and in a deeply rooted relationship with Christ and each other, sharing the bread and wine in holy communion, ought to renovate the local church to a healing therapeutic community in this inhospitable world.

The therapeutic quality of the church came to the fore during the COVID-19 lockdown where people were forced to isolate themselves to curb the spread of the virus. Christians could not share their communion in worship services and realise anew the spiritual wealth and compassion that springs from their being together. Many congregations reached out to ill and dying patients and become havens for the bereaved. The pandemic brought a new appreciation for the therapeutic value of living in a community with others.

To my mind, this is what the New Testament intended the church to be. Unfortunately, Christians have over the years distorted this precious gift of God into power-hungry mega-structures with rulers and leaders, with cathedrals and wealth, and with fixed and rigid ceremonies. They made the church a highly complicated institution. Thus, the inspiring, dedicated, caring, healing and vibrant church of the New Testament became the zombie-church of the third millennium.

Besides a vibrant and therapeutic community, the church is also a prophetic community. This characteristic of the church is considered in the section 'A prophetic community'.

◼ A prophetic community

The church remains first and foremost a local community of Christian persons that must function as a living, healing and therapeutic community. But Christ also called the community to be a prophetic community who bears witness to all humanity of the reality of God's renewal of creation, the hope he bequeaths

on society and what true personhood entails. The primary source of this testimony is the ministry of the written Word of God in the local congregation. The church lives by preaching, as Bright (1980:164) states eloquently in his highly acclaimed study of the meaning of the Kingdom for the church in the world. Furthermore, the preaching of the Word in the local congregation is the voice of the church in the world. Without preaching, the church would be irrelevant. That is what we as Christians live by and live for, because the greatest contribution we can make to humanity is to testify about the immanent reign of God and its transformative meaning for the flourishing life of the individual person and society. The effects of Christ's reign filter through into the harsh realities of the various predicaments of persons in two waves – the preaching of the pastor in the local church and the testimony of this preaching by the congregants as the envoys of the reigning Christ to all other persons.

Preaching commences with the pastor in the local congregation and the message is then taken further into society by the congregants in their testimony in the societies in which they find themselves. They are devoted to the ethic of the immanent reign of God that ought to be realised in the world to assist persons in the pursuit of flourishing personhood. The life of the person as a dedicated life is examined in Chapter 6. At this stage, I propose some ideas about preaching as an indispensable part of the relational life in the covenantal community as a prophetic community.

□ The pastor

Who and what is the modern Christian pastor? Numerous studies deal with this question from various angles of approach in response to the fact that many pastors from all ecclesiological traditions are struggling with an identity crisis. In the execution of their vocation, they confront powerful forces. Pastors tend to fall into an identity crisis because of secularism, the demise of churches, the decreased influence of the Christian faith in public spaces, and the constant and growing criticism of the gospel. They develop doubts about the validity and the significance of their contributions. Some even question or reject their faith in God. In their empirical research about pastors who have lost their faith, Dennett and LaScola (2010:122ff.) describe this trend across a broad range of ecclesiastical traditions in the United States, from 'conservative' to 'liberal', and the destructive and painful effects of this identity crisis on the pastors and their congregations. Some experience retirement from their occupation as a liberation and others admit that they keep their disbelief secret and carry on with their ministry to reach the good end of fixing relationships and serve the common good without resorting to issues of faith. Others even leave the ministry and turn to agnosticism or atheism. Pastors in our time can easily fall into and experience an identity crisis when they define their identity according

to the expectations of people (see D. Fischer 1996:20). It is fair to conclude that the results of the study in the United States is also applicable to other Western societies. It is indeed true of mainline churches in South Africa. A study by Mouton and Smit (2009:263) on the translation of Jesus in the church in South Africa reveals that many spiritualities have emerged in modern South Africa as a result of new forms of ministry.

Another more frequent reaction to the identity crisis of pastors in the African context is to seek other social identities. Some resort to popularist identities with the aim to regain lost territory for the church in a secularising society. This is the reason why the world has seen the rise of all kinds of new ministries and gospels. Africa especially is prone to these kinds of new gospels. In a recent empirical study done by Biwul (2018) about the paradigm shift in Nigeria regarding Christian ministry, he concludes that:

> [*T*]oday there are some who claim to be pastors who understand the pastoral function from an African socio-cultural and traditional religious point of view without recourse to the biblical tradition. Their orientation and practice of ministry is guided by that worldview and those beliefs. The Bible is used only as a tool to Christianize their activities and is often perceived as possessing magical power to confront the many ills of African society. (p. 93)

In poor communities in Africa it often happens that ostentatious pastors confuse their congregants with a 'prosperity gospel' that promises an affluent life if they turn to Christ and donate their meagre earnings to the 'church'. Other pastors in these environments perform healings and extortion of demons or evil spirits from ill and susceptible people.

Even amongst affluent societies in Africa, so-called televangelists bombard people with judgemental and fundamentalist slogans to warn them to run to God before it is too late. With emotional manipulation, strict fundamentalist and literalist interpretations of Scripture, command ethics and authoritarian self-claimed agency, they engineer the lives of especially vulnerable people who come from personal crises. These excesses are not what the congregation should be. Such behaviour devalues the church and deprives preaching of its essence, real power and richness.

In the Christian tradition, the ministry of the Word determines the identity of the pastor. In all ecclesiastical traditions, pastors' preaching was held in high regard, as well as their role to guide Christians in a pastoral way to find solace in faith and to pursue a life of holiness. The influence of the current secularising society has distorted this foundational role of the pastor and churches react by experimenting on all kinds of new ministries in efforts to stay relevant and to the point. New identities for pastors emerged and this shifted their focus from being preachers to pastoral counselling from the perspective of the Human Sciences. The role of interdisciplinary research to assist the pastor is important and may well be promoted, but this assistance

must not redirect the pastor's role away from being a preacher of the Scripture in the first instance. Pastors must refrain from becoming mere pastoral psychologists, or public motivation speakers, or promotors of all kinds of mystical and spiritual wisdoms. They are not sociologists with socio-political advice or pseudo-politicians or quasi-economists.

These modern trends in Christianity today reiterate once again that a pastor of the Word of God ought to be a trained theologian with a deep knowledge of congruent biblical theology and the scientific means to interpret and apply Scripture. In Africa alone, thousands of pastors work without any form of theological training. According to the study by Biwul (2018:105–108), this trend has a negative effect on the pastors, the congregations and on the transforming power of the gospel. Even in the theological training of mainline churches, there is a tendency to lower the standards of theological training and to focus more on practical ministry according to methodologies promoted by disciplines in the humanities. In this way, preaching and pastoral guidance become just another social service. Practical theology that focuses on pastoral counselling infused with psychological techniques are blooming in theological training worldwide. I do not disregard practical theology and pastoral counselling as such, but when it replaces foundational studies in theology and distances itself from the richness of the congruent biblical theology, it will eventually only contribute to the demise of the splendour of preaching and the impoverishment of the spiritual depth and potency of the testimony of Christian persons. The answer to the question of who and what the pastor is could still be: The pastor in the local church is a dedicated and visionary preacher of Scripture and a well-trained interpreter of the congruent biblical theology who can translate this theology into fresh ideas and moral codes for today's market place of ideas and values. Let us then look at preaching.

☐ Preaching

The content of preaching is and should always centre on picturing Christ for the world. When hearing preaching, people must see the living Christ and must hear what his reign is all about for the world in need. Preaching is preaching the gospel – the good news – of God's interest in his creation by his sacrifice in the suffering Jesus and his vindication in the resurrected Christ. Preaching must proclaim not only God's compassion but also his judgement on unbelief and evil. Preaching must be a powerful call to conversion, faith and obedience to the living and always present God. Preaching that pictures the living, always present, compassionate God evokes in persons living faith, hope and love, and points to the possibility of a flourishing life in the midst of so many distressing experiences. It points to the blessing of the coming Kingdom in this world of so much evil, fear and hopelessness.

In this respect, it would be prudent to reflect on the attitude of the prophetic community. In too many instances in the history of the church, the power of transformative preaching in the local congregation was side-lined by the 'top-down' dictates of ecclesiastical dictators such as popes, bishops, councils, synods, statements by ecumenical bodies and power-hungry 'spiritual leaders'. Believers were confronted by all kinds of casuistic rules and regulations that defended a fossilised Christendom without pulsating life and vision. The Protestants revolted against this kind of formalised Christianity, only to fall into the same deception of cold religion with rites and regulations. In the 20th century, many of these formalist ecclesiastical structures reflected the image of their environments rather than the reign of God. One can refer to the Reichskirche in Germany, the Orthodox Church in the USSR, the Anglican Church in the colonies and the Apartheid churches in South Africa. They mirrored their '*umwelt*' instead of the Kingdom. Harsh words, but unfortunately true in these instances. These authority-driven churches with their fossilised 'top-down' religion became part of the problem instead of part of the solution to build peaceful societies. They failed to be part of the solutions. This has resulted in protest atheism, suspicion of the Christian religion and the decline of churches in old Christian societies. Bonhoeffer's (2015a:471) warnings against this kind of hollow Christendom is indeed just as valid today as it was in his time.

My plea is for a return to powerful preaching in the local congregation. Christian persons gather around Scripture and try to conceptualise what God is saying to them and to seek answers to problems in a spirit of unpretentiousness. The local congregation has its own identity as a group of people who live in a covenantal relationship with the same ethos and vision. It is an independent body. This independence must not be sacrificed to other societal relations and duties. The congregation must not become a community with social barriers – a congregation of the affluent, or the poor, or black or white or gay or straight, nor must it become an agent for a language or a culture or political party. It must not become a slavery to ideologies such as capitalism or socialism or the idols of the time. The congregation must always remain an independent agent of the immanent reign of God, motivated by preaching from the deep well of congruent biblical theology. The congregation can maintain its independence if the pastors stick to their identity – persons of God and not persons of gold; persons of the cloth and not persons of politics; persons with vision and not persons with arrogance; persons with solutions and not persons with problem statements, and above all, persons with faith in the living God. Such pastors can shape the conscience of Christian persons to become spirited moral agents in society.

Having said that, I also plea for modesty in preaching. On the one hand, our interpretation of Scripture is always limited and provisional and we cannot offer fixed answers to all difficult problems. That is why we adhere to the very important principle of *semper reformanda* of the Reformation. In many cases

in the history of Christianity, preaching resulting from partisan theologies promoted ideas and theories that would today be regarded as outrageous, such as, for example, the validity of slavery, institutionalised racism and the subordination of women in church and social life. On the other hand, pastors cannot be adequately informed on every area of contemporary life. Trying to be conversant is the shortest route to irrelevance. We can still fall into the same snare of the self-confident inflexible preaching of the past by using the pulpit to attempt to provide clear-cut answers to the many moral questions that emerge from modern scientific research. It will be presumptuous of a pastor to lay out moral codes for genetic manipulation, nanotechnology, robotics and other modern fields of research for scientists in the local congregation without a thorough knowledge of the moral problems at issue.

Preaching should not intend to speak the last word on all moral questions and the pulpit must not be regarded as a place to fix all problems. Preaching must firstly excavate the congruent biblical theology according to the hermeneutical rules described earlier. Answers must be tested against the views of other interpreters of the past and the presents, old mistakes must be avoided, and answers must then be presented to people by means of dialogical and engaging involvement. The authoritarian pastor will prescribe final answers and regulative rules from a distant other-worldly institution, whilst the modest pastor will engage with people in a solidary-critical way to find the route to solutions. Authoritarian casuistic preaching is becoming more and more irrelevant because the modernist age of rules and regulations, of leaders and followers with a herd mentality and of the great narrative is fading away. Postmodern people respect the mindsets of others, they are suspicious of fixed concepts cast in stone, they flirt with new beliefs, they experiment with new values and they are interested in social relationships that bridge the barriers and limitations of the past. Cupitt (1999:218) contends that in the postmodern condition, truth has become relative and old forms of truths have lost their credence. In this age of relative truths, preaching has no choice but to be involved in a plausible, modest guiding capacity and to provide more options for the sceptical, the insecure and the seekers of a meaningful life. A good sermon on Sunday is the sermon that congregants can use in their own lives, but also in their interactions with other persons they encounter during the week. They must have the confidence to present the sermon as a plausible option to consider in the supermarket of passing ideas presented to the postmodern person.

The church is meant to be an enriching community where preaching of the active reign of God as announced and explained by the gospel nurture the personhood of the person. This preaching could draw on the deep wells of congruent biblical theology and the administration of faith-strengthening sacraments. The church is a wonderful gift from God, a unique relationship in a harsh world, the first visible fruit of God's reconciling action and a glimpse

into the future humankind in the complete kingdom of God. Wherever and whenever congregations of Christians emerge, people must be able to see the living Christ in this vibrant new community of believing persons. In this way, the church can guide persons to enliven flourishing personhood.

☐ The envoys

Prophetic testimony does not end with the pastor's preaching in the local congregation. A church is a relational community of persons who believe in God, live under the immanent reign of God and are filled by the spirit of God. The Holy Spirit bestows on them a variety of gifts so that they can be Christ's witnesses in the world. Christ tasks all of them to be envoys of his reign and the new reality that came with his resurrection. Pastors and envoys form living pulsating communities who receive the Word and have to let it trickle down to society with the aim to convince, shepherd, comfort, care and inspire persons in their pursuit of flourishing personhood. The envoys of powerful preaching ought to be moral agents in all spheres of society. They must introduce the ethic of the immanent reign of God as the design of flourishing personhood. Just as the preacher professes the power of the immanent reign of God and becomes deliberately involved in solidary dialogue with society, the envoys must be willing to always explain what the morality of the immanent reign of God represents. Just like the modest pastor, the envoys have to engage in problem-solving dialogue from this perspective.

Hauerwas's (2002:341) view that the church is a peaceable kingdom and a social ethic is only partly true, because it limits this prophetic role of the church by way of the moral agency of the envoys in society. Moltmann rightly criticises Hauerwas on this point. Hauerwas (1983) considers the church to be a peaceable kingdom. Moltmann (2012:33) says in his reaction to Hauerwas that the church is more than this. It is a peace-making kingdom because Christ blessed not the peaceful, but the peacemakers. Christian moral agents are envoys who are called to echo in society the prophetic ministry of the written word of God through the preacher in the local congregation. More is said about the moral agency of the Christian person as an envoy in Chapter 6 on the life of the person as a dedicated life.

■ State

The third circle in the relational life of the person is political relationships in spheres of authority. God instituted the family as a relationship within a sphere of authority. The same is true of his covenantal people, the church. But God also instituted civil authority to maintain order in society and to curb the destructive influence of evil in his creation. Civil authority can be regarded as a gracious gift from God to protect and further the common good. All execution of authority must be subservient to God and ought to

answer to the ethic of the immanent reign of God. Civil authority manages the relationships between persons in a *polis* (region) where they have a common habitat, history and destiny. This corpus of people has become known as the state. In very broad terms the state (see *Encyclopedia Britannica 2010*) can be described as a form of human association distinguished from other social groups by its purpose, the establishment of order and security; its methods, the laws and their enforcement; its territory, the area of jurisdiction or geographic boundaries; and finally by its sovereignty. The state consists most broadly of the agreement between individuals on the means by which disputes are settled in the form of laws. In other words, in a state people in authority rule over the people of the polis according to certain laws by means of necessary structures. This manifestation of authority implies relationships, which has enormous implications for the life of persons and their pursuit of flourishing personhood. The way in which authority is executed in this sphere of authority can foster or destroy the quality of personhood. Therefore, a few remarks about the relational character of the state from the perspective of an ethic of flourishing personhood is put forward in the section 'The political covenant'.

The state is thus the relationship between governors (government) and citizens (society). Ancient Greek philosophers theorised on the way in which the state could function. These theories resulted in concepts that have taken many forms in the history of humankind and still manifest in various political dispensations today. These theories and concepts themselves are not addressed in this study, only the relevance of this relationship for persons living within the confinements of a state and its relevance for their personhood.

Congruent biblical theology does not provide a model for any form of the state but sets clear moral principles and conditions for the just and fair rule of the government and the responsibility of the citizen towards those in authority. The purpose of the state is to serve God and to create an environment for flourishing personhood. The *locus classicus* of the biblical idea of civil rule is Romans 13, which teaches:

> Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended. For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. (vv. 1–4)

◼ The political covenant

The reformed tradition, which developed very strong and influential views on social order, used this testimony and the concept of the covenant to define

civil rule (see Witte 1996:359–403, 2007:57ff.). This development commenced with Calvin's (1509–1564) view of the civil authority. His view on the task of the government had two focal points, namely the *theocracy* and the *imago Dei*. He founded the task of the government in the *theocracy*. The state and the church must function under the immanent reign of God and are responsible to God for the execution of their authority. Church and state are two separate 'kingdoms' that may not interfere in each other's sphere of authority or the execution of their respective authority. The government must apply the law in such a way that the *dignitas* of the citizens is protected and civil order is maintained. The church ought to promote the faith and the good virtues of the citizens by the ministry of the Word. In these ways, both these entities can demonstrate the glory and the majesty of God (Calvin 2008:*Inst*. IV.XX.2.970). His contemporaries and successors developed his ideas into a line of thought that became prominent in the development of democracy and constitutionalism.

Calvin's tentative ideas on civil authority were extensively developed and applied by his astute pupil, Theodore Beza (1519–1605), a citizen of Geneva. Beza elaborated on Calvin's ideas and advanced them to their logical consequences for society. He introduced the concept 'political covenant' in combination with the gifts of natural law and the Decalogue to propose a social theory that claims that God initiates a political covenant between himself, the rulers and the citizens. This tripartite covenant is a solemn covenant before God between the rulers and the citizens, who receive their obligations from God by way of the Decalogue and natural law. An important aspect of his social theory was the view that the citizens have to elect the rulers. The right to vote is, in his opinion, a condition for legitimate authority and rule. The elected rulers must execute their authority in such a way that the citizens can serve God by way of freedom to observe their religion and to live a good life. They must protect the rights and the freedoms of the citizens. In this respect, he accentuated the right of religious freedom, ownership of property, freedom of choice in marriage, parentship and fairness.

The authorities can expand this list according to the natural law and the relational implications of the political covenant. The civil authority needs to work for the sake of the citizenry and not vice versa (De Bèze 1956:30, 44). Although Beza did not design a comprehensive political philosophy, his introduction of the political covenant had an enormous impact on reformed social thinking and on the political theories that developed over the next two centuries. In his seminal research on the social theories in the first centuries after the Reformation, Witte (2007:205ff.) elaborated on the influence of the concept of the political covenant by Althusius (1563–1638) (see Althusius 2013:xviii, 48–55), Hugo de Groot (Grotius 1583–1645) and John Milton (1608–1674). He indicates, with many references to primary sources written by these exponents, how this idea of a 'political covenant' eventually led to the concept

of the state as a social contract between rulers and citizens. In this respect, the ideas of John Locke (1632–1704), the father of modern constitutionalism, are worthwhile to consider.

Locke (1632–1704) departed from the idea that the person lives in a state of freedom and equality within the confines of the natural law. Locke (1988) maintained that:

> God having made Man such a creature, that, in his own Judgement it was not good for him to be alone, put him under strong Obligations of Necessity, Convenience and Inclination to drive him into Society, as well as fitted with Understanding and Language to continue and enjoy it. (p. 271)

The state must realise this given of natural law in a system where natural basic rights are protected and the common good promoted. The power of the state is not absolute. When the state fails to protect people's natural rights and to promote the common good, it becomes a tyranny. In such as case the citizenry must have the ability to replace the authority with a new one because a just society is the *sine qua non* of the existence of the person. That is why the idea of a social contract is so important. Just as Beza (1519–1605) and Grotius (1583–1645) argued in their proposition of a political covenant, Locke said that society starts with the relationship between a man and a woman in marriage and then expands to the state and all these relationships are based on a social contract that holds that all the parties must respect the rights of others. The social contract stipulates all the responsibilities and functions of the commissioned parties. Locke (1988) explained that:

> Man being born, as has been proved, with a Title to perfect Freedom, and an uncontrolled enjoyment of all Rights and Privileges of the Law of Nature, equally with every other man, or Number of Men in the World, hath by nature a Power, not only to preserve his Property that is, his Life, Liberty and Estate, against the Injuries and Attempts of other Men; but to judge of, and punish the breaches of that Law in others, as he is persuaded the Offence deserves, even with death itself, in Crimes where the heinousness of the Fact, in His opinion, requires it. (pp. 323–324)

Locke's ideas were furthered by prominent philosophers such as Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), Wolff (1679–1754), Blackstone (1723–1780), Kant (1724–1804) and Fichte (1762–1814) (see Koorntz 1981:95–119; Van der Vyver 1975:5–7).

The reformed social theorists of the 18th and 19th centuries became suspicious of Locke's political theories and his school of thought because of what they perceived as the influence of the rising humanism and the spirit of revolution emanating from the French Revolution in 1789. However, the ideas of the state as a social contract and the recognition of basic human rights were furthered by the reformed tradition in the United States. Protestant immigrants in the United States fled religious persecution in Europe. They saw in the concept of a social contract the idea of the 'political covenant' of the early Reformation, and thus supported the Declaration of Independence, the

Constitution and the Bill of Rights of Thomas Jefferson, John Adams and Benjamin Franklin. Meeter (1960:164) remarks that many Protestant churches organised religious occasions for thanksgiving to rejoice in the new constitutional dispensation.

◼ Sovereignty in own sphere

It is fair to say that the political theory of the reformed tradition with its concept of the 'political covenant' and its requirements for the ruler and the citizen had a remarkable impact on the development of democracy and constitutionalism in the Western world. The relational character of the state and the responsibility of rulers to adhere to and maintain the fine balances of this relationship can be regarded as a prominent contribution of reformed social theory. The rise of democracy and constitutionalism because of the philosophers of the Enlightenment stimulated new reflection amongst reformed jurists and theologians about the way in which relationships could be designed so that the principles of the 'political covenant' can be implemented.

In a time of political turmoil during the revolutionary epoch and the rise of secular humanism after the French Revolution, the political theory of the reformed tradition took a new turn. In this respect, the contributions of two prominent Dutch Reformed exponents, the jurist Groen van Prinsterer (1806–1876) and the theologian and politician Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920), can be mentioned. They shared far-reaching and ground-breaking thoughts about the state founded on the reformed perspective of the 'political covenant' under the immanent reign of God. With their idea of 'sovereignty in own sphere', they paved the way for a moral framework where state, church and civil society were defined as separate entities, each with an own independent structure and function in the broader quest for peace and civil order.

Groen van Prinsterer (1904:14) nurtured the political and constitutional ideas of Calvin's Reformation, especially theocracy. He warned against the dangers of a new tyranny in the name of freedom. This tyranny is the tyranny of the people when freedom is structured without the confinements of civil order, the limitation of absolute power by the people and Christian morality. Freedom must not violate the immanent reign of God. He criticised the ideas of Hobbes and Rousseau because their emphasis on a system of absolute power by the people led to a new form of abuse – the abuse of church and society by the state and the violation of the tranquil life of the citizens. He proposed the idea of 'sovereignty in own sphere', which entails that the civil authority, the church and civil societies could function within their own spheres of authority and vocation under the immanent reign of God. These entities must not interfere in the sovereign sphere of another. Rights of people can be be pursued within the framework of sovereignty in own sphere and must answer in the end to the morality of the immanent reign of God. Groen van

Prinsterer (1904:112) was suspicious about boundless human rights without a solid moral foundation and the over-estimation of the power of the state. The principle of sovereignty in own sphere can be appreciated as a very important principle because it defines the role of state, church and civil society on the one hand, but also demarcates the magnitude of the authority and independence of each sphere.

The momentum of reformed social ethics created by the contribution of the jurist Groen van Prinsterer was furthered by Abraham Kuyper in the second half of the 19th century and the early 20th century. Just like Groen van Prinsterer, he attempted to employ the social theories of Calvin's Reformation in a society where state, church and civil societies function each in their own sphere of sovereignty and where rights, liberties and responsibilities are exercised in a peaceful symbiosis under the reign of God. He maintained that a peaceful society is a society where neither the tyranny of the state, nor the tyranny of the church, nor the tyranny of the people abuses rights and liberties. In his view, Calvinism could be seen as the origin and guarantee of freedom (Kuyper 1874) and he made an effort to fashion the social theories of the Reformation into a democratic social model (see also Kuyper 1898, 1916).

Similar to Groen van Prinsterer, Kuyper (1916:10) typified his ideas as democratic, but also as 'anti-revolutionary' because he founded all authority in God's common grace, which may well be exercised responsibly under the immanent reign of God. Authorities are nothing more than servants of God and might never become totalitarian or abusive. Justice must rule above power. In his (Kuyper 1898) well-known Stone Lectures at Princeton in the United States, he said:

> Let it suffice to have shown, that Calvinism protests against state-omnipotence; against the horrible conception that no right exists above and beyond existing laws; and against the pride of absolutism, which recognises no constitutional rights, except as the result of princely favour. (p. 126)

Kuyper was a fiery and zealous proponent of Christians' calling to be involved in social life to proclaim the kingship of Christ over all spheres of life and to promote Christian morality in society. He founded this social calling on his view of the church as an institute and as an organism (Kuyper 1909a:205, 1909b:204). The institute is the assembly of believers where the official ministry of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments take place. This visible institute is sovereign in its own sphere and must not be abused by the state or civil society. The instituted church must function free of external interference. But, the instituted church must also not overstep its own limits of authority by expanding its primary task. The instituted church has no political or social role. When it trespasses on other spheres of authority, it becomes deformed – an agent of the state or a force against the state or a servant of secular ideologies. History has many stories of the deformation of churches because of the church overstepping the limits of its authority

and activities. The instituted church is bound to the official ministry of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments and has no other interest.

With the concept Church as an organism, he endeavours to explain the role of Christians in society. Unlike the instituted church, individual Christians are called by God to play an active role in society. In this respect, Kuyper designed an interesting Christian social order. Christians ought to form social spheres (organisations) to fulfil their divine calling as stewards of the reign of God in society. In the political domain, they may form Christian political parties to partake in elections and become a force in the institution of the state. They could also form Christian secondary schools and Christian higher education institutions (universities), Christian labour unions and other civil societies. All these social societies ought to be paradigm-driven, in other words from the presupposition of Christian faith. These ideas of Kuyper influenced the Dutch society. All kinds of Christian civil societies emerged, which inspired controlled execution of power by civil authorities, free association, freedom of speech, religious tolerance and protection of human rights. This design for social life also influenced societies in the Dutch colonies and was introduced in parts of the United States.

■ Constitutionalism

The first half of the 20th century was marked by the most violent violations of the basic rights and liberties in modern history. The British concentration camps in South Africa, social stratification founded on racial differentiation and discrimination, the cruelty of the First World War and the Holocaust distorted the values of democracy and human rights. Authoritarian and tyrannical states saw the light, such as the communist regimes in the Soviet Union and China, as well as the countries under their influence and control. They furthered the idea of absolute state power and control over every aspect of social life.

This era of war, power abuse and the dehumanisation of persons inspired reformed theologians to further develop the political theory of the reformed tradition into suitable forms of democratic government for a modern age. The ideas of the 'political covenant', the rights of persons in their relationship within this covenant, fair jurisprudence and the concept of democracy developed as ways to keep the covenant intact. Based on the idea of the 'political covenant', they find solace in the emerging political theory of constitutionalism where the power of the state is limited and the rights and liberties of the citizens are protected by a bill of rights and a constitutional court. Citizens ought to have the means to review the covenant from time to time by the execution of their right to vote in democratic elections.

Drawing on the development of the political theories of the reformed tradition, the contributions of Barth (1886–1968) and Moltmann (1926–) can

be mentioned in this regard. Earlier I referred to Barth's resistance of the liberal theology of the 19th century and his rejection of any form of natural theology. Over and against these notions, which were in his view responsible for Nazi theology and the unresponsiveness of many Christians to the errors of National Socialism, he reaffirmed the idea of the immanent reign of God over state, church and society and the responsibilities this principle confers to the state, the church and persons in society. He founded this principle not only in creation, but in Christology.

Barth (1946) maintains that the immanent reign of God overarches the whole creation and both church and state find their meaning and purpose in this reign. Just as much as the church, the state is obliged to be subservient to the morality that flows from the immanent reign of God. According to Barth, the immanent reign of God is the centre of society. The church (*Christengemeinde*) comes into being around this centre and the nearest to it. The state (*Bürgergemeinde*), consisting of the rulers and the citizens, is the next sphere. These two entities have their own spheres of authority and functions and may not mix. The church ought to proclaim the immanent reign of God by means of prophetic testimony and by the exemplary execution of Christian morality that entails the realisation of the immanent reign of God in social life. In this respect, the church can act as an example to the state. Furthermore, the church is obliged to pray for the government. Praying, exemplary presence and prophetic testimony constitute the 'political role' of the church. The church may not co-opt with the state or act as a political role player in alliance with the rulers, as was done so many times in the history of the church and in Nazi Germany. On the other hand, the state ought to build the social-ethical implications of the immanent reign of God into its legal framework and jurisprudence. These are the principles of justice, equality and freedom (Barth 1946:33). He proposed a constitutional democracy as the most suitable form of government because it is, up to now, the best way to honour the immanent reign of God by protecting the fundamental rights of persons and by pursuing justice. Barth's social theory, which he developed over an extended period in accordance with the political theory of the reformed tradition, was also echoed by Bonhoeffer. Although not an exponent of the reformed tradition, Bonhoeffer (1995:332) also proposed that the church should proclaim the principles of the social and political order and the state should design the technical means for putting these principles into effect.

Moltmann, perhaps the most influential theological theorist on social ethics in the latter part of the 20th century, invigorated the idea of the 'political covenant' of the reformed tradition even further. Arguing from the basis of his Theology of Hope (1965), he reiterates that the relationship between rulers and the people in a state is a 'political covenant' before God. This covenant determines the rights and responsibilities of all persons – those in authority

and citizens. On the foundation of God's creation of persons in his image, God's reconciliation of the world, the coming consummation that bequeaths abundant hope on humankind, Christians are compelled to strive for a form of rule where people's rights are protected constitutionally and where justice is served, especially for the poor and the marginalised (Moltmann 1975:31).

The political theory of the reformed tradition was largely a vague outline for politics, with the exception of the American Constitution. However, Kuyper, Barth and Moltmann all succeeded, each in their own way, in moulding these theories into plausible and applicable proposals for political structuring. They made a large contribution to the modern development of the political theory of constitutionalism and its development into the modern liberal democracy.

The relationship between persons and the state could be driven by the following principles:

1. All authority comes from God and must be executed according to the principles of the immanent reign of God.
2. The state is a tripartite 'political covenant' between God, persons in authority and persons as citizens.
3. When the persons in authority break the covenant by ruling in an abusive and unjust way, citizens must have the ability to form a new covenant by way of peaceful democratic elections.
4. The rulers of a state must maintain law and order by way of just laws and an independent judiciary. They are responsible for protecting the citizenry and promoting peace. They may not violate the fundamental human rights of persons.
5. The state is sovereign in own sphere but must respect and protect the sovereignty in own sphere of churches and civil societies.
6. The state must manage the tax citizens pay in a responsible way to develop the community and to alleviate poverty.
7. The citizenry must obey the rule of law and respect the authority as an institution of God.

These principles were developed over many years as part of the reformed tradition and are important for the furtherance of flourishing personhood in the lives of persons within the context of a state. In the relational life of a person, the relationship within the state can impoverish and even destroy flourishing personhood. Where a state violates the dignity of persons by abusing power and revolting against the values of the immanent reign of God, flourishing personhood is the first victim. Without dignity, a person cannot enjoy life, cannot prosper or have peace and joy. When persons are dehumanised because of colour, race, religion, gender, sexual orientation or any other social marker for the relationships within a state, the gift of life and flourishing personhood are rejected and God is disgraced. Flourishing

personhood will blossom in a state where persons are respected, where they can enjoy good education, where they can observe their religion of choice, where they can execute their fundamental rights, where they can move freely, where they can enjoy all their other relationships and where they are protected against the forces of evil. This is the form of state for which Christians should strive.

Christian moral agency must address constitutional development and political philosophy and ought to be an ardent agent for democracy and the rule of law. Flourishing personhood depends largely on the living spaces provided by the political institutions. When all spheres of society are politicised and shaped into tools of an authoritarian state, the space for the pursuit of flourishing personhood becomes limited. Abundant state control and a politics of power degrade persons to mere tools of the state. The institutionalised racism of Apartheid in South Africa (1948–1994) is a clear example of how power abuse by a state can dehumanise people and inhibits flourishing personhood. Responsible politics results in a form of rule where persons can have ample space to be persons with the freedom to pursue the flourishing personhood and to enjoy God's gift of life. Up to this point in time, the liberal democracy founded on the tripartite political covenant seems to be the most suitable form of state and Christian moral agency can promote this concept until something better emerges.

■ Civil society

The fourth concentric circle describing the relational life of the person is the relationships of persons in civil society. Civil society can be described as the whole of the structured associations, relationships and forms of cooperation that exist apart from the state with their respective own constitutions, regulations, courses of action and focuses (Rheeder 2017:335). The establishment of liberal democracies resulted in the emergence of thousands of civil societies that act as promoters of a certain cause within the confines of the law. Kuyper (1909a:205, 1909b:204) made a huge contribution in this regard from a reformed perspective. As expounded above, he used the concept of church as an organism to explain the role of Christians in society. In his view, the instituted church has no social duty and must only deal with ecclesiastical matters. However, Christians have a duty in society and they can form all kinds of Christian civil societies to further particular causes. Kuyper's view resonated strongly in the Dooyeweerd's (1933:481) idea of law as a social vision of the neo-Calvinist philosophy. This view resulted in the formation of many independent Christian organisations in Netherlands in the 20th century. They contributed greatly to the promotion of the common good in Dutch society and set in motion a value system based on Christian values. These

values are still highly esteemed in Dutch social life, despite the decline of churches and the core doctrines of Christian faith. Organisations like these are commonly referred to as 'non-governmental organisations' (NGOs).

Kuyper made a case for what can be termed a 'paradigm-driven' NGO. He did not use that terminology, but he argued that Christians can assemble to establish a Christian organisation based on a Christian creed or a value system. In this way, they can further their cause, for example a private Christian school, Christian labour union, Christian newspaper or radio station. Eurich (2017:311) uses the term 'faith-based organisations' in his review of the activities of *Diakonie Deutchland*. This term also refers to paradigm-driven organisations in Germany. But NGOs can also be purpose-driven. This terminology describes an association of people who have the same purpose, irrespective of their religious, cultural or any other social affiliations. People with different beliefs and persuasions can organise themselves in an NGO to, for example, render a service to a poor community or to assist a health institution. A paradigm-driven NGO is driven by a common faith or set of beliefs and concomitant values. A purpose-driven NGO is driven by ideals the members hold in common.

Paradigm-driven NGOs function well in societies that are relatively homogenous in its basic moral beliefs, such as European nation–states with a heritage of Christendom. In a pluralist country such as South Africa, these kinds of NGOs can be commissioned to serve only certain groups – only the groups subscribing to their own values. In such a heterogenous society, a purpose-driven civil society is beneficial. In this respect, Rawls's theory of overlapping consensus can be considered. Rawls' (1999:7) view of a well-ordered political dispensation can also apply to civil society (see J.M. Vorster 2015). Rawls argues that a well-ordered society is stable when it is relatively homogeneous in its basic moral beliefs. However, in a pluralist society, the application of this hypothesis can be problematic. Such societies are characterised by a multitude of incompatible and irreconcilable religious, philosophical and moral doctrines. Rawls (1993:134) proposes the concept of overlapping consensus as a solution to this problem. In his view, a well-ordered society needs an overlapping consensus that allows for a plurality of reasonable, though opposing comprehensive doctrines, each with its own conceptions of the common good. A well-ordered society can be stable when there is a political concept of justice that every supporter of a reasonable doctrine can endorse from their own philosophical, ideological or moral point of view.

Although Rawls does not deal with civil societies in his argument, his view can apply to civil societies in a broader political entity. Applied to civil society, this overlapping consensus means that purpose-driven NGOs can find common ground based on the common good. Just like a political entity in a

heterogenous society, a purpose-driven NGO can function based on an overlapping consensus on moral directives that can generate civil action to serve a certain cause.

One can appreciate the growing prominence of these organisations, be they paradigm-driven or purpose-driven, in the development of the common good when reading Welker's estimation of civil society in Germany in recent years. He remarks that public life in democratic countries nowadays are driven by the state, the markets and civil society. Therefore, active and motivated NGOs are indispensable for the development of a public life where persons can enjoy a peaceful and prosperous life. The different sectors can act as checks and balances to control possible abuse of power by the state. Welker (2017:3) explains that civil society in Germany is generated by associations and unions called '*Vereine*'. There are currently approximately 600 000 registered '*Vereine*', six times more than 50 years ago – an indication of the growing importance of this sector in a democratic society. In addition, Germany has about 20 000 private foundations. About one-third of the German population is active in civil society by way of NGOs. He concludes that with these numbers, Germany ranks in the middle when compared with other European countries, illustrating the importance of this sector in European society.

Welker (2017:4) provides the following interesting details: When measured by the number of participating members, the key areas of civil society in Germany are sports and social activities; health and health care; church and religion; culture, music and education; caring for the elderly; support for the youth; political, environmental and social interest groups; and local civic voluntary engagements in emergency services. This shows that persons have a vast array of commitments besides their political involvement in electing authorities. In this way, the state's power is reduced and it cannot overstep its limits of authority and control the total life of persons. Civil society and the free market act as a bulwark against power abuse by the state.

The same is true of liberal democracies outside Europe. Influential NGOs actively assist in developing societies within the rule of law, keeping possible power abuse in check. Some of these organisations even work internationally, for example as accredited role players at the United Nations Human Rights Council. They act as prominent watchdogs and whistle blowers when oppressive and abusive regimes violate people's rights and liberties. The international role of NGOs in raising awareness of the perennial damage to the ecosystems by huge mining, chemical or agricultural corporations and power plants can hardly be overestimated. The growing prominence of civil society could be regarded as the biggest blessing in contemporary global social life and Christians have an opportunity to engage actively in this sector as a relationship that offers opportunities to enhance personhood.

Let us focus briefly on this opportunity in South Africa. As a young constitutional democracy, South Africa has experienced an astonishing rise in active and effective NGOs that challenge the government in courts when power abuses, racist legislation, state capture and corruption are detected. These NGOs are highly effective in developing constitutionalism and serving the needs of, for example workers, the unemployed, poor people and minority cultures. Although largely free to function, the African National Congress (ANC) government still oscillates between socialism with large state control and a free market idea that inhibits the full function of civil society at the scale of European counties. Restitution policies to rectify the imbalances caused by the Apartheid system, although necessary, are executed in a way that benefits only an elite group in the previously disadvantaged communities.[7] Corruption has become rife in the public sphere and pockets of attempted power abuses by the state can be discerned from time to time. Very poor service delivery by local authorities has become the rule. It dehumanises especially the poor communities, who are unable to pay for additional service delivery by private enterprises. Protest marches with an underlying current of violence accumulate and as a result criminality threatens to run out of control.

The work of NGOs to address these social ills are important and have in fact become indispensable. Besides their responsibility to use their franchise to influence politics, Christian moral agents in South Africa may well become active participants, especially in purpose-driven NGOs, to assist the political institutions in a solidary-critical way. This way of involvement entails that the rulers might be supported when they serve the common good and enhance the personhood of the citizens. South Africa has many well educated and highly capable persons in every sphere of social life. Many of the educational institutions are on par with international standards and are equipped and able to do world-class research to address South African and African challenges. All these assets are available and can be used to develop society and to bring a better life and future to the many people still living in despair and hopelessness. A solidary-critical approach entails that purpose-driven NGOs are critical whenever and wherever abuse of power and corruption emerges in

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7. I have discussed the ethics of affirmative action and land restitution in South Africa in an earlier publication, with reference to the applicable legislation (see Vorster 2007:41, 77). Apartheid benefitted the white population with its many laws of social engineering. In an effort to rectify the resulting inequalities between white South Africans and black South Africans, the new constitution (1996) provided for affirmative action and land restitution. I support the goal, but in the execution of policies such as Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) and 'cadre deployment', the ANC administration largely failed to reach the intended goal. Although the social and economic conditions of previously disadvantaged black communities have improved remarkably due to affirmative action in the spheres of education, public spaces and business, the execution (or lack thereof) of these policies, especially during the administration of President Jacob Zuma, resulted in large-scale corruption among state officials, attempts of state capture by bribing businesses and very poor service delivery to the population, especially the poor. Maladministration of public funds fuels the fire of unemployment to the detriment of the poor. South Africa is becoming an ever more unequal society with a highly prosperous elite (black and white) and a poor class (mainly black).

politics and business. They can act as timely whistle blowers when politics falls into abusive social engineering, when racism raises its head, when communities are delivered to incompetent officials and where the fundamental human rights of persons are violated. What NGOs have done up to now can be commended, and new NGOs can follow their examples.

The relational life of the person can be enriched by active participation in civil society. A person can enrich the personhood of others when this segment of human life is organised and used in a responsible way. A well-ordered and peaceful society can develop in South Africa when we all aim to balance state, markets and civil society with the aim to serve the common good. Civil society is an indispensable vehicle for persons in their pursuit of flourishing personhood because it serves as an important guard against power abuse by the state and it secures the open spaces needed for the pursuit of flourishing personhood.

■ Eco-relationship

The outer circle of the relational life of the person is his or her relationship with the environment. Pannenberg (1985:20) applies the relational characteristic of the life of the person also to a relationship with the earth. He posits that like our creation 'out of clay', creation 'in the image of God' projects the person's relationship to and responsibility for the integrity of creation. This relationship is not an 'I–thou' relationship such as the relationship between two individuals who can meet each other on certain occasions and then depart on their separate ways. It is a relationship that cannot be broken or suspended. Nature is part of the person and the person is part of nature. All the creational gifts to the human being, the breath of life, becoming a person with personhood, the call to serve and to worship God as the Creator, are bound to nature. The person is a person in a natural environment with nature as an integral part of its existence. The relationship with nature is part of the uniqueness of the life of the person – part of the *imago Dei* (Moltmann 1993:221).

God served the person with the cultural mandate. The cultural mandate as outlined in Genesis 1:28 delineates the purpose of the person's life – a purpose that is an integral part of flourishing personhood. Brueggemann (1982:15) explains this purpose by saying that from the beginning of human destiny, God was prepared to entrust the garden to the unique person. From the beginning, persons were called, given a vocation and expected to share in God's work. The destiny of the person is to live in God's world and not the world of the person's own making. The person is to live in harmony with God's other creatures, some of which are dangerous, but all of which have to be ruled and cared for. The future of the person is to live in God's world, with God's other creatures on God's terms (Brueggemann 1982:40). The ruling of creation ought to be an extension of God's care and provision and not an act of dominion according to the person's own will or design. In the execution of

this cultural mandate, the person is responsible to God because the person conserves nothing less than God's creation by way of God's eternal providence, in which the rule of the person is a mere tool. Misuse of the cultural mandate is a revolt against God. Any idea of the absence of God from creation and the total freedom of humankind as the ruler of nature with the absolute right to explore nature without limits has no theological foundation (see Loader 1987:16ff.). Therefore the 'ruling' of Genesis 1:28 does not entail exercising destructive power over creation, but stewardship in the service of God. Caring for creation is worshipping God.

Clark (2000:284) raises a valuable point with his idea of neighbourhood as a description of the eco-relationship of the person. He argues from the perspective of the covenant of God with his creation and contends that the covenant God made with all living creatures (Gn 9:9–10) entails that all creatures, also the person, might co-exist in the spirit of 'neighbourhood'. Because of the God-given relationship between all creatures, they are neighbours under the reign and providence of God. Clark therefore prefers the term 'neighbourhood' to 'stewardship'. This term emphasises the duties of the person over and against the idea of simply ruling over everything. In his opinion, the idea of 'ruling over' creation has the implication that the act of creation was for the benefit of the person and that everything is there for the person's use. Clark's criticism of the notion of 'ruling' is valid, especially when all the biblical laws regarding caring for the land and the warnings against exploitation are considered (Clark 2000:285). He also reminds us that the eventual recreation of the broken creation in Christ embraces not only the fallen person but the totality of creation. The whole created order will become new – a new heaven and new earth where justice will rule.

Recent eco-theologians and eco-ethicists have developed new perspectives on the cultural mandate. These perspectives consider the concept of environmental justice as part of the contemporary theories of justice. Conradie (2006:3), a leading theologian in this new field, describes ecological theology as a new contribution to the contextual theologies of the last five decades. He explains that ecological theology is an attempt to retrieve the ecological wisdom of Christianity as a response to environmental threats and injustices. It is an attempt to reinvestigate and to rediscover the tenets in Christianity that apply to the environmental crisis. Leese (2019:4) proposes an ecological hermeneutic that consciously establishes a link between the biblical narrative and the pressing ecological questions of our current context. Such an approach requires a paradigmatic shift that establishes ecology and the eco-crisis as a bona fide hermeneutical lens for reading Scripture, a lens that ideally enables interpretation to inform praxis. He identifies hermeneutic angles of approach where theologians attempt to focus on the relevance of theology and Christian ethics for environmental injustice. The developments and different approaches that Conradie and Leese outline are not discussed in this study because Conradie deals with them critically in many seminal publications. He proposes

thought-provoking ideas about the earth in God's economy (see Conradie 2015). I offer some remarks on eco-ethics from the perspective of a hermeneutic of congruent biblical theology with its emphasis on the relational life of the person and the role of the environment in the pursuit of flourishing personhood.

The increasing focus on environmental justice in theology today is of great importance for two reasons. Firstly, research in various natural science disciplines has proven beyond any doubt that nature is endangered by human-made (anthropogenic) destructive forces. Climate change is a glooming reality, to the detriment of all species in creation and as a result of modern lifestyle. Some world leaders still deny it under the influence of pseudo-science and the urge for economic prosperity and power. In their investigation of many prominent scientific findings about climate change, Cook et al. (2013) found that multiple studies published in peer-reviewed scientific journals show that 97% or more of the actively publishing climate scientists agree that climate-warming trends over the past century are real and likely because of human activities. The American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS 2014) also found that:

> Earth's climate is on a path to warm beyond the range of what has been experienced over the past millions of years. The range of uncertainty for the warming along the current emissions path is wide enough to encompass massively disruptive consequences to societies and ecosystems: as global temperatures rise, there is a real risk, however small, that one or more critical parts of the Earth's climate system will experience abrupt, unpredictable and potentially irreversible changes. Disturbingly, scientists do not know how much warming is required to trigger such changes to the climate system. (p. 4)

In addition, most of the leading scientific organisations worldwide have issued public statements endorsing this position with reference to well-conducted scientific research with well-founded results (AAAS 2014:1).

We face ecocide (Broswimmer 2002:109), which refers to goal-oriented, uncontrolled human economic development with an extravagant lifestyle as the goal and without concern for the depletion of sources and the pollution of the environment. Species – our neighbours in the words of Clark (2000:284) – are dying every day.

Secondly, reformed theology has to take note of the debate that started with the widely acclaimed and thought-provoking article of White, which he published as early as 1967. As a historian, White (1967) raised the opinion that:

> Since both science and technology are blessed words in our contemporary vocabulary, some may be happy at the notions, first, that, viewed historically, modern science is an extrapolation of natural theology and, second, that modern technology is at least partly to be explained as an Occidental, voluntarist realization of the Christian dogma of man's transcendence of, and rightful mastery over, nature. But, as we now recognize, somewhat over a century ago science and technology – hitherto quite separate activities – joined to give mankind powers which, to judge

by many of the ecologic effects, are out of control. If so, Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt. I personally doubt that disastrous ecologic backlash can be avoided simply by applying to our problems more science and more technology. Our science and technology have grown out of Christian attitudes toward man's relation to nature which are almost universally held not only by Christians and neo-Christians but also by those who fondly regard themselves as post-Christians. (p. 1206)

White inspired a vigorous debate amongst Christian theologians. Scholars are reflecting on his conviction that because the 'human–nature' dualism is deeply rooted in Christian thought, nature has been eradicated not only from our minds but also from our emotions, and we shall doubtless be unable to make fundamental changes in our attitudes and actions affecting ecology. Both present natural sciences and our technology today are so 'tinctured with "orthodox Christian arrogance" towards nature that no solution for the ecologic crisis can be expected from them alone' (White 1967). Since the roots of the present environmental crisis and the looming ecological disaster are largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not. People must be taught to rethink and re-experience nature and their destiny within their habitat. What we need, White (1967:1207) argued, is a philosophy that is 'a viable equivalent to animism, a philosophy and corresponding ethic affirming the intrinsic value of nature, and a rejection of the human–nature dualism that permits hubris and anthropocentrism to emerge'.

White steadfastly warned people to engage in the development of an eco-friendly and enlightened prudential eco-ethic where persons recognise that their well-being is totally dependent upon the health of nature. Such an eco-ethic would be a suitable replacement for the destructive religious ethics that paved the way to our ecological problems of today. Humankind needs new religious ethics for the future we face. Our old worldview created our problems, only a fool would assume that a simple reapplication of that same worldview would also solve our problems. We shall continue to have a worsening ecological crisis until we reject the traditional Christian Western axiom that nature has no reason for existence except to serve humans.

The reality of ecocide, looming environmental disaster and the accusation that the Christian view of the cultural mandate to persons in the execution of their vocation to rule over God's creation pose challenges for reformed theology. Reformed theology needs to revisit the cultural mandate and respond with the attitude-changing eco-ethic for which White pleads. To my mind, the perspective on life derived from congruent biblical theology, the teachings on the relational life of the person and the quest for an ethic of flourishing personhood can be a plausible foundation for a responsible eco-ethic. The views of Pannenberg, Moltmann, Clark and Conradie are valuable contributions in redirecting Christian theology to develop a responsible eco-

ethic that can nurture new values and attitudes in people's engagement with nature. Christian ethics is able to elaborate on this, and I would like to do so by posing the following argument.

A Christian eco-ethic may possibly rely on the following biblical assumptions:

1. God's creation does not propose different, independent faculties of reality. There are no higher and lower orders in creation, such as matter, vegetation, animal life and persons. They are all equal partners in God's covenant with his creation (Gn 9:9). They are all included in God's household (see Conradie 2007:2).
2. God's concern is not only for the person but for the totality of creation. The creation is also 'groaning' under the burden of evil (Rm 8:18–30). Christ redeems creation. In him, the kingdom 'is near'– a new heaven and earth and not only a new humanity. What will eventually emerge is a restored creation under the reign of God.
3. Everything in creation exists in a relational harmony and is interdependent. This principle becomes clear in the ecosystems of which humanity is a part.
4. Although only the human creature received the 'breath of God', the person is not superior in the sense that it is a living being outside the universal creational relationships. The person is part of nature and part of ecosystems. It is intrinsically part of the cycle of death as a condition for life. Life cannot exist without death.
5. The cultural mandate God gave the person after its creation (Gn 1:28) and which he reaffirmed after the flood (Gn 9:9) must be executed within the universal relationship of God and the totality of creation. It can therefore not be interpreted as irresponsible and absolute dominion by the person. Responsible care for nature is part of the Old Testament ethics (Wright 2004:ch 4).
6. Within the confines of congruent biblical theology, God's permission to rule over creation cannot be interpreted as an anthropocentric mandate. The use of creation for the benefit of people alone violates the continuous biblical call to servanthood and stewardship. The rule must imitate the attitude of Christ (Ph 2:5–11), which reflects self-sacrifice (love), taking the nature of a servant (servanthood), humility (self-denial) and obedience to God (see J.M. Vorster 2007:15–20).
7. In its ecological relationships and as part of the ecosystems, the person may well be a caring, nurturing agent living in nature with a sense of neighbourliness instead of dominion and exploitation.
8. Being servants in creation within all the universal encompassing relationships is serving God. Personhood cannot flourish in a context of environmental destruction. Serving God without being a servant in the natural environment is hollow religion. Theology without ecology is incomplete and does not understand the full range of God's creational, redemptive and empowering involvement in his Kingdom.

The eco-relationship of the person is intrinsically part of its relational life flowing from God's breath of life. Conradie (2006:30) is correct with his idea that ecological responsibility should not only be a theme in Christian–ethical research but a constant thread interwoven with congruent theology.

Christian moral agents have a solid theological motivation to become deeply involved in the struggle against environmental injustice. In cooperation with other disciplines in scientific research, Christian theology ought to engage in the imminent debates about questions that penetrate to the core of human lifestyles. Environmentalists raise valid questions, such as:

1. Can we carry on with a lifestyle that destroys ecosystems with anthropogenic climate change?
2. Can the growing population and related demands for the exploitation of natural resources be sustainable?
3. Can the consumerist culture be tolerated indefinitely?
4. Can economic growth and the quest for wealth and prosperity be reconciled with environmental justice?

These are powerful questions that implicate the patterns of existence of persons and the future of the planet and all forms of life. Theology and Christian ethics have a duty to engage in the current interreligious, ideological and interdisciplinary discourses in the quest to find answers to these difficult questions and solutions to the problems. Whilst the natural sciences develop new ways and means to protect the ecosystems and to limit environmental damage, theology can address people's reasoning. Theology can shape people's conscience by convincing them of interrelatedness of religion and nature, by guiding them to thus become eco-sensitive to change lifestyles – in some cases radically, to develop new perspectives on wealth and prosperity, to pursue politics that advances environmental justice and to redress their habits. Of special importance is new Christian–ethical reflection on family planning, the need for smaller families and controlled population growth, because in many cultures the ideal of having many children is still alive, motivated by religious views justifying patriarchalism, subordination of women and the belief that many children are a blessing to the father.

■ Cherish relationships

The relational life of the person within the contexts of marriage and family, church, state, civil society and nature is a core ingredient of the gift of life. The relational life of the person is a delicate interwoven piece of art given by God to humanity to experience and maintain peace in this incomplete world where the powers of evil are still attacking the immanent reign of God. When these relationships are distorted by the powers of division and destruction, they will inhibit the wealth of personhood and force persons into alienation, enmity

and all the kinds of injustices so common amongst people. Good care of this God-given piece of art is the way to peace and happiness as much as persons can achieve in this age. In the quest for serving God and pursuing flourishing personhood, God calls persons to cherish all these relationships by being devoted to the protection and cultivation of a God-given relational life. Flourishing personhood depends on healthy and inspirational relationships and that is what Christian moral agency needs to pursue persistently.

The life given to a person, a gift from God, is also a devoted life. This principle was mentioned occasionally in the argumentation thus far. Dedication is an essential part of flourishing personhood – for the dedicated person as well the subjects of this dedication. Therefore, more ought to be said about this principle. Chapter 6 attends to this aspect of the gift of life and its bearing on Christian moral agency in the pursuit of flourishing personhood.

A dedicated life

■ Introduction

In the preceding discussions, many references were made to the calling, obligations and various tasks of persons to be moral agents in the areas of concern that have been mentioned. The obligations are firmly embedded in the gift of life, the cultural mandate of Genesis 1:28 and Genesis 9:9 and are important for the search for flourishing personhood. This chapter will focus on the relevant aspects of Christian moral agency itself and will explore other biblical perspectives from various angles to identify the motivating forces behind moral agency in pursuit of flourishing personhood. All these perspectives enlighten and constitute the character of human life as a devoted life dedicated to God's act of renewal and restoration, but each of them adds a certain and important additional component to the values of Christian life. A common denominator in these perspectives is the idea of vocation. A Christian moral agent does not act opportunistically, but with a cause, a direction and an ideal in the service of God. This vocation is the essence of Christian religion. Paul writes (Rm 12):

> Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing, and perfect will. (vv. 1–2)

In this chapter, some perspectives on what vocation entails will be addressed. Subsequently, fulfilment of the vocation will be discussed along the lines of the synecdoche-like character of the *Decalogue*. A synecdoche is a figure of speech in which a term for a part of something refers to the whole of something or vice versa. In other words, a synecdoche is a class of metonymy that either mentions a part for the whole or, conversely, the whole for one of its parts. Applied to the *Decalogue*, this synecdoche-like character means that what is said in a few sentences in a Commandment has a whole array of meanings and applications, whilst these can be derived from congruent biblical theology. Let us then focus on the idea of vocation.

■ Vocation

In the reformed tradition, moral agency is perceived to be a religious activity (Calvin 2008:*Inst*. II.8.46). To act as a moral agent in pursuit of flourishing personhood is to serve and worship God. In his discussion of vocation as divine service, Schwarz (2013:351) refers to Luther, who suggested that, if people properly attend to their vocation, which should always be actions not for the self, but for the benefit of others, they are co-operators of God, whether they are Christians or not. Human vocation was thus held in high esteem by the reformers. God created the unique and dignified person to fulfil a task, and that was to be a servant in creation to the honour of God. This calling was distorted by evil when the person wanted to become like God and not remain a servant under God. However, the calling was not suspended by God. Although persons became anthropocentric in search of power and revolted against the reign of God, by setting up unjust systems and destroying the interwoven relationships amongst people, God did not leave his creation and image in destitution and despair. His love and grace initiated the process of re-creation and restoration of his reign – the redemption of creation from the bondage of evil and the liberation of persons from their guilt before God. His reign became immanent, aimed at the restoration of creation and the renewal of the evil-invested reality. This is his promise to persons, and on account of this promise, he establishes a new covenant that entails that he will redeem them, and persons will continue with their moral agency as God's agents.

The idea of Christian vocation becomes clear when the many metaphors and teachings illuminating this idea in congruent biblical theology are investigated. The full extent of these metaphors and teachings cannot be addressed in this study, but they will be dealt with in as much as they have a bearing on the idea of the vocation of the person striving to flourishing personhood. The first idea that will be examined is the idea of the fulfilment of a vocation as an act of gratitude as response to God's liberating action.

■ Gratitude

As a religious action, moral agency is an expression of gratitude to God. It is the human response to God's redeeming action in Christ and the bestowment with his Spirit. In the Old Testament, the conduct of God's elected people had to be holy and totally different from the peoples around them, because God had liberated them. Their holy lives were meant to reflect the holiness of God, not for the purpose of becoming the people of God, but because they were the people of God – the people of the new covenant fulfilling the responsibilities of the covenant. They enjoyed the promise of redemption, and had to trust in the promise and respond to God by a holy life – a life of gratitude for God's saving grace. The ceremonial laws, cultural practices, institutions, hygiene and treatment of the land were all symbols of their holiness (otherness), and compliance to these instructions expressed their gratitude for being called by God as his people.

Moral agency as gratitude is also a foundational teaching in the New Testament. The Soteriology of the New Testament departs from the idea of the total depravity of the person (Rm 3:9–20). The only way out of this bondage is justification by God in Christ (Rm 3):

> But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. (vv. 21–24)

This is the answer given to total depravity. Only in Christ can the person be liberated from the bondage of sin. The cross reveals the suffering, judging and saving God, and the resurrection reveals the newness that sprouts from the ruins of the evil-infected existence. Jesus is raised from death; the spirit of God is bestowed to realise this novelty. Welker (2013:190) asserts that in the power of the creative spirit, and the presence of the resurrected crucified, hopelessness turns into joy, doubt into faith, desire into certainty and lack of direction to new discipleship. The new condition can be claimed by faith and not is to be earned by adhering to the law of Moses. Living in the light of the cross, the open grave of Jesus, the power of the spirit is a grateful response to the saving grace of God. We cannot appease God with our moral agency – we can only serve him as moral agents with gratitude.

Virtually all the epistles of the apostles proclaim that moral life and action flows from redemption and renewal in Christ and is the fruit of faith. They proclaim the total depravity of the person, the insufficiency of the works of the law to appease God, the intervention of God in the cross of Christ on behalf of God's people, and justification by faith alone. Following these teachings and the call to conversion and faith, persons are admonished, encouraged and called to be agents of the morality of the kingdom of God in

the world. They must proclaim the kingdom of God, they must be holy, they must bear 'the fruits of the Spirit' (Gl 5:25), they must do good to all people and seek peace. This is their vocation in life and, also for this purpose, they are equipped by the Spirit of God with the gifts necessary for moral agency. But the ability to execute the vocation is a result of redemption and faith. The vocation of the Christian moral agent is the result of the fulfilled vocation of Christ to liberate persons from the bondage of evil. Again, fulfilling this vocation is always an act of gratitude.

Election for a purpose

Another biblical theme that has a bearing on moral agency is the idea of election and calling. Where God elects his people, it is not only to express his ownership of the people but to impart their vocation. The same holds true around his election of individuals. The people of God were elected to serve him in the Holy Land. The judges were elected to guide the people through difficult times, the kings were elected to lead the people with the aim to manifest God's reign and holiness, and the prophets were elected to proclaim his judgement over injustice and to give new direction to the people. Jesus elected the disciples to follow him and to change their ways. And Christians are elected with a purpose, as Paul explains to the Ephesians (Eph 1):

> Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To God's holy people in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. (vv. 1–4)

Persons are not elected by God to retreat from public life and resort to piety in isolation. All persons have vocations in life. With reference to many sermons of Luther, Schwarz (2013:354) contends that a vocation could always be understood as God's calling and command.

The offices of Christ

A striking metaphor relating to Christian moral agency is the idea of the offices in the Old Testament that manifest in Christ and eventually in the followers of Christ. Christology in the reformed tradition elaborates copiously on the offices of Christ. In Christ, the offices of the people of the Old Testament find their destiny and completeness. In the congruent theology of the Old Testament, the office of King, Prophet and Priest already contained the Messianic promise. Christ fulfilled the office of King, Prophet and Priest in his suffering on the cross, and his resurrection and ascension. As King he reigns over the coming Kingdom by Word and Spirit, as Prophet he proclaims his rule and reveals the way to the Kingdom, and as Priest, he sets and nurtures

the love of the coming Kingdom in the world. As the only High Priest, he also intercedes as the advocate of the person to avert the judgement of God. The reformed vision on the offices of Christ and its implications for Christians is briefly but lucidly stated in the Heidelberg Catechism, Lords Day 12. This part of this widely acclaimed confession of reformed churches worldwide reads as follows (Heidelberg Catechism, Lords Day 12):

Question 31: Why is he called Christ, that is, Anointed?

Because he has been ordained by God the Father and anointed with the Holy Spirit, to be our chief Prophet and Teacher, who has fully revealed to us the secret counsel and will of God concerning our redemption; our only High Priest, who by the one sacrifice of his body has redeemed us, and who continually intercedes for us before the Father; and our eternal King, who governs us by his Word and Spirit, and who defends and preserves us in the redemption obtained for us.

Question 32: Why are you called a Christian?

Because I am a member of Christ by faith and thus share in his anointing, so that I may as prophet confess his name, as priest present myself a living sacrifice of thankfulness to him, and as king fight with a free and good conscience against evil and the devil in this life, and hereafter reign with him eternally over all creatures. (n.p.)

This part of the reformed confession offers a clear indication of the meaning of the concept Christ and its relation to the concept Christian. Jesus, meaning Redeemer, according to the preceding part of the Confession, was anointed as the Christ to be King, Prophet and Priest, and Christians share in his anointing.

This concept, emanating from the Christology of Calvin and his contemporaries, has recently been revisited by Welker (2013:209ff.) in his seminal reflection on Christology and its implications for Christian vocation. Welker (2013:209) uses the concept of the three offices of Christ as a striking defence of Christian faith in our time, where many people fall away from faith or find it difficult to believe or resort to a faith founded in the life of the pre-Easter historical Jesus only. Protest atheism, suspicion against religion because of its many misuses and failures to promote the common good, as well as the belief in the dominion of reason as the way to solve the problems of the world, have steadily secularised the Western world with its Christendom-culture. Welker's reapplication of the Reformed idea of God's revelation in Christ and his immanent reigning presence in the world as the eschatological Christ gave new impetus to the cosmological meaning and implications of the teachings about the three offices of Christ, and can serve as a solid answer to both secularism and the historical-Jesus movement.

Welker argues, with many valid references to reformed theologians in the past and present, that this reformed teaching has powerful and far-reaching implications for a world that suffers under the power of evil and death.

Furthermore, he frames this concept in the modern idiom and presents it as an answer to many critiques against Christian faith and life today. He integrates this part of his Christology in a plausible way in modern discourses about political and social reform, the need for compassion and peace, and the realisation of human dignity and human rights. His explanation does not resort to a one-sided public theology, such as the Political Theologies of the previous five decades, but provides a convincing theological model and indicates its relevance for this secular age. The Christology of Welker, specifically his explanation of the relevance of the three offices of Christ, is a welcome contribution to explaining and defending the deeply rooted and far-reaching relevance of Christian faith and morality to a secularising society – all founded on the reality of the royal dominion of the post-Easter and eschatological Christ in the presently emergent kingdom of God and not only on the life of the historic Jesus.

Instead of using the old reformed concept of the three offices of Christ (*munus triplex Christi*), Welker (2013:215) opts for another description, namely the 'threefold' office (gestalt) of the royal dominion of Christ, because these offices mutually penetrate each other, and pneumatic charisma are attached to all of these offices. The tendency in traditional theology to describe the offices as if they function in separate silos inhibits the richness of the concept of the threefold office of Christ and reduces the offices of Christ only to his work in the instituted church. The threefold *gestalt* of the work of the post-Easter Christ refers not only to the offices in the church, but to the whole immanent reign of God in the world, and the place and function of believers in Christ in this reign. As God's reign is a perpetually emerging reality, both immanent and transcendent, Christ has a Kingly, Prophetic and Priestly presence in the world. The implication of this is that God is never without his people (nor the people without God), whilst he exerts the liberating power of love and mercy in the kingly presence of Christ that must spill over in diaconal presence and the Christian humaneness of his followers in this world. Welker (2013) explains the cosmological relevance of the royal presence of God intelligibly in the following words:

> In the light of Jesus's pre-Easter life, the royal dominion of Christ and his own acquires clear contours and develops a clear message for freedom and diaconal love. In light of the outpouring of the Spirit, this same royal dominion revolutionizes hierarchical and monarchical organizational forms in the ecclesial sphere and indirectly, also political forms of rule and organization, since this king is at once both brother, and friend, or indeed one who is poor and outcast. (p. 238)

The threefold *gestalt* of the offices of Christ has tremendous implications for the church, Christian spirituality and celebrated worship. It enriches the meaning of the sacraments where the presence of Christ with his own is celebrated, it focusses on the living Christ present in his spirit and it enables the congregants to gain more and more knowledge of God, which is also

knowledge of salvation (Welker 2013:279). Worship with the exalted Christ is comforting, consoling and reinforcing. But the reign of the post-Easter Christ in this world with its royal, prophetic and priestly dominion also entails far-reaching transformative power in the world. Because it is characterised by love and humaneness, it needs to be accompanied by a praxis of love and by freedom mediated by that love. Christ and his people are the advocates of the praxis. The gestalts of his reign are transforming, both in the church and in the world. The reigning Christ and his own protest against all evil institutionalised, oppressive and abusive structures, call on liberating love, shaping free communities in the political and social spheres. They inspire acts of mercy and liberating deeds. The royal, prophetic and priestly presence of Christ motivates his own people to be driving forces to bring about transformation, understand their own woeful experiences such as illness and suffering, but also to understand and intercede for others in suffering. The moral agency of the Christian person is, in view of the royal presence of Christ. not only an obligation but a joyous and grateful experience around being there for the other. Thus far the valuable insights of Welker.

The idea of the offices of Christ that entails that Christian moral agents as followers of Christ are also anointed by the spirit of God to execute these offices in the world, is another important vision of Christian moral agency and a motivation for the dedicated life of the person in search for flourishing personhood. Another determinant of dedicated life is the biblical concept of stewardship.

■ Stewardship

The priestly office of the follower of Jesus is also enlightened by the idea of stewardship. The Christian moral agent is a steward in service of others just as Christ became a steward in the world. The richness of this concept becomes clear in the Christ hymn of Phillipians 2 where Christian moral agents are called to imitate the attitude of Christ. This passage reads as follows (Phlp 2):

> In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (vv. 5–11)

This hymn is an ethical poem but can also be considered as soteriological in nature. In a scholarly article about the deeper meaning of the hymn, Floor and Viljoen (2002:91) conclude that, although it was composed for Christological and soteriological reasons, the apostle's first motive was not to preach about

doctrine but to lay down a foundation for Christian living. The hymn presents Christ as the ultimate model for Christian moral action. As a result of his abasement, Christ took on the nature of a servant. The word used for 'servant' is the same as the word used for 'a slave' (*doulos*). As in the Hebrew Bible, the idea of slavery is used here to illustrate the relationship between God and his people. This imagery is also found in Romans 1:1 and 1 Peter 2:16. The slave was in service of his owner on a full-time basis and had limited freedom in accordance with the will of the owner. Whilst recognising his indissoluble divine nature, Christ came not with the power and splendour a glorified person, but as a servant. By taking the nature of a slave, Christ became human and humane (Martin 1997:171). He came not only in the service of God but also in service to people. He washed the feet of the disciples and called on them to wash each other's feet (Jn 13:12–17). He came as the compassionate God in the cloth of a servant to present, amongst others, the art of compassion – of living in services of others. Compassion [*co-passio*] is to 'feel-with-others'. Fedler (2006:178) indicates that compassion is a biblical foundation for morality. The compassion of Christ must be made real in the compassion of his followers. Compassion is the trademark of Christian attitude. In the person's willingness to serve, the humaneness of Christ, the ultimate servant, must be discovered. When a person feels the rays of the sun, he or she can see the sun. When a person is subjected to the compassion of the Christian moral agent, he or she sees Christ.

To encapsulate the identity, motivation and service of a servant, the word stewardship is fitting. The life of Jesus is not only the model for Christian life, as propagated by the followers of the pre-Easter Jesus only, but by 'making himself nothing' and in becoming human, Christ sets in particular the model for the servanthood of Christians. He is a ministering servant, a steward. Therefore, stewardship as a description of the purpose of human life is to the point. Bonhoeffer (1995:61ff.) developed this idea as a guiding principle in his explanation of the foundation of Christian ethics and the attitude Christians ought to express in addressing the ills of the world. He said on many occasions that the divine calling of persons to be stewards corresponds with the servanthood of Christ and appealed on the basis of this perspective for a compassionate this-worldly Christian religion that can raise out of the ruins of the 'other-worldly' Christianity he identified in the early 20th century.

The identity of the Christian person is to be a steward like Christ. The motivation of the Christian person is to be an active part of the process of renewal commenced by the post-Easter Christ, and the service of the Christian person is the exemplary execution of the compassion of Christ, his humaneness, his being there for the other and his love for humanity. The life of a person as a dedicated life is also enriched by the biblical perspectives on the reason, purpose and goal of human labour. The biblical perspective on human labour

is another illuminating and descriptive explanation of the dedicated life of the person under the reign of God, and a few remarks will shed light on this recognition.

■ Labour

In the first instance, the biblical idea of vocation refers to our daily labour as the execution of the cultural mandate. The cultural mandate came to the person before the fall, and therefore labour should not be perceived as the consequence of evil. Labour is not a 'sub-human' action, nor can it take on idolatry forms (Van Wyk 2001:429). However, evil impedes the execution of this command. Evil makes our daily labour difficult. God's curse on evil causes that the execution of the cultural mandate will confront many obstacles, which will lead to hardship. Persons will labour through painful toil and will eat food from it all the days of their lives (Gn 3:19). But a person needs not to view or experience labour itself as a punishment from God. After the fall, the command to work is repeated and falls within the framework of moral agency. Daily labour is part of the vocation of the person to act as an extension of God's own renewal of the world. God is at work also through the daily labour of the person. God equips persons with the gifts of the Spirit to utilise their talents to the fullest extent. Therefore, labour with the aim of renewing the distorted creation will eventually be included in the glory of the coming dispensation that will emerge with the second coming of Christ.

This ultimate purpose of labour, even performed with hardship, sweat and pain, eventually sanctifies human labour and what we achieve today with our daily task will be included in the re-created and restored new heaven and earth. The prophetic vision of John in the book of Revelation about the completion of the renewing work of God with his people as agents reveals that in the future completed universal kingdom of God, persons will rest from the sweat and pain of their labour and their 'deeds will follow them' (Rv 14:13). The nations will bring their glory and honour to it (Rv 26:14–16). The fruits of human labour, civilisation, culture, art and architectural beauty – everything aimed at bringing the beauty and latent possibilities of creation to fruition – will be part of the new heaven and earth.

The perspective of the future sanctification of our labour implies that labour can take two forms. Our labour can point to God in theocentric manner, or it can point away from God to ourselves in anthropocentric manner. Labour pointing to God becomes part of his renewing work and all it entails such as constructive development to the benefit of all, using natural resources responsibly, being creative to display the splendour of creation and further the common good. Theocentric labour will restore the ruins left over by evil forces and will curb all attempts to exploit the world we are living in. Such labour will be involved in beating swords into ploughshares,

and spears into pruning hooks (Is 2:4). On the other hand, anthropocentric labour tends to be destructive because it deifies this reality and adumbrates a human kingdom. History and the present age display many examples where anthropocentric labour endangers the common good. When deemed necessary, it will beat ploughshares into swords and pruning hooks into spears. It enslaves, exploits, dehumanises, serves human-designed futures and worships human reason and perceived unlimited abilities. It distorts art and culture, erects systems and structures of violence and aims to create a future without God – a kingdom of the world. Therefore, the labouring person has two choices: To engage in God's renewing activity and contribute to the future dispensation or to engage in the anthropocentric urge to create a humanly designed utopia. Just as in the case of all Christian moral agency, theocentric labour is worshipping God.

The life of a person as a vocation in service of God and creation as an essential part of flourishing personhood becomes clear when enlightened by the biblical–theological perspectives on gratitude, election, the threefold office of Christ, stewardship and labour. The range and contents of this dedicated life emerge when the synecdoche-like character of the Decalogue, as derived from congruent biblical theology, is investigated. The main tenets of the Decalogue will be addressed in the section 'the Decalogue' with the aim to identify the vocal points of dedicated life today in the pursuit of flourishing personhood.

■ The Decalogue

Besides the fact that the church embodies a social ethic as Hauerwas (1983:99) claims in his explanation of its moral responsibility as an exemplary community, it also has a social ethic flowing from the immanent reign of God. The foundation of this new ethic is the Decalogue, which has been given its full meaning by Christ and applied to all spheres of life by the apostles. They explicate the synecdoche-like character of the Decalogue as the new morality under the reign of God. Christian morality inspired by the Decalogue is a reaction to the redemptive action of God. In Exodus 20:1, God reminds his people that he delivered them from the slavery of Egypt and that they should respond to this liberation by living according to his commandments. Whilst Judaism, in the time of the New Testament, viewed the execution of the law as the way to appease God, Jesus and the apostles reiterated time and again that the law has a new meaning. The law, as the call to love God and the neighbour, demarcates the gratifying life of the person and the contents of flourishing personhood. The following contours of flourishing personhood can be derived from the Decalogue from the perspective of the new meaning given to the law by Jesus according to the ethics of the New Testament.

■ A living God with active moral agents

The Decalogue suggests that God is a living God, that God is in control and that God speaks to persons and involves them in God's re-creating activity. The commandments are not dead letters, but indicators of the new life resulting from his ongoing covenantal communion with persons. God is a living God in communion with creation and an active driving force in the renewal of everything. God's dominion and powerful reigning activity are imminent realities – these are present, are coming and will be completed. God is not a lifeless image in a temple. God determines human history and has the future in his hand. God is not responsible for evil, but generates and completes something new despite evil and its influences. God's active reign is the cause of all the good, beauty, love and peace we can experience and achieve within this age of raging evil. But this dominion is inclusive. The person is an intrinsic part of this dominion, not only as a submissive subject but also as a responsive agent of this dominion. Created in the image of God, persons can relate to God and exercise royal dominion as a tool of God's dominion.

VanDrunen (2014:68) argues that the proctological commission of the person, as well as the image borne in the redemption is in organic continuity with the image as originally displayed in God's act of creation. He refers to the relation between Genesis 1:26–27, Ephesians 4:24 and Colossians 3:10 not only to explain what persons are, but also what they have to do. Translated into the terms of this study, his argument entails that persons can live and be active in a relationship with the reigning God: they can find solace in God's immanent reign amongst all the distortions caused by evil, and they can exercise their dominion in the spirit of neighbourliness. The newness becomes visible where persons succeed to love and create lifestyles with an ethos of love, such as acts of forgiveness, reconciliation, peace and justice. It is God's dominion, presence in history, and management of persons as agents of renewal that brings wars to an end, that demolishes reigns of terror and that installs times of peace, enabling the common good.

The Decalogue with its synecdoche-like character is God's plan of action for the person in pursuit of flourishing personhood. The remainder of the present chapter will draw the outlines of this plan of action under headings capturing the essence of each commandment. This essence will then be applied to some pressing and highly debated issues in the current Christian–ethical discussions.

■ God alone

Firstly, the loyalty of the person as moral agent to God, who is the author of this plan, needs to be established. Therefore, no other 'god' might be served. Nothing else can become the centre or the ulterior motive of human life.

Idolatry was time and again a common temptation for the people of God in the Old Testament. On many occasions, they longed for serving the visible idols of the surrounding nations and became disillusioned with the dominion of the living God. They envied the customs of their surrounding nations and abandoned their own commission. For this idolatry, they were punished by God, but always within the confines of the covenant, which gave them the opportunity to turn back to God. In the New Testament, the followers of Jesus are continuously cautioned not to become subservient to the customs and aspirations of unbelievers. Jesus warns them against the formalist dead religion of the Pharisees and the deification of the temple (Mk 13:1–2). The apostles constantly reprimand Christians to turn away from the Mediterranean religions and the Greek 'gods', as well as the cult of the Caesar, because there is only one God and that is the God of the covenant – the Father of Jesus Christ.

Throughout history, persons faced many deceiving idols who promised a utopia without the living and present God, and these emerged in the forms of philosophies and ideas. The Roman Emperor was called '*dominus ac deus noster*' (our lord and god), and this belief controlled and dictated moral life in large parts of the Roman Empire for many centuries. Early Christianity had to struggle against this idol and its concomitant, anti-Christian culture. Roman culture produced some form of civilisation and promised eternal peace, but on Roman terms and at the expense of others. In many places, it was a reign of terror and destruction. European history revealed many such idols, who promised the good life and healthy philosophy, but became destructive forces and inhibited flourishing personhood. The Holy Roman Empire of Charlemagne and the cruelties of the Crusades come to mind in this respect. In modern times the inhumane and destructive waves of colonialism, communism, Nazism and indeed many other forms of fascism can be recalled. All these idolatrous movements endeavoured to capture persons with the promise of a good life and the justification of any means to achieve that. The result was immense suffering, dehumanisation and hopelessness. Human reason is a fabric of idols and a creative architect of promising ideals, but when the person attempts to disintegrate its dominion from God's dominion, flourishing personhood cannot be grasped. God alone and his inducement of the person is the guide to flourishing personhood. Therefore, God alone should be worshipped, and God's dominion must be proclaimed.

Missionary work in Africa still confronts idolatry in African indigenous religions where various forms of ancestor worship and animism are still very much alive, despite the tremendous growth of Christianity in this continent. In the early stages of missionary enterprises, Christianity came to Africa in a European form, closely linked to Western culture, forms of worship and rationalism, and European ecclesiastical structures overwhelmed

African spirituality. In many instances, missionary work resulted in a clash of cultures and the missionary enterprise was perceived as the forerunner of eventual colonisation and destruction of indigenous lifestyles. The Zulu king, Cetshwayo kaMpande, is said to have observed about colonialism: 'First comes the trader, then the missionary – then, the Red Soldier' referring to the British annexation of the Zulu kingdom in South Africa (Young 2015:1). European missionary enterprises established mission stations and these institutions contributed to the establishment of many Christian schools, colleges, and hospitals. However, Christian missions supported colonisation and social stratification and raised growing suspicion against Christianity (see Boesak 1984:4). On the other hand, Christianity was accepted to the extent that it could be synchronised with traditional African religions, which led to the development of many so-called African Initiated Churches where main tenets of Christianity and indigenous religions were merged into a typical African syncretistic religion (Nolan 1988:3).

Preaching the God of Scripture and the concomitant dedicated life poses a huge challenge to reformed testimony in Africa. The Christian message must be liberated from its historic cloth of 'whiteness' and Western culture. It needs to be 'de-colonised'. However, it must also be liberated from syncretism. It needs to be inculcated in the African idiom in a way that speaks to Africans, and at the same time introduce them to the only God (see Ntwasa & Moore 1973:21). Both colonial Christianity and black theology failed in this respect because both departed from contextual hermeneutics that obscures the God of Scripture with living contexts in Africa. Political theologies assisted struggles for liberation and succeeded to re-affirm the public responsibility of reformed theology and concern for the poor, but it did not produce a vibrant decolonised theology for the society 'after liberation'. The public voices of churches have fallen silent, and Christianity in Africa oscillates between pietist quietism and enthusiastic spirituality. And within this 'religious atmosphere', societies are delivered to the forces of economic exploitation, corruption and constant political turmoil.

What does it mean to serve the only God in Africa? In my opinion, an answer is to be found in the life of the early Christians. They were confronted by many gods, imperial powers and seductive ideas, but they eventually identified the God of Scripture and devoted their lives to this triune God. A vibrant Christianity was born which spoke to rich and poor, slaves and free people, rulers and subjects, philosophers and artists, and all persons longing for flourishing personhood. They succeeded to escape the conquests of the idols of their time and developed in their own sphere of faith. This virtue of ancient Christianity must come to life again, and that can be achieved if we were to re-introduce the modern world to the only God and the life-enriching reality of his immanent reign.

■ Idolatry in the name of God

The second commandment relates closely to the first. This command forbids making images of any part of creation and to worship this image. It can be applied to idols or visible images of God. Followers of the Reformation regarded votive images, as used in the Roman Catholic tradition, as idols, and ventured many violent protests and the destruction of these statues in cathedrals and other places of worship. I do not want to enter into a debate about Roman Catholic imagery or the use of icons in the Orthodox tradition or symbols in African Initiated Churches, because I think that the commandment also has another much profound message. A link to this profound message can be found in the explanation of this commandment in Lord's day 35 of the Heidelberg Catechism. According to this creed, we are not to make an image of God in any way, nor to worship him in any other manner than he has commanded in his Word. Although this creed also involves the command to the use of images as the 'books of the laity', it points to the deeper meaning behind this, namely to the embroiling of God into human enterprises – in other words, to clothe human endeavours with the cloth of a divine purpose or to create God in the image of the human being.

Over the centuries, this kind of idolatry in the name of God plagued humanity. We can refer to the Constantinian Christianity, the Holy Roman Empire, the Caesaropapacy, the Crusades, the Spanish conquest of South America and European colonialism. Another good example is the intention of the Puritans as stated in the Mayflower Contract of 1620 (Bradford 1620). More recent examples are the theology of the German Christians (1932–1945) (Heschel 2010:13) and Christian Nationalism in South Africa. I have discussed the Mayflower Contract, and other recent examples of idolatry in the name of God, in a recent article (see J.M. Vorster 2019a).

Under the rubric of idolatry in the name of God, I would like to address in particular the errors of Christian Nationalism in South Africa and its contribution to the turning of the racist presuppositions of British colonialism into the ideology and political system of Apartheid, with destructive consequences for black and white persons in South Africa. I will also attend to the errors of the liberation theology that lies beneath the struggle against Apartheid because both set good examples of idolatry in the name of God.

The history of South Africa since 1652 is marked by continuous manifestations of hostilities between the indigenous inhabitants of the region, what is now known as South Africa, and migrants from Europe. The latter groups were Dutch, French, Indian and British. The many struggles for the possession of land are well known. The discovery of diamonds and gold and the rapid growth of the mining industry caused a further influx of settlers from Europe as well as from all over Southern Africa by indigenous communities. All these factors eventually contributed to a heterogenous plural society when the Union of

South Africa was formed under British colonial control in 1910. Up to that time, large areas of land occupied by black tribes were dispossessed by the colonial authorities under the principle of *terra nullius* (so-called no-man's land). African people owned land communally and were not acquainted with the idea of individual ownership. Dispossession of land took place over a long period of social stratification, as described by N. Vorster (2003:9–115) in his study about the church and human rights in South Africa.

This process found its apex in the Land Act of 1913, which reserved land for white and black people, and which formed the foundation of total social segregation. Because of the fact that the economic hubs were in white areas, black people were impoverished. They had to work as migrant labourers and as 'foreigners' in the 'white areas' for meagre wages (see in this regard, the expositions of Elphic 1997:351ff.; Terreblanche 2002).

The Anglo–Boer war between the British and the Afrikaners, the indigenous white nation which developed over two and a half centuries and stemmed from Dutch settlers and French Huguenots had a huge effect on South African society. The war resulted in a division between English South Africans and the Afrikaners and was fuelled by British atrocities in their concentration camps for Afrikaner women and children and black people, where thousands died of starvation and ill-treatment. The Afrikaners defined themselves as a new African nation with their own language and culture, resisting British imperialism on the one hand, and fearing black domination on the other.

Two kinds of opposing nationalisms developed: Black nationalism with the aim to retrieve land and share in the wealth of the country as people with freedom and dignity, and Afrikaner nationalism with the aim of establishing a white republic along the lines of the social principles of the Calvinist Reformation. Black nationalism was driven by the ANC (est. 1912) and Afrikaner nationalism by the National Party (NP) (est. 1912). The ANC was not allowed to become part of the all-white Parliament of the Union of South Africa (est. 1910), whilst the NP had the opportunity to further Afrikaner ideals in parliamentary politics. When the latter came into power, it followed a strict policy of racial segregation under the Afrikaans term of Apartheid (segregation), which was fuelled by the ideology of Christian Nationalism. The execution of this policy separated black and white persons in every sphere of society. With the emergence of the Republic of South Africa in 1961, the policy developed into the establishment of 'homelands' for every ethnic group amongst the black population under the name of Separate Development.

This brief historical survey is necessary to understand the development of the two ideologies of nationalism, which both eventually claimed divine sanction and clothed themselves and their actions with a 'Christian' outfit. Both performed their actions in the name of God. The NP and its theorists adopted the ideology of Christian Nationalism aimed at the division of the

South African population into various nations. This policy controlled every aspect of life. At birth, babies were registered along racial lines (white, mixed race, Indian or black). Mixed marriages and sex between 'non-white' and white persons were prohibited by law. All amenities, urban and rural areas, schools, universities and public transport were segregated between white and 'non-white'. The motivation was to protect the white nation and secure its future, and the moral justification was found in a theology of Apartheid.

Christian Nationalism, however, showed no concern for the human dignity and human rights of black persons, and was imposed with dictatorial authoritarianism by the all-white South African government. Many churches amongst the Afrikaners supported and promoted this ideology, which smothered flourishing personhood, not only of black persons but also of white persons. Black people were oppressed and dehumanised, whilst white people became prisoners in a rigid authoritarian structure with control and discipline. Critical Christian voices were silenced with harsh security laws, and freedom of speech and academic freedom were only tolerated when executed in favour of the system.

The struggle of black nationalism against Apartheid took a turn to violent resistance when it became clear that change through dialogue would not be tolerated. In the latter decades of the 20th century, the struggle of the ANC was deeply influenced by a radical neo-Marxist Liberation Theology, which propagated Christ as a political liberator, the church as a political agent of social revolution, violence as a justified means of transformation and the kingdom of God as a socialist dispensation. In this respect, the theorists of the movement drew largely on the perspectives of Cone (1973:217ff.), Gutierrez (1973:220ff.) and other exponents of the emerging political theologies of the late 20th century (see Fierro 1977:129–304).

Many black Christians saw the war of liberation, with the assistance of communist regimes, as a Christian response against the oppression of Apartheid. Two nationalisms clashed, both had churches on their side, had Christians as leaders and both had Christian chaplains to encourage their soldiers; both used the Bible, both claimed to be Christian and both fought for their cause in the name of God. In between were many black and white prophets, criticising violence and oppression, calling for peace and dialogue, and warning against the enslaving power of these 'Christian' national ideologies. Their testimonies and the visionary leadership of Nelson Mandela and F.W. de Klerk eventually liberated South Africa from these suffocating ideologies and created room for persons to pursue flourishing personhood in a free society, still with many ills, but also with unlimited possibilities.

This short interlude about South Africa serves to trace the extent to which idolatry in the name of God can dehumanise persons and suffocate flourishing personhood over a long period. It also indicates that idolatry in the name of

God blossoms when it is rooted in the soil of oppression, dehumanisation, and the degrading and shackling of persons. Confronting idols is not always easy, especially when they present themselves in the form of a kind of Christ-figure, speaking the language of the Scripture and marketing the kingdom of God in fascinating catchphrases. The answer to these ideologies will be *semper reformanda* (always reforming) – constantly revisiting our motives, ideals, human relations and responsibilities with the assistance of the prophetic voices of Christian persons worldwide. In this respect, the constant search for an open society with the rule of law, free press, uninhibited dialogue, limitation of power and prophetic churches is indispensable. A dedicated life needs to cherish liberation from these ideologies posing in the name of God and agents of his reign.

■ Glorifying and dignifying dialogue

The third commandment forbids the misuse of the name of God. In the Old Testament, God's people were not even permitted to express his names in their communication. The names of God used in this commandment are Yahweh and Elohim (Alt et al. 1977:119). These names point to God as a person, but each refers to a certain attribute of God. Yahweh describes the God of the covenant, who enters into a relationship with his people. Elohim describes the holiness, omnipotence and omnipresence of God. In these names, God revealed God-self to the person, but that did not reveal everything about God. VanDrunen (2014:90) argues correctly that this revelation is not exhaustive, because the covenant of creation did not reveal everything there is to know about God. What we can know about God is revealed in his special revelation by the written Word. God reveals God-self to such an extent that the person can honour, worship and reflect God's image. Any attempt by human reason to develop a complete concept of God will thus be a futile exercise.

The names of God, as far as God reveals God-self in the spoken and written Word, say something about God's essence. God's names are one with God's essence (Brunner 1949:120; Routledge 2008:81). The names of God in the Old Testament indicate God's holiness, majesty, omnipotence and omnipresence (Vriezen 1966:370). Yahweh particularly refers to God's relationship with God's creation and people. Yahweh was present everywhere where the name was found (De Vaux 1988:327). God is not an abstract silent God, such as the gods of the surrounding nations, but a living, speaking God in the lives of his people and in the destinies of the neighbouring nations. This active presence and relationship are explained by way of the metaphors of a father and a mother (see Finlayson 1970:476).

Respect for the name of God was respect for God-self and everything God represented. Misuse of God's name was therefore perceived as degradation of God and an encroachment on God's holiness. The misuse

could take the forms of open blasphemy, a false oath in God's name or the negligence to live the holy life as a response to God's holiness. The name of God could also be misused by the verbal abuse of fellow persons. Proverbs 17:5 taught the people of God that whoever 'mocks the poor shows contempt for their Maker; whoever gloats over disaster will not go unpunished', and Leviticus 19:14 instructed: 'Do not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block in front of the blind, but fear your God. I am the Lord', connecting respect for God and fellow persons. Honouring the name of God entailed, inter alia, dignifying communication – words that are constructive and tranquil.

The New Testament reiterates the fatherhood of God and God's intense relation with people. They can pray to the father like Jesus taught them (Mt 6:9–13) and as Jesus himself did (Jn 17). God is also described as caring, like a mother (Mt 23:37). God's holiness must be reflected in the lives of God's people because they know God in Christ (I Pt 3:13–16). Particularly important is the depiction of love as the essence of God in the epistles of John (see I Jn 4:7–21). God is love and the persons knowing God will also love each other. Human love reflects the love of God and is an indication of knowing the essence, that is, the name of God. On the other hand, hatred and abuse run against his essence and degrades the God-self. Misuse of the name of God takes place not only in cases of blasphemy but also where persons violate the dignity of others by way of swearing, insults and verbal abuse (Ja 3:9).

Communion means communication and that is true of communion with God and interaction with other persons within the many varieties of human relationships. By using language, we praise God and interact with others. Language as part of our dedicated life serves constructive relationships and enriching the lives of persons. God bestowed humanity with the gift of communication to serve flourishing personhood and the gift of artistic persons to use words to enrich lives with literature and poetry. Over centuries, literature and poetry guided people out of difficult and dire situations by pointing to new possibilities. These forms of art brought light in dark times and served people with new visions when hope declined. It reminds persons of what true humaneness could be and eloquently reveals the faces of evil. To speak, to communicate, to write are gifts of God to the person in search of true personhood. Therefore, words have got to honour God by respecting the dignity of others.

But these gifts of God can also be used in a destructive way. Words can promote evil and obscure the splendour of God's work. They can cast a shadow over the pursuit of the common good. Words can be immensely destructive. Words can further hate and hostility. They can fuel wars and cause suffering. Used by persuasive orators with evil ideals, words can motivate communities to do harm, oppress, divide and destroy peace.

The implications of this commandment of God are crucial for South African society today. Coming from a dispensation that aimed consciously at dividing people and establishing a society controlled to the core by authoritarian directives, derogatory group identification is still alive and well. The way men speak about women, black people and white people speak about each other, and the derogatory terms used to describe gay people and foreigners indicate that the legacies of the past continue to determine the attitudes of many South Africans. These destructive terms are defined by the concept of hate speech. Hate speech leads to hate crimes. Therefore, the promulgation of the Prevention and Combating of Hate crimes and Hate Speech Bill promulgated by the South African Parliament in 2018 can be welcomed. This bill (Republic of South Africa 2018) defines a hate crime as an:

> [O]ffence recognised under any law, the commission of which by a person is motivated by that person's prejudice or intolerance towards the victim of the crime in question because of one or more of the following characteristics or perceived characteristics of the victim or his or her family member or the victim's association with, or support for, a group of persons who share the said characteristics: age; albinism; birth; colour; culture; disability; ethnic or social origin; gender or gender identity; HIV status; language; nationality, migrant or refugee status; occupation or trade; political affiliation or conviction; race; religion; sex, which includes intersex; or sexual orientation. Any person who commits a hate crime is guilty of an offence and liable on conviction to a sentence as contemplated in Section 6(1). (p. 4)

In the long process of reconciliation after centuries of segregation, separation and racial preferences as well as gender-based and homophobic hate speech, the necessity of such laws is understandable. However, jurisprudence alone will not solve the problem in the long term. What is necessary is the development of a culture of respect for personhood that overarches all the biases of people captured in racist, sexist and homophobic ideologies. The South African community still has a long way to go because real and deep-rooted reconciliation is not cheap. It requires intensive search of the inner self, confession of guilt, turning away from preferences of the past, admission of guilt, confession, and a willingness to redress and restore and forgive. The idea that a new liberal constitution with the protection of rights and liberties and an equal society in juristic terms will produce a quick-fix reconciliation, as held by many well-meaning South Africans, has been proven to be wrong. Reconciliation is not cheap and does not live in words on paper but in the hearts and minds of people. In the pursuit of flourishing personhood, persons ought to learn to use language that serves the spiritual and moral upbuilding of the community. Responsible persons will not use abusive language but will heed the call of God in the third commandment to cherish reconciliation with glorifying and dignifying language when speaking about God and, by extension, fellow persons.

■ Serviceable labour

God called on his people to keep the sabbath holy. His creational work ended with a day of rest. This metaphor is used in congruent biblical theology to describe the cycle of life and the role of worship of God and the purpose of human labour. In the Old Testament, the sabbath is linked to God's covenant with God's people. God acted on behalf of persons and on the sabbath, they had to respond by devoting the day to God. The day is linked with creation, but also the history of liberation (Dt 5:15). God gave the people a place of rest after the hardships they had suffered in the desert (Dt 12:9; Ps 95:11). The sabbath is also a sign of God's communion with his people and their sanctification (Ex 31:13). Keeping the sabbath was the guarantee for finding 'joy in the Lord' (Is 58:14–15), a blessed life (Is 56:2), and a life of prosperity under the orderly rule of the kings (Jr 17:19–27). God punished profaning of the sabbath (Ez 20;13; Neh 13;17–18). In the time of the exile, prophets described the sabbath as a seminal sign of the covenant and the symbol of God's faithfulness. The New Testament congregations did not adhere to the sabbath-ethics of the Old Testament, despite the strict rules of the Pharisees (De Vaux 1988:482). They convened on the first day of the week for worship, table communion and interaction, possibly to commemorate the resurrection of Christ (Douma 1996:138). This practice was continued in the history of the churches, and in the reformed tradition the first day was set aside for the assembly of believers in congregations to worship God, ministry of the Word, administration of the sacraments and instruction of children.

Douma (1996:112) and De Bruyn (2013:104) relate the fourth commandment also to the ethics of labour. This is a valid connection, because the idea of human labour in Scripture is closely related with the creative activity of God, as has been argued in the section 'A committed relationship', in Chapter 5, where labour is discussed as an angle of approach to the description of the gift of life as dedicated life. I want to take the argument further. As said earlier, God's creative work continues in the daily labour of the person and is an intrinsic part of flourishing personhood. What, then, is the core characteristic of human labour? Douma (1996:302) draws attention to fact that the Hebraic word for labour is the same as the word for service. And labour must be done in the honour of God (Rm 14:8; 1 Cor 10;13; Col 3:17; 1 Pt 4:11). People serve God in their labour just as much as they worship God in a church. Amongst others, two perspectives on labour come to mind when reflecting about this principle.

Firstly, human labour may not lapse into life-consuming activism driven by the urge to become rich and wealthy. Labour can force a person into captivity and enslavement when it becomes the all-encompassing means to achieve material wealth or success as an ulterior motive in life. Such a motive degrades Christian moral agency and inhibits flourishing personhood. Whilst labour must be remunerated fairly, it ought to render a service, and this moral

principle must be the ultimate motivation to work. Secondly, whilst labour is service, there cannot be superior and inferior work. Although responsibilities may differ, and although different occupations require different degrees of education, the religious character of labour determines that all work and all occupations are of equal importance to God, and that every person is responsible to God in the fulfilment of his or her vocation (see J.M. Vorster 2007:97–100). Seeing labour in the greater context of a service and as part of God's renewing creativity brings fulfilment and joy. Labour with the purpose to serve God and humankind enhances flourishing personhood.

Employers have the responsibility to organise labour and construct the environment of labour in such a way that the labouring person experiences joy and has the ability to employ his or her own gifts and talents, and feel part of the achievement of the end product. The labouring person may not be utilised as something, but respected, motivated and dignified as somebody. Labouring persons should not be (or feel themselves to be) small parts in a huge manufacturing or producing machine, where they do not feel responsible for and proud of the end product and their contributions to this within the bigger picture of service delivery. What is expected from the labouring person ought not to obstruct the person's other relationships such as marriage and family, nor may it harms physical and mental health by ignoring the need for rest and enjoyment of life outside the confines of daily occupation. Labour as an instrument of God's creative work and can always be experienced as such.

The labouring person can draw joy and fulfilment from his or her vocation because of the eternal relevance of the work done with a theocentric vision, but also because of the value of the vocation in service of others in the renewal of the world. Daily labour grows in the present and comes to fruition in the future society. Furthermore, other persons, especially the poor, can reap the fruits of our labour (Ec 11:1) and the beauty of creation can shine in our products. Cultivating, creativity, doing, caring, serving, restoring, healing, reconstructing and all other vocational actions enrich the life of the person and may be appreciated as indispensable components of flourishing personhood. Person can enjoy their occupations and find fulfilment in their daily labour when they realise that it, although sometimes goes along with hardships, is God's tool in the renewal of creation and the coming of the Kingdom.

What is said above about labour boils down to the core characteristic of human labour: Theocentric labour is joyful delivery of service and a necessity for flourishing personhood. The following values can be derived from this principle:

1. Labour must be constructive.
2. Labour must be satisfying, enjoyable, and motivating.
3. Labour must be remunerated fairly.

4. Labour must be dignifying.
5. Labour must feature in a context of justice and human rights.
6. Labour must serve the common good.
7. Labour must not enslave.

A huge part of a persons' life is consumed by their occupation. The way in which a person experiences labour determines quality of life. In the end, the question will be: Was all the sweat and hours of labour contributory to the achievement of something worthwhile? Were my hard work and meticulous inputs instrumental in serving the common good? Can the future generation reap the fruits of my labour? The answer to these and other similar questions will determine the value of my service to humankind as an instrument of God's renewing activity in the world.

■ Ministering authority

Authority comes from God. God rules over creation and, although evil distorted creation, God did not withdraw from God's artistic work, but restored and continues to restore and renew the splendour of creation. Christ liberated creation from the bondage of evil and introduced humanity to the restoring reign of God, who has come in Christ, taking creation to completion by the immanent, powerful and active spirit of God. Creation as a whole yearns for the completion of God's renewing work and the final *gestalt* of God's reign. In this emerging reality of restoration on the route to completeness, wholeness and fullness, God installs authority and calls persons to authority to be of service in God's renewing activity. Only the authority of God is absolute. The authority of persons in authority ministers authority in service of God for the well-being of society and the common good.

By using the example of obedience children have to uphold towards their parents in a family, the fifth commandment in its synecdoche-like character deals with the ethic of all authority. God institutes authority and calls people to positions of authority to prevent chaos and nurture a peaceful society. Authority must limit the destructive effects of evil that plagues humanity in this age where the kingdom is present, whilst the forces of evil nonetheless continue to undermine the immanent reign of God in Christ and the work of the spirit of God. Under the authority of God, civil authorities, parents and leaders are bestowed with authority and they must administer it with wisdom because they are, in the end, responsible to God, the giver of all authority. Administering authority is a huge and far-reaching responsibility, and people in authority must be worthy of it (Barth 1948:107). Reformed theology always promoted respect for the authority of the rulers of the day whilst its execution did not undermine the authority of God (Witte 2007:52). When persons are confronted with the opposite situation, however, the person should be more obedient to God than to people (Ac 5:29). Reformed ethics made provision

for the right to civil disobedience when persons reach a point where they are obliged to choose between the authority of God and life under God's immanent reign, and distorted forms of authoritarian rule.

Persons are obliged to be compliant in all spheres of authority, and when they are in authoritative positions, they have a duty to serve the common good by means of just and peaceful rule. Authority under the immanent reign of God may never be distorted by abusive and self-centred power abuse. Such abuse inhibits the freedom of persons to live in peace and harmony. When the powers of the day claim absolute power, they become oppressive structures that tend to dehumanise and exploit persons. When rulers see themselves responsible only to their constituents in politics, or to the interests of a few, or their shareholders, they tend to become vehicles of power abuse by the few against the many. Violations of the dignity and rights of persons are commonplace in power structures driven by a small group of power-hungry individuals, and many examples of these exploitations can be found in authoritarian governments, corporations and civil societies. Modern history reveals many well-known examples of fascist regimes who were responsible for genocides, inhuman policies and destruction. Power abuse forces persons into servitude and captivity, and is the most dangerous and devastating force against a person's quest for flourishing personhood. The danger of power abuse is a threat to sound ministering not only in the domain of politics but is an inherent and constant threat in all instances where authority is in question.

Power abuse in patriarchal family structures dehumanises women and creates anxious children who suppress their innate talents and ideals to satisfy the selfish intentions of a dominating father figure. Abusive patriarchalism is a destructing force in South African society and is mostly founded in religious persuasions. In African traditional religions, fundamentalist Muslim and fundamentalist Christian persuasions, the authoritative father figure is still romanticised and perceived as the driver of a good society. The potent attempts of the South African government and Christian leaders to act against male domination and the abuses of children and women in domestic violence must be welcomed and supported, but this society still has a long way to go in the struggle against chauvinism. The high levels of domestic violence by the domineering father figure in South Africa today is proof that this form of power abuse is still ubiquitous. The development of a responsible ethic of ministering authority in the domain of family life may well be high on the agenda of all role players in family education.

The development of the ethos of human dignity and human rights and the increasing emergence of liberal democracies inhibits the development of fascist regimes; the world is a better place than a century ago. South Africa has made great strides in this respect since 1994. Despite prevailing inequality because of poor political management and incompetent and careless

implementation of sound economic plans, the dignity of all persons is respected, and every adult person can exert full political rights on all levels of state authority. Civil societies used the rule of law with good effect thus far, where abuse of power by the rulers threatens democracy and freedom. However, this situation must not make Christian moral agents complacent. In pursuit of flourishing personhood, persons must take care that authoritarian power abuse by the political players do not impede the search for flourishing personhood. By using the political suffrage, the proven avenues of civil society and prophetic testimony, Christians, in their role of envoys of God's reign, ought to act as watchdogs and whistle blowers against power abuse by the state. This principle of the idea of the political covenant as maintained in the social ethic of the Reformation is of the utmost importance, as it has been over the centuries in the midst authoritarian monarchies, dictatorships and fascist regimes.

Authoritarian power abuse infects many other social domains. Extra-large globalised mining-corporations controlled by managements with unlimited and unchecked powers can become organs of state capture that manipulate governments to provide all kinds of licences to excavate and mine areas at the expense of inhabitants and the environment. Many examples of these abuses were revealed in African countries (see Ilesanmi 2004:71–77). Furthermore, some huge manufacturing corporations move their industry to countries with poor human rights records to enhance their profits by using cheap labour and even child labour. Manufacturers of arms for military purposes bribe officials to gain contracts for deliveries without accountability or ascertaining what the armaments will be used for. The assessment of Gunnemann (1986:68) that the development of trans-national corporations with their complex divisions of labour across national lines, their international structures and ability to move capital quickly throughout the world often surpasses governments and escapes government controls, is still valid today. The obligation of moral agents to resist all advents of enslaving power abuses today must also address the often obscured ways of authoritarian power abuses by mega-corporations. Rothchild (2005:123) is to the point with his plea that corporations must be designed and managed in such a way that they become moral agents to deal with the many ethical problems arising from globalised market-driven economies.

Even churches are prone to power abuse. Major assemblies, synods, moderators and self-acclaimed leaders often forget the biblical concept of ministering authority in the service of God, entering the stage as absolute rulers of congregations and controllers of the free consciences of believers. Many schisms in reformed ecclesiastical communities resulted from synodocracy, that is, where local congregations and individual congregants are forced to adhere to majority decisions of the 'higher' authority against their own convictions. In the reformed tradition the Presbyterial system was developed in church polity, which entails that major assemblies have 'broader'

authority and not 'higher' authority (Van Dellen & Monsma 1954:133). No person can claim to be the head of the church – not even of a local congregation. However, this very important principle was seldom applied. In the history of reformed churches in Netherlands, the United States and South Africa, schisms occurred because of the abuse of the authority of synods and the inhibition of the freedom of conscience of local congregations and individual believers. Synods are assemblies of congregations who adhere to the same confessional standards and church polity. These assemblies ought to deal with doctrinal issues and may not dominate all areas of the worship and testimony in local congregations. Where synods abuse their authority, divisions creep in, and these have contributed in the past to schismatic tendencies in reformed ecclesiastical traditions, resulting in numerous disturbing and highly negative effects. Resolutions of synods as assemblies of local churches need be driven by maximum consensus and not by mere majority vote.

Power corrupts and ultimate power corrupts ultimately. The well-known statement was made by Lord Acton (1834–1902), a British historian of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, in a letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton in 1887 (Acton 1887:1). He observed that a person's sense of morality lessens as their power increases. Therefore, ministering authority must not deteriorate to abusive power. The leader must be a steward. Church polity, designed by the Synod of Dordt (1618–1619), introduced a very important principle for office bearers in the church, and that is the principle of periodical retirement. Office bearers could serve for a certain term, subsequently relinquishing their offices. This principle was introduced to prevent stagnation and serve ongoing reformation as well as preventing tyranny in the church. This idea was also maintained in the development of constitutionalism in the political domain and was implemented in the Constitution of the United States, which determines that a President can serve only two terms of four years each. Modern liberal democracies followed this example in attempting to limit the possibility of power abuse. This idea can be applied in most spheres of authority today, with the aim to prevent authoritarianism and the creation of abusive and corrupt leaders.

God-given authority is to minister power to the benefit of all, and not lapse in power abuse for the benefit and enrichment of a corrupt few. Christians, knowing what responsible execution of authority is, ought to be custodians in society against abuses of power wherever it appears. They must always call on leadership to execute their authority as servants of God and must support systems where accountability of leadership is legally enabled. They must support the rule of law, the independence of the judiciary and the freedom of the media to call power abuses to account.

Ministering authority is necessary to promote peace and orderly association of persons in a corpus of people. The execution of this authority can secure

the possibility of persons to pursue flourishing personhood by enjoying and implementing the splendour of the gift of life. Ministering authority is visionary and inspiring and creates open spaces for dignified lives and idealism. Abusive power oppresses, obstructs personhood, lessens the sense of morality, and eventually unleashes the forces of violence and revolt. God calls on persons to obey and honour authority, but persons in authority need to be worthy of that obedience and honour.

◾ Thriving life

The responsibility of Christians to respect and protect the life of persons has been discussed earlier in this text with reference to abortion on request, physician-assisted suicide and capital punishment, in view to the fact that human life must be considered as a precious gift from God. Christian moral agents are called upon to choose life. The sixth commandment of the Decalogue, in its synecdoche-like explication, touches on further issues related to human life and protecting it. This commandment also condemns any human action destructing the splendour of the life of the person or that inhibits ways and means to enjoy a thriving life. It deals with the motives, desires and attitudes of persons that can lead to direct actions of violence, but also to injuring people psychologically or emotionally. Every action aimed at the restriction of flourishing personhood can thus be deemed immoral.

The immorality of murder, assault and self-destruction is self-evident and needs no additional explanation. The gift of life may not be destroyed under the immanent reign of God. What we need to address are attitudes and societal structures that serve as fertile breeding grounds for violence. Violence erupts from attitudes of hostility, envy, hatred, wrath and the lust for revenge. These attitudes come to fruition in active violence, but also in social structures that rigidly limit the living spaces of people on the foundation of certain religious or ideological presuppositions. In this regard, corporal punishment of children, bodily harm, and infliction of pain in domestic violence and abuses spring to mind. It also blossoms in many forms of emotional violence such as verbal abuse, belittling, humour at the cost of the vulnerable and the degradation of others. The fifth commandment condemns thus not only killing other persons but also all forms of offensive violence and actions that can result in counter-violence and hostility. On the other hand, the condemnation of violence and the attitudes that fuel violence call on persons to enhance possibilities and open avenues to live a thriving life and to pursue flourishing personhood.

The Christian tradition made a case for the justified use of violence when necessary for protection, self-defence and the prevention of disorder within the ambit of the law. These forms of violence became known as legitimate and morally acceptable defensive violence. Pacifism is also a topic of Christian

ethics that has been debated in peace-related discourse over the years, and some scholars argue that the fifth commandment calls for total pacifism. An influential modern exponent of this position is Hauerwas (1983:12, 2000:318). For an evaluation of his view, see Ott (2012:245–257). I do not intend to re-open the debate about the justification of certain forms of violence in certain circumstances, but would address other related issues in modern society that, in my opinion, need attention, because they impede the pursuit for flourishing personhood.

A perennial form of violence in societies today is systemic. In the 1960s, the social analysis of the French neo-Marxist philosopher Marcuse used the term 'one-dimensional society' to describe systems that are essentially violent because of over-regulation and enforcement of laws that direct and control every aspect of a person's life (Marcuse 1971:19–140). He argued that highly industrialised society, although politically democratic, had become violent because it is controlled by economical and technical regulation of life. Fixed interests manipulate persons' needs and inhibit freedom. Persons do not live but *are lived by* the highly controlled society where their real needs are subjected to unreal ones created by the controlling highly industrial society. In such a society, suffrage is, in his opinion, not an instrument of change, because a free election gets rid neither of masters nor slaves. This society is thus without real opposition, and therefore he describes it as a 'one-dimensional society', which is inherently violent because of its enforcement of manipulating controls and inhibition of real freedom. His critique was specifically aimed at western democratic societies of the sixties of the previous century and had a potent influence in the philosophy (and theology) of revolution of the seventies. The social analysis of Marcuse can be critiqued, especially his low esteem of democracy and free markets, and his inability to propose viable alternatives besides his proposition of ongoing revolution even with violence (or counter-violence, in his view) if necessary.

However, Marcuse is in my opinion correct that an over-controlled society, even a democratic one, with unnecessary, rigid rules can become 'one-dimensional' and breed systemic violence. Even a democratic society can 'over-control' its persons with unnecessary measures limiting their choices, ideals and movement – and the execution of these measures by forceful execution of the law. Systemic violence usually manifests in police brutality, dehumanising disciplinary actions, corporal punishment of children, harsh treatment of prisoners and convictions not in balance with crimes. It also comes to the surface when jurisprudence favours the rich, who can afford expensive counselling, whilst impairing the poor, who cannot afford adequate legal representation. Systemic violence raises its head in the media and especially social media where people are 'convicted' without their right to *audi alteram partem* (hearing of the other side). In one-sided emotional reporting, journalists can wield systemic violence against subjects when they

attempt to convince their readers or listeners of the culpability of a person, irrespective of due process of law. It happens that protesters in European cities can resort to violent measures in their own city to protest against a police action in the United States, solely on account of a news flash on the screens of an international television news bulletin or in social media. One-sided and misleading journalism is just as much a form of systemic violence as restraining social structures. Under the banners of freedom and democracy, systemic violence in many forms can inhibit flourishing personhood, and moral agents could address this ill by constantly re-evaluating and reforming the strengths and constraints of their societies.

The quest for an open society, beneficial for flourishing personhood, leads us to ask other pressing questions, such as: How do we present violence to the community? Do we present it as something negative and destructive or as a legitimate way of solving problems? Or as a fair means of revenge? In this respect, I want to voice my concern about some segments of the worldwide entertainment industry – especially some the productions made in Hollywood. Despite many constructive and artistic presentations from the film industry, we are today confronted with an influential entertainment culture where especially the film industry pollutes societies with the idea that violence can be a normal part of life. Swearing, verbal abuse, insulting and bodily harm inflicted by the hero against the villain portrays the person's superiority and heroism. Violence and forcefulness are romanticised and the 'Rambo-mentality' glorified as an appropriate way to 'fix a problem'. Violence as an act of 'justified' revenge is romanticised in many 'action movies' along with violence as a valid means to solve problems.

An empirical study by Bushman et al. (2013) of gun violence in American movies published in *Pediatrics*, the official Journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics, finds that even if the youth do not use guns:

> [*T*]hese findings suggest that they are exposed to increasing gun violence in top-selling films. By including guns in violent scenes, film producers may be strengthening the weapons effect and providing youth with scripts for using guns. These findings are concerning because many scientific studies have shown that violent films can increase aggression. Violent films are also now easily accessible to youth (e.g. on the Internet and cable). This research suggests that the presence of weapons in films might amplify the effects of violent films on aggression. (p. 1018)

It seems that exposure to a culture of violence in many movies feeds attitudes that can resort to violent behaviour. To express violence with the aim to picture its destructive and immoral character can be part of educational art, but not when all kinds of physical and emotional violence are portrayed as something normal and even necessary in solving problems. The Christian moral agent is duty-bound to always choose the option of life and the quality of the life of a person in the face of the culture of violence in our modern age.

The gift of life to the person and the possibilities to pursue flourishing personhood by nurturing all the splendid and beautiful characteristics of this gift may not be blemished by violence in all its destructive forms – from killing to defaming another person with the use of words as well as activities and structures that obstruct it.

■ Sanctified sexuality

In the explanation above of the relational life of the person with reference to the relationship of marriage and family, I have expanded on marital life and family and some other outstanding and important issues centring on this. I have argued that the Christian moral agent as an envoy of preaching in the church has to be a vocal and inspiring agent for all the splendour and blessings of this aspect of the relational life of the person. Marriage and family add tremendous value to flourishing personhood. The seventh commandment, as read from the perspective of congruent biblical theology, is all about vibrant, healthy, fulfilling and inspiring family life. This short commandment, forbidding adultery, focusses on the conduct of persons within the marital relationship. I want to reiterate here what I have debated earlier, namely that the relationship within marriage and family is a foundational part of the relational life of the person and has a direct bearing on flourishing personhood. Therefore, these relationships ought to be a focal point of Christian moral agency. Protection and enrichment of marriage and family are essential parts of our dedicated life as persons living under the immanent reign of God.

In current Christian–ethical discourse, issues related to marriage receive much attention from many hermeneutical angles of approach. Divorce, adultery, re-marriage, same-sex marriages, cohabitation and the question as to whether marriage can be thought of as a mere social construct, as well as relating topics, feature prominently in this discourse. I attend to some of the pressing issues in the section dealing with marriage and family as essential parts of the relational life of a person. In this section, I will discuss the issue of sexuality because of its new actuality in the context of liberation hermeneutics. Arguing from the perspective of a hermeneutic of congruent biblical theology, I raise the argument that Scripture labels human sexuality as a sanctified heterogeneous activity within a permanent marital relationship between husband and wife.

As a result of the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, people today live in a culture where free sexual relations are perceived as normal conduct and part of the autonomy of the person over his or her life and decisions. Life-long relationships of mutual trust and commitment and *de jure* marriages are no longer the norm for family life in western societies. Cohabitation (sometimes called *consensual union* or *de facto marriage*) has developed into a novel family form in contrast with conventional marriage. In a well-researched article

founded on scientific empirical work, Guzzo (2014:826) finds that in the United States, 'cohabitation is now the modal first union for young adults. Even most legal marriages are preceded by cohabitation. Besides, fewer cohabitations evolve into marriage'. According to Guzzo, these 'contrasting trends may be due to compositional shifts amongst cohabiting unions, which are increasingly heterogeneous in terms of cohabitation order, engagement, and the presence of children, as well as across socio-economic and demographic boundaries'.

Guzzo constructs 5-year cohabitation cohorts for 18- to 34-year-olds from the 2002 and 2006–2010 cycles of the National Survey of Family Growth and premarital cohabitations to examine the outcomes of cohabitations over time. Compared to earlier cohabitations, those formed after 1995 were more likely to dissolve, and those formed after 2000 were less likely to evolve to marriage even after accounting for the compositional shifts amongst individuals in cohabiting unions. Higher instability and decreased chances of marriage occurred amongst engaged and non-engaged individuals, suggesting society-wide changes in cohabitation over time. A similar study conducted by Kasearu and Kutzar (2011:307–325) with reference to Europe reveals that cohabitation following these patterns is also a rising phenomenon in most European countries.

The trend of short-term cohabitation is also rising, and this indicates that the relational aspect of sexuality becomes less important because of 'on and off' cohabitation, especially amongst the younger generation. Furthermore, free sexual activity without any form of relation has become part of modern forms of recreation and features prominently as normal activities in the entertainment industry.

Scripture depicts marriage as the sphere of sanctified sexuality. Sex is not the free exercise of human desires and the satisfaction of bodily lusts, but an intimate, loving union of husband and wife with mutual consent in a permanent relationship of mutual trust and love. The same principles apply to men and women who prefer a *de facto* marriage. This devoted and physical act expresses the deep spiritual nature of the covenantal marriage. These are the essentials of marriage as a covenant and therefore Christian ethics runs against the trends and patterns of sexuality in modern western societies.

Because of the essentials of the marital and familial relationship of the gift of life, Scripture constantly denounces ill-treatment and dehumanising of spouses, wilful desertion, divorce, and adultery and sexual promiscuity. In his study of reciprocity of faithfulness in the light of the 10 Commandments, Bosman (2004:274) explains that sexual intercourse outside the confines of a protective and secure loving marital relation is prohibited because it interferes with the covenant and thus with the relation with God. Adultery disavows the relation of mutual trust and degrades the life of the person. Arguing from this point of view, one can even conclude that free sex is dehumanising for

everyone involved because it is without commitment, and thus an action where the 'I', the 'me', and the 'my' motivate the selfish deed. Free sex is me-sex.

Moreover, modern western culture, where sexuality becomes commercialised to feed a consumer lifestyle, especially by exploiting the sensuality of the bodies of women, is not less than a resurgence of the degrading reduction of female persons to mere bodies. Pornography, nowadays available to anyone – even children – and the portrayal of uncommitted sexual relations as a normal part of life in media and movies, as well as short-term cohabitations, are assaults on the dignified life of the person. The 'somebody' degenerates to a 'something'. The body of the person is more than a mere biological entity such as an animal with instincts and desires that need to be fulfilled. Personhood is more than sensuous and erotic bodily encounters. 1 Corinthians 6 describes the body of the person as follows:

> The body, however, is not meant for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, 'The two will become one flesh'. But whoever is united with the Lord is one with him in spirit. (vv. 13–17)

And then follows the admonition (1 Cor 6):

> Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body. Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore, honour God with your bodies. (vv. 18–20)

Sexuality is an expression of the triangular relationship between Christ, husband and wife, and whilst the covenant is not periodical or temporary, the sanctified sex of *de jure* or *de facto* marriage is inextricably linked with permanence, mutual consent, mutual love and mutual enjoyment. Sanctified sex is we-sex.

Gay sex and marriages between gay couples are currently vigorously debated in Christian ethics. I have dealt with the 'pro' and 'contra' arguments in another publication (see J.M. Vorster 2007:227–244), and will not repeat the arguments in this presentation. Suffice to say that all the arguments boil down to the hermeneutical approach of the interpreters of Scripture. A hermeneutical approach that regards all ethical principles in Scripture as time-bound and as cultural constructs of ancient societies will approve of gay sex and found their argument on some or another modern scientific anthropological finding and presupposition. They argue that the biblical scholars of today have more knowledge about homosexuality than the biblical authors, especially Paul. The approval of gay sex and gay-marriages is rooted mostly

in modern-day liberal hermeneutics. A hermeneutic of congruent biblical theology encounters difficulties with such a point of view because the consistent biblical message about gay sex in the Old Testament as well as in the New Testament denounces it. It is not valid to argue that the prohibition on gay sex in the 'holiness code' (Lv 18–20) has lost its relevance for the New Testament people of God in the same way as other cultic practices and regulations, because references to homosexuality in the New Testament (Rm 1:25–27; 1 Cor 6:10; 1 Tm 1:8–10) indicate that the prohibition has not been lifted. A hermeneutic of congruent biblical theology leads us to the understanding that Scripture denounces gay sex and presents a marriage as a monogamous heterosexual relationship of mutual love, commitment and permanence.

However, the debate is basically hermeneutical and, although most biblical interpreters agree that promiscuous gay sex as well as promiscuous heterosexual conduct are immoral, the validity of a gay relationship of commitment, mutual love and permanence needs to be part of an ongoing debate. An ethic of flourishing personhood can contribute to the debate by reflecting on the gay relation of love, commitment and permanence within the confines of the gift of life and an ethic of flourishing personhood. All people are, after all, persons, and may pursue flourishing personhood. Christian moral agents have the calling to guide fellow persons in this pursuit with respect. Therefore, Christian moral agency needs to denounce all forms of homophobic actions and conduct, discrimination, and abusive treatment – just as in the cases of all other dehumanising treatment of persons.

Christian moral agents, experiencing the joy of marital and familial relationships, ought to be the guardians of the monogamous heterosexual marriage and chaste sexual relations. True and honest Christian testimony cannot bend over under the current defence and furtherance of the ideology of unlimited sexual freedom and the irrelevance of marriage and family life in modern societies. The noble values of marriage and family and sanctified sexuality ought to be demonstrated and professed by Christian moral agents. The person appreciating the gift of life, who is sincere about flourishing personhood, is duty-bound by the immanent reign of God to address the destructive and dehumanising effects of the current culture of free uncommitted sexual conduct and all forms of sexual promiscuity. Experiencing marriage and family as covenantal *gestalts* and sanctified sexuality as a joyous part of the gift of life deepens true personhood.

■ Personal property

The eighth commandment of the Decalogue, read in its synecdoche-like contexts, deals with the principle of owning and managing property. The gift of life establishes the right of ownership. Property rights in modern liberal

democracies are generally considered to be individual rights of a person or group of persons in a corpus with a common interest. Congruent biblical theology recognises the right to own private property within the limits of the principle which reads as follows: 'The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it' (Ps 24:1; 1 Cor 10:26). The ethic of ownership can be derived from the moral principles exposed by congruent biblical theology about possession and acquiring land. The right to land ownership was founded on the belief that all land belongs to God and that he appointed persons to be stewards of his property. In his research about the ethic related to Land and Property in the Old Testament, Wright (1990:19) finds that property rights in the Old Testament were observed as 'divine rights', and were protected by the inalienability of family land as well as security under the law of property in general. Wright points out that the head of the family owned the land of his patrimony legitimately, not simply in terms of the technical legality of his inheritance: ultimately, he and his family held it from Yahweh. Women could also own land (Nm 27:5, 36:1–13). Leviticus 25:23–28 lay down the principles and rules for the inalienability of ownership and for its redemption. When someone became poor and sold property, the land had to be redeemed by way of recovery by a kinsman redeemer, or through the later recovery by the seller when the person had the means, or by eventual return of the property to the seller in the Year of the Jubilee. Every fiftieth year, which was announced with the sound of a trumpet, was the time of the general emancipation of all inhabitants of the land. The land lay fallow and every male person re-entered his ancestral property. Exceptions were made around dwellings because they were not regarded as means of support (cf Wright 1990). These measures served the alleviation of poverty.

There is much to learn from the laws of ownership in the Old Testament. Wright (1990) argues convincingly that, viewed within its congruent theological perspective, land signified:

> [*T*]he place of communion with God, but also the place where the 'holy people' could live according to certain specific values in terms of the laws of God's covenantal relationship with God's people. This lifestyle is characterised by security, inclusion, fellowship, blessing, corporate sharing, and responsibility. The deeper meaning of all these instructions is the prevention of poverty and oppression of the poor. (p. 88)

His finding validates the point of view that the ethic of the Old Testament warns against accumulation of property at the expense of the poor, but also against dishonest and corrupt ways of getting hold of the property of others. Hence the commandment against stealing.

The land of Israel had no relevance in the New Testament. According to Wright (1990), the Christian community was 'faced with a situation where the rights to private ownership were recognised', and there is no indication

in the ethic of the New Testament that such a practice was against God's will (Kingston 1992:376). However, the way in which this was executed was the same as in the Old Testament. Wright (1990:96–97) explains that God's concern for the poor and the needy and God's instruction that people should have the same concern is just as important in the New Testament as in the Old (1 Jn 3:17; 2 Cor 8:13–15; Jm 2:1–7). The paradigmatic and typological interpretation of land which relates to the person and work of Christ carries the socio-economic thrust of the ethic of the Old Testament into the New Testament's moral prescriptions about practical relationships within the community in Christ. The same is true of the Jubilee. The new community in Christ applied jubilee principles to its socio-economic life. This application becomes clear in the parallel between Deuteronomy 15:4 and Acts 4:34.

According to Wright (1990), the ethic of ownership, property of land, dispossession and stealing boil down to the following principles:

1. Tenure and private ownership are permitted, although it must be considered within the framework of divine ownership. This principle entails that property accumulation cannot become the sole purpose of life. Ownership is a means to an end. It must be qualified by stewardship. Each individual person has the right to ownership, but property needs to be managed in such a way as to benefit the well-being of the fellow person.
2. In the light of this principle, it is fair to argue that ownership must not lead to monopolies of individual persons or interest groups and be managed in such a way that some parts of society become highly affluent and control the means of wealth creation to such an extent that people are impoverished and denied any means of improving their own predicament. The same is true of state capture by business on the one hand and capture of private enterprise by the state. Monopolies, state capture and ultimate state control have proved their ultimate route to exploitation and impoverishment of a population.
3. Fair access to the accumulation of property to all persons is of immense importance, particularly for the prevention of poverty because of human-made social restrictions.
4. Possession ought to be considered against the background of the calling to earn possessions by honest labour and enterprise.
5. Land ownership and utilisation of land must serve the purpose of reconciling people and preventing social inequalities to further the social and economic well-being of the community. (p. 96ff.)

Misuse of property, dishonest accumulation of property by stealing, corruption and the false impressions of justice are forbidden in the eighth commandment. The command is to labour and trade honestly and fairly and to promote and protect the interest of the fellow person.

In this respect, a short discussion of land restitution as a response to the seizure of land by colonial powers over the past few centuries will be appropriate. Above, the way in which colonial powers expropriated land belonging to indigenous tribes under the European '*terra nullius*' principle has been mentioned. Land restitution became a highly emotional and debated issue in the post-colonial era, especially because indigenous people were still suffering under colonial expropriations. They claimed that they had a historic right to the restoration of their ownership of their traditional land. On the other hand, current owners argued that they were the rightful owners because they purchased the land legally, whilst it had been sold multiple times in preceding centuries. Current owners could not pay the price for the atrocities of colonial rulers centuries ago. They were protected by the fundamental right which read, as found in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, that no person may be deprived of his or her property (United Nations 1948). This conflict of interests caused vigorous debates and even violent attempts to re-possess land in many of the previous colonies.

These interests must be reconciled. Stealing cannot be justified by ulterior motives and can also not be redressed by confession of guilt and remorse alone. Stolen property must be returned to the rightful owner. But what if it becomes impossible to return the stolen property? The moral answer will be that the lost property could be compensated for by offering something of the same value to the rightful owner. How can these moral values be translated into policies of redistributive justice to pave the way for reconciliation and peace? I have discussed related issues of land restitution in South Africa in an earlier publication (see J.M. Vorster 2007:41–60) and will deal here only with these questions. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa makes provision for fair land restitution whilst honouring the right of individual persons not to be arbitrarily dispossessed. Persons dispossessed of their land in terms of the 1913 Land Act were empowered to lodge a claim to their land before 31 December 1998. Where possible, and with consent of the present owner, the land was then expropriated with compensation based on the market value, and was subsequently returned to the previously dispossessed owner. Where expropriation was not possible, the government compensated the previously dispossessed owner in monetary terms according to the market value of the property.

These constitutional conditions seem to be morally sound. The property rights of the present owners are respected, the concerns of the previously dispossessed person are addressed, and fair distribution and reconciliation are served. However, the implementation of these policies, though agreed upon by all the applicable parties, left much to be desired. Mere incompetence of the relevant government officials, large-scale corruption and lack of political will inhibited the morally sound process to such an extent that, after 25 years, distributive justice has not been served to the extent that it should have been.

Present owners, especially productive farmers, are left with uncertainty about their property, and dispossessed people cannot escape from the perennial poverty caused over many years by colonial land expropriation. Despite reasonable and morally sound constitutional conditions for distributive justice, the restitution process has stalled. Since 1996, South African governmental administrations have not executed their responsibility to alleviate poverty, promote reconciliation, and serve justice and peace.

The ethics of personal property within the context of the gift of life urges moral agents to fulfil their calling to remind the present government of its God-given responsibility to execute its duties in this respect. Withholding justice from the poor is injustice to the poor and inhibits their longing for flourishing personhood. Also, the constant harassment of present owners, who are mainly farmers who purchased their properties fairly and who fulfils an indispensable role in food security for the total population, is caused by authoritarian misuse of power and not ministering authority. The failures of the South African government in this regard leads to unnecessary social turmoil and inhibits the process of reconciliation and nation-building.

The privilege and right to own personal property are part of God's gift of life and the managing of property aims to serve flourishing personhood not only of the property owner but of society – especially the poor. Owning property is a means to an end, and is just an additional way for a person to live a dedicated life.

■ Striving for liberating truth

The words of Jesus to the Jewish Christians in John 8:32 have reverberated over the centuries in many situations where persons were confronted with distortions of justice and being misled to serve immoral ends. His words reading that the 'truth shall set you free' became an adage for many people striving for freedom and justice. Although these words feature firstly in the context of soteriology, they are also a clear indication of the command to understand, grasp and nourish the truth, because the truth is deeply embedded in the immanent reign of God. Seeking truth is essential for the pursuit of flourishing personhood because truth is liberating and healing. Evil breeds deceptions and lies and darkens persons' perceptions of truth. Life loses its direction and quality if people are unable to find the answer to Pontius Pilate's rhetorical question: 'What is truth?' Inability to get hold of truth in the age of brokenness keeps people in bondage. The lie enslaves and makes persons blind, obscuring the way to flourishing personhood. It forces persons into the captivity of insecurity, doubt and a loss of direction. Freedom from this bondage is possible by way of the redeeming work of Christ, and this is the teaching of John 8:32. Morris (1971:456) explains that the adage about the truth that sets free is interwoven with the person and work of Jesus. It is saving truth that liberates and heals.

When the command that you shall not give false testimony against your neighbour is read and understood within the synecdoche-like character of the Decalogue, and is evaluated within the context of congruent biblical theology, it becomes clear that the concept is not only closely related to God and to the saving activity of Christ but also the whole spectrum of human life under the immanent reign of God. Scripture repeatedly teaches the sanctity of truth. This is done in a variety of ways. Satan is called a 'liar' and the 'father of lies' (Jn 8:44) showing us that the opposite of what is true is not holy. Truth comes from God and flows from his triune presence and actions to his people, and from his people to the world, as a liberating and transformative force. Without the truth of God, no real freedom can be enjoyed. A person who does not hold on to the truth cannot know God nor relate to God and cannot grasp what the immanent reign of God and the cross of Jesus embodies. Psalms 119:16 describes truth as the sum of the Creator's Word (119:160) and reminds us of how the Lord draws near only to those who call upon him in truth.

Truth as a theological and a moral concept is wide-ranging and interrelated. The concept denotes an attribute of God as well as a motivating force for human activity. God is truth. Jesus proclaims himself as the way and the truth and the life. No person can know or come to the Father except through Jesus (Jn 14:6). Jesus calls the Holy Spirit the Spirit of truth, which will come and guide the disciples into all the truth (Jn 16:13). Jesus prayed that his followers will be faithful to the Word because the Word is the truth (Jn 17:17). He affirms the inviolability of lawful and factual oaths and vows by telling us it is better not to swear an oath at all if we have no intent to keep it (Mt 5:33–37; see also Nm 30:2 and Ja 5:12) Paul calls Timothy a worker handling the truth of God (2 Tm 2:15) and describes the church as a pillar and a buttress of the truth (I Tm. 3:15). God, Jesus, the Spirit, the church, and the believer are the agents of truth. Where God reigns, the truth pours down. Where the cross of Christ is accepted in faith, captives become free; where the Spirit of God and of Christ teaches, lives transform; and the pursuit of flourishing personhood becomes possible. Where the Word speaks, truth gives guidance, and where the Christian person executes his or her dedicated life, society reaps the fruit of truth.

People are susceptible to lies, especially when these are accompanied by false promises of a better life for all. This is what Bonhoeffer (1995:358ff.) experienced in his confrontation with the powers of the Third Reich. Many Germans were misinformed by deceiving propaganda and cover-ups of atrocities and war crimes. He then theorised about what it meant to 'tell the truth' in such a context. Referring to the grandeur of truth as the essence of God's immanent reign and its liberating effect, he reminds us that 'truth-telling' is, firstly, a deeply religious act. Truthful speech is owed to God and not to humans, because God is not a general idea or principle but a living Person in relation with people. Truthfulness can only be concrete when it is truthful

before God. Truth relates to God and reality and telling the truth must penetrate the circumstances of the truth-seeker. The ethic of truth cannot be detached from the reality where the lie manifested. A concrete truth is truthful when it exposes a concrete lie. His reflections on concrete truthfulness could have been prominent in post-war theological reflections on truth, impunity, justice, and accountability: unfortunately, these were not published because of his execution.

However, Bonhoeffer' ethic of truth-telling echoed strongly in transformed and liberated colonies over the past seven decades. In many of these countries, Truth Commissions were established to deal with past injustices in a manner that serves reconciliation. Of these, the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission attracted global attention. This commission was tasked to establish as complete a picture as possible of the causes, nature, and extent of gross human rights violations that were perpetrated from 1960-1995. The Commission also had to facilitate and grant amnesty to people who made full disclosures of the relevant facts related to atrocities and abuses and make recommendations about the future prevention of such violations (South African government 1995:5). The purpose was to facilitate reconciliation between victims and perpetrators, serve justice, and reveal the atrocities that had taken place. Moreover, the process was aimed at designing a better society and creating social conscience with a view to avoiding the violations of the past, the colonial mentality, racism, and abuse of power, and invoking sensitivity for human dignity and human rights.

What was the outcome of this process? Many empirical studies in the Human Sciences attempted to find an answer to this question and others over the past two decades. My interest is in the part of the question dealing with the liberative quality of the process. Was the truth-seeking process liberating and conducive to the pursuit of flourishing personhood in a society that had kept people captive for many centuries? A thought-provoking empirical study was published by Stein et al. (2008:462–468). These scholars attended to shortcomings in the process and concluded that, although the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) may not have met the early expectations of South Africans, namely that reconciliation and forgiveness would suddenly heal all the wounds, many people were exposed to the TRC and participants upheld a moderately positive view of the process. The researchers emphasised that the TRC was an imperfect process: some of the identified perpetrators had not been brought to book and victims were not often adequately compensated. They mention that the effects of the TRC at an individual level may have been positive for some, but negative for others. Sufficient evidence was however found in some data to support and validate the conclusion that the South African TRC has been a transparent and effective social process that may serve as a useful model for similar commissions in other parts of the globe.

In my opinion, the TRC process was liberating in the sense that victims had the opportunity to speak about their pain and loss of dignity under Colonialism and Apartheid. Some could look the perpetrators in the eye and speak their mind without interference and obstruction. There were confessions of guilt and expressions of forgiveness which were widely published and televised. Many local processes of confession, forgiveness and reconciliation resulted from the TRC. Speaking and listening to the truth was indeed liberating despite certain shortcomings. Furthermore, the liberating truth opened a vigorous debate in South Africa about racism and spilled over to gender issues, homophobia and other forms of inhumane treatment. On the other hand, the process revealed the fact that political liberation, free exercise of suffrage, a new liberal constitution and freedom under the law do not guarantee immediate reconciliation, the eruption of a new culture of humaneness, and healing of pain and feelings of inferiority. Most of the critics of Apartheid had it wrong in this respect. They saw the solution to all the ills of Colonialism and Apartheid as though embodied in political rights. Political rights, though highly important, do not guarantee reconciliation and human dignity. The pursuit of flourishing personhood needs more than opened social and political spaces. It needs the constant inspiring power generated by the gift of life and all the innate qualities of this gift. A person heals, overcomes pain, bears insults, grows and eventually blossoms when he or she draws on these innate qualities in the first place, and it does not depend on open spaces alone. Sustainable reconciliation and nation-building needs more than a political solution – it needs a deep-rooted change in morality and character ethics. The South African community is still in need of such a change and Christian moral agents have to attend to this need.

Liberating truth is threatened today by many misuses of social media and many new forms of communication established by electronic science. Social media is influential in positive and negative ways. Its contribution on the positive side is that it enables persons to stay in touch with those who live far away – even across international borders. People can communicate and share fun, interesting and informative content. Furthermore, it gives corporations and businesses a way to engage with customers. The positive aspect of social media was highlighted during the worldwide social lockdowns caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. It also served the purpose of revealing atrocities in some countries to the global community. Obstructing truth and covering up atrocities and corruption have become difficult since the emergence of social media. It can be, and in fact has been utilised to serve liberating and healing truth.

On the other hand, this new development also has a negative side and is prone to damaging misuse. Social media is a sharp 'two-edged sword' (Kim, Moravec & Dennis 2019:933). It can be used as an enemy of liberating truth and a powerful force of captivity in a labyrinth of lies, falsities and deceit.

Any person can share anything, including material that may not be accurate or may in fact be pertinent untruths, without any form of control. In some cases, real harm is done when people spread inflammatory, unverified or outright false information. This immoral conduct can be detrimental for other persons or groups of persons, such as when someone is bullied and vilified online. Disinformation can also have a harmful impact on some spheres of society. It may be too soon to evaluate the long term effects of 'fake news', manipulation of electoral processes in a country by outside forces, and the promotion of false information to promote or destruct ideas, scientific findings or products.

Several studies report the negative influences of fake news by social media and propose measures that can be taken to limit these, for instance research recently published by Kim et al. They report that 'more than 60 percent of adults acquire news from social media, primarily Facebook, and the proportion is increasing'. The problem of fake news is thus likely to become more serious and widespread. Moreover, a greater proportion of fake news articles are shared on social media than real news, and users play a considerable role in the fact that fake news gains momentum (see Kim 2019; Romans 13:1–4). This tendency is proved by the fact that 23% of social media users report that they have spread fake news. False articles spread faster than true ones, primarily as distributed by persons. Users also tend to believe articles that align with their beliefs because of *confirmation bias* and this tendency makes them more gullible when faced with posts crafted to their point of view.

According to the research of Kim et al. (2019), there are three important differences between 'news articles on social media' and 'traditional media' that make it harder for social media users to recognise fake news:

> The first is the mindset of users. People visit social media with a hedonic mindset. Individuals in a hedonic mindset are less likely to think critically than those in a utilitarian mindset, causing confirmation bias to prevail. Secondly, on social media anyone can create 'news' – real or fake – and the news spreads uncontrolled throughout the Internet as social media users share it news with their contacts. (p. 934)

This 'democratisation of journalism' replaced quality control by journalists with a putative interest in truth, supplanting this with unqualified and amateur users who 'usually do not choose the source of the articles they see'. In the case of 'traditional media', the user first picks the source, for instance newspapers, TV or online news sites, and is generally cognisant of the nature of the source. Facebook conversely presents a mix of articles from many different sources, such as friends, sources based on past use and advertisers who have paid to place their content into the user's newsfeed. Whilst people are more likely to believe and share articles that align with their beliefs because of confirmation bias, fake news takes advantage of this inclination.

These authors propose that whilst the spreading of fake news on social media is an important problem facing society, information systems researchers have an obligation to mitigate the problems created by this new information system (see Kim et al. 2019). The key issue for them is whether these experts can redesign an information system or social media such as Facebook to reduce the impact caused by those who intentionally misuse it to spread false information (Kim et al. 2019), They then propose a rating system to identify fake news and lower its influence. I am not qualified to comment on the value and efficacy of their proposal, but their analysis is sufficient to call for an ethical response of this nature.

Liberating truth situates in the moral agent, who views truth as an obligation to God, as Bonhoeffer (1995:358ff.) reminds us. Structures, controls and jurisprudence can assist the moral agent in seeking and telling the truth, but in the end, liberating truth is served by persons who respect truth as an obligation to and before God. The pursuit of flourishing personhood depends on liberating truth and this liberating truth can be grasped and advanced because, under the immanent reign of God, truth and truth-telling are precious gifts flowing from the renewing act of Christ on the cross. Therefore, people can also be free from the bondage caused by the lie with all its appearances, forms and destructive effects in the world today. Christ as the way to the truth, the guidance of the Spirit of truth, and the church as a pillar and buttress of the truth are all indications and guarantees that truth can prevail and can overcome the obstacles to flourishing personhood created by lies and deceits. Therefore, Christian moral agents ought to be the upholders of liberating truth in this age of extensive and often unrestrained information.

■ Live with a vision

The last commandment forbids coveting with reference to the properties of other persons. In his explanation of the law as the source of knowledge of sin, Paul describes coveting as the root of all evil (Rm 7:7–11). Evil emerges with the intention of a person to contravene any of God's commands. The reformed tradition echoed the instruction of Paul. The Heidelberg Catechism (Lords Day 44) describes the prohibition in both negative and positive terms. On the one hand, the command cautions that not even the slightest thought or desire contrary to any of God's commandments should ever arise in our hearts. On the other hand, we may see in this command an appeal to hate all evil and delight in all righteousness. The righteousness refers to a godly and virtuous life before the Lord. This exposition of the command can thus be regarded as a fitting conclusion of the Decalogue that again emphasises the execution of the law as an act of gratitude for redemption in Christ and the reality of the transforming reign of God.

To my mind, this conclusion of the Decalogue is a call to live with a vision. False and selfish intentions obscure the purpose of human life, which is to be an instrument in God's renewal of God's creation. When the focus of life moves away from this vocation, the person becomes like a lost person in a desert seeking for direction and nourishment. With an obscured vision or no vision at all, the pursuit of personhood becomes a laborious and difficult process. The intention to be an agent in own service breeds a lifestyle of self-centredness. Self-interest then becomes the name of the game called human life. Self-centredness does not tolerate other interests and needs and comes to fruition in an overwhelming attitude of perennial competitiveness. Persons with blurred visions are continuously competing for more wealth, more benefits and bigger shares of everything. They manipulate relationships to feed their own needs and ideals. They strive for power because they regard it as the golden route to self-enrichment and satisfaction. They conspire with the man-made idols of every age to strike deals that serve their interests – almost always to the detriment of the common good.

God's immanent reign gives persons a vision. The vision is to pursue the splendour of flourishing personhood and to deviate from all the obstructions that may blur this vision. This vision can overarch constraints when a person remains committed to human life as a dedicated life amongst all the other noble qualities of life. The synecdoche-like character of the Decalogue, as excavated from the rich elements of congruent biblical theology, brightens, directs and constantly redirects this vision. The vision will not be obscured if persons remain dedicated to being stewards in the service of God and his renewing creation with the aim of experiencing the gift of life as flourishing personhood in accordance with God's intention for God's human creature.

Congruent biblical theology teaches us to view and appreciate the gift of human life as a unique life, a sacred life, a dignified life, a relational life and a dedicated life. Each of these qualities are relevant for an ethic of flourishing personhood. But, ultimately, life under the reign of God is a life blessed by God. This biblical idea is a refrain in God's communion with his people and furnishes us with yet another angle to understand the gift of life, because he blesses his people to be a blessing to others. What does this belief entail for an ethic of flourishing personhood? In Chapter 7, I will deal with the blessed life and its relevance for an ethic of flourishing personhood.

A blessed life

◼ Introduction

God frequently blesses his people in both the Old and the New Testaments. In the Old Testament, the words *barak* and *berakah* as used in their historical context indicate a person as the object of blessing. The idea is to provide someone with a special power or authority to fulfil a task or to enhance its life. The creation narratives are marked with the theme and terminology of blessing. God blesses the creatures he has created (Gn 1:22) and the person (Gn 1:28, 5:2). Even after the entrance of evil, God blesses Noah (Gn 6–8), Abraham (Gn 12–25) and his descendants and eventually the nation of Israel and its leadership. In the New Testament, the blessings are connected to Christ and denote spiritual blessings, as well as the gifts of the necessities of life. The blessings took many forms in the different historical contexts, but all forms point to two major themes. Firstly, the blessing is given within a relationship, and secondly, it serves the well-being of persons. The relationship is the covenantal relationship between God and the people under his immanent reign, and well-being refers to the wellness under his reign. God also employs persons as moral agents to extend his blessings to others. Persons can bless other persons in the spiritual realm, such as the priests in the Old Testament and the apostles in their testimonies to their assistants, the people surrounding them and the early congregations. They can also bless others by their moral agency. Therefore, life under the immanent reign of God is a blessed life with

two waves. First the blessing of being blessed and second the God-given privilege of being a blessing.

■ The beatitudes

The prominence of God's blessings in a congruent biblical theology becomes very clear in Jesus's beatitudes in the Sermons on the Mount (Mt 5:3–12) and the Plain (Lk 6:20–23). The beatitudes have been studied, discussed and applied throughout the history of Christianity as the foundation for how Christians can find solace under the reign of God. They emerged in all theological traditions as the foundation of Christian life and as the core of Christian spirituality. The beatitudes in Matthew 5:3–12 begin by touching on the 'poor in spirit', who realise their own destitution and their total dependence on God. Then Jesus speaks to 'those who mourn, for they will be comforted'. The meek will be blessed 'for they will inherit the earth'. The blessing of those who have a hunger and thirst for righteousness is the promise that they 'will be filled'. The merciful will be blessed 'with mercy shown to them'. The 'pure at heart', will be blessed, 'for they will see God'. The blessing of the peacemakers roots in the fact that they 'will be called children of God'. Those who are persecuted because of righteousness and because they are insulted and because of Jesus and his name are blessed with the 'the kingdom of heaven'. Some earlier exponents related the blessings solely to the future eschatological dispensation, whilst scholars in modern times tend to explain these blessings as wellness for sufferers in this world under the immanent reign of Christ. For a well-argued scientific-grammatical exegesis of these beatitudes in Matthew, see Grossheide (1954:65ff.).

My concern is the meaning of these blessings for God's people here and now under God's immanent reign. What is expressed here in this very popular Christian testimony is the link between God's immanent reign and daily life – a life flowing from the cross of Christ. After his seminal survey of the beatitudes, Bonhoeffer (2015b) commented:

> Having reached the end of the beatitudes, we naturally ask if there is any place of this earth for the community which they describe. Clearly, there is one place, and only one, and that is where the poorest, meekest, and most sorely tried of all men is to be found – on the cross at Golgotha. The fellowship of the beatitudes is the fellowship of the Crucified. With him it has lost all, and with him it has found all. From the cross there comes the call 'blessed, blessed'. (pp. 113–114)

Bonhoeffer's striking remark reminds us again of the essence of biblical theology, being that the immanent reign of God which came on the cross turns judgement into blessings that give meaning to life amidst disappointments, despondency, cruelty, injustices and hopelessness. These blessings fill life with abundant happiness and joy, which is what flourishing personhood is all about.

To my mind, the Sermon on the Plain in Luke 6:20–26 is a good reflection of who is being blessed and what being a blessing means as core elements of flourishing personhood. Therefore, I would like to offer a perspective from this angle of approach. My focus is on Luke 6:20: 'Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God' (Lk 6:20). Battle (2009:50) rightly says that this decree in the Sermon on the Plain challenges political ethics today because of the focus on the poor. However, much more can be derived from this passage because essentially it points to the transformative power of God's immanent reign in the lives of his people. The poor reflects the brokenness of persons and the blessing indicates the radical change God brings about by Word, Spirit and fellow moral agents. Through the blessing of the living, the immanent God guarantees that flourishing personhood can be grasped and experienced even in this tumultuous age.

■ Being blessed

Luke's version of the Sermon on the Plain can be understood within the broad delineations of his Christology. But this statement immediately raises a question that is currently high on the agenda of Christian–theological reflection, namely how could his Christology be explained? The historical surveys of Ford and Higton (2002) and Welker (2013:55ff.) introduce readers to the wide range of thoughts about the person, work and relevance of Jesus of Nazareth over the centuries and in modern-day theology. It is impossible to speak of a general idea of a Christian Christology or even a reformed Christology. Van de Beek (2002:165) explains that although all Christologies say that we know God in the deepest sense of the word in Jesus and that the Christian faith stands or falls by this notion, two very broad movements in the history of Christology can be identified, namely the 'high' Christology, speaking of Jesus as God, and a 'low' Christology, focusing on his humanity and the implications of his humanity for persons today. The first emphasises the salvation and eschatological relevance of Christ as the Redeemer of humankind by way of the cross, the resurrection and the mediator of the reign of God. The latter focuses on the historical Jesus as the Liberator and his relevance for social justice and politics. A close reading of the work of Ford and Higton (2002) reveals that the 'low' Christology became very popular in the age of modernism and post-modernism and the public theologies that depart from a liberationist reading of the biblical text (see Johnson-Hill 2008:86). Jesus the person has become an example of goodness and morality and being a Christian means to walk in the footsteps of the historical person Jesus of Nazareth, who is worthy of imitation as a prophet of love and peace.

The first question that has to be answered when dealing with Luke's portrayal of Jesus is whether he presents a 'high' or a 'low' Christology. The answer to this question is essential for an understanding of Luke's view of

the blessing of the poor in Luke 6:20–24 (see discussion in J.M. Vorster 2013:310–326). In his discussion of the Christology of the Dutch theologian Noordmans, Theron (2000:193) warns against the notion of a 'low' Christology. He explains that Jesus was not merely a social reformer, for he is the crucified king himself on God's heavenly throne. Theron also cautions against a one-sided appraisal of the secular relevance of the church, for the church is a 'sphere of faith' and nothing more (Theron 2004:712). In the plan of redemption, Jesus's suffering, crucifixion, resurrection and ascension are the most crucial foundations as becomes evident in the gospels. So is his relation to the Holy Spirit. Dingemans (2002:69) holds the same opinion and highlights the fact that the authors of the New Testament were interested in this Jesus and not only in a mere spiritual, historical or political Jesus as proposed by several modern public theologies. These viewpoints of Theron and Dingemans concur with the revelation of Christ in the congruent biblical theology as the sole and total Redeemer of the fallen creation by way of his sacrificial death on the cross and his resurrection (see also the recent research of Span, Rochester & Van Rensburg 2020).

Nevertheless, taking into account the biblical concept of Christ as the Redeemer, it can be also reasonable to state that the broad Christology of the theological union of the pre-Easter Jesus and the post-Easter Christ is, amongst other things, also directed at the transforming actions in all social spheres of God's creation. These transforming actions become evident in the 'kingdom of God' language in the gospels, which correlates with the messianic expectations of the prophets. Congruent biblical theology portrays the Kingdom as a future and present reality. The imminent reign of God has clear consequences for the present world. Many of these consequences have been explained and applied in this study. In his message in Luke 6:20, Jesus not only shows concern for spiritual redemption, he also calls for a paradigm shift of colossal proportions in the present society, says Green (1997:266). A new immanent kingdom (reign) indeed came in the life, ministry and work of Jesus (Matz 2017:53). People need not only the broad all-encompassing salvation by the Redeemer but also a healer, a protector and a voice on behalf of the vulnerable. The immanent reign of God as embodied by Jesus answers this need. Consequently, Jesus connects with people whose experience of life is not good and who need spiritual and social healing.

With each deed, Jesus reveals something of the immanent reign of God. Each deed serves as a present manifestation of the future complete and overarching kingdom of justice. When he decries injustice, he simultaneously proclaims a future reign of justice. He also calls for justice now as a manifestation of the future reign of justice. When he heals the sick he proclaims a kingdom without suffering; when he drives out demons he proclaims a kingdom free from deception; when he forgives people their sins he proclaims a kingdom of peace with God; when he rises from the dead, he

reveals a kingdom of eternal life that includes everyone who believes. All these proclamations of the future kingdom were also relevant for social life under the immanent reign of God. Mckenna (2009:50) explains the relationship between the eschatological kingdom and the realised immanent kingdom by saying that the kingdom has arrived with the birth, life and death of Jesus and that since the resurrection, the kingdom is wherever Jesus is found in the testimony of believers and in their in lives and actions. He illuminates the way of the kingdom as it spreads out across the earth like the rays of the sun. Therefore, the reign of God is all about the salvation of persons in the bondage of evil, but it is just as surely about justice in economics, politics and social relationships.

The central theme in Luke's Christological narrative is God's goal of bringing salvation to all. The salvation God describes embraces the totality of creation and embodied life. Humanity and creation are liberated from the deep destructive influences of evil and are restored according to the promises in the laws, holy places, feasts and sacrifices and taught in the psalms and the prophecies of the Old Testament. The purpose of Jesus's coming was to change a corrupt world according to God's plan of redemption and to steer reality towards the final consummation when a new heaven and earth will arise ('high' Christology) (see J.M. Vorster 2013). But Luke also introduces the implications of salvation for the present dispensation ('low' Christology). In his own preaching, Jesus describes comprehensive salvation by referring to his vocation according to the prophecy in Isaiah 61:1–2 in Luke 4:

> The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim the good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of the sight of the blind, to set the oppressed free. (vv. 18–19)

■ The poor

Stassen (1999:154) and Co (2014:78) indicate in their grammatical-historical studies on the prophecy in Isaiah and its relationship to Luke 4:18 that Luke broadened the scope of the prophecy. Isaiah had encompassing salvation in mind, whilst Luke refers only to the materially poor. Jesus's mission is, besides salvation, also to relieve the suffering and oppression of those most ignored, rejected and persecuted (Lk 4:16–30). In many passages in his gospel Luke talks about the poor (Lk 4:18, 6:20, 7:22, 14:13, 21, 16:20, 22, 18:22, 19:8, 21:23). The song of Mary in Luke 1:50–53 describes his mission in socio-economic terms. It entails the following: Jesus will bring down those with wealth and power who oppress others and justice will be restored to the earth. God's mercy is coming to the righteous and God's love is for the lowly and the poor. Luke does not present a new Christology, but he shows the explicit relevance of the Christology of congruent biblical theology for social life in this-worldly domain.

This explicit relevance becomes apparent in the difference between the description of the 'poor' in Luke's version of the Sermon on the Plain (Lk 6:20–24) and Matthew's version of the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5–7). The Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:1–16 addresses the poor in spirit. They are the humble and bring to fruition this virtue into a passionate search for God's righteousness. In the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus turns his attention to a more specific problem and focuses on the materially poor, represented by his disciples and the people following him (Gill 2013:62; Stassen 1999:154). Whilst Matthew addresses the humble, Luke draws specific attention to the social implications of Christ's redeeming work by addressing the poor (Marshall 1978:243). Although Jesus's vision is mainly eschatological, it cannot be relegated only to the future (Green 1997:265). What matters to him is his relationship with the Father and the salvation of sinners, but also, as part of this, caring for the poor, the release of captives and the end of oppression (Finn 2013:53).

According to Luke's version, Jesus came down the mountain with his disciples and found the people. He addresses his disciples and the people, in other words, his followers. The fact that he speaks to 'great crowds', 'all' who will listen, the 'multitude', the outcasts and the 'enemies', including Gentiles from outside the Jewish region, from Tyrus and Sidon, is a central theme in Luke's gospel. Within these communities, Jesus establishes a new community that embraces foreigners, outcasts and the marginalised, and bridges all the social divides (Stassen 1999:158). It is an alternative community. Within the overarching theme of a 'high' Christology, Luke designs an ethic encompassing many areas of life. Central to this ethic is the conduct of Jesus' followers when it comes to privilege, power and property ('low' Christology) (Miller 2014:416). Luke thus presents a Christology with more than only one dimension, picturing Jesus as a Redeemer of sinners, but also as a social transformer. Christ's plan of renewal is therefore a renewal of the human heart and spirit, but also embodies the whole of creation and includes history and social life (Green 1997:21).

Jesus starts his Sermon on the Plain with a portrayal of the destiny of two kinds of people: the poor and oppressed and the rich and admired. The poor will be blessed and the rich will be condemned. Who are these people? Let us firstly focus on the poor. Topel (2001:67ff.) conducted thorough research on the Greek word '*ptogos*' [the poor]. He argues that a semantic overview of the word in Greek and a comparison of this word with similar Old Testament terms leads to the conclusion that the '*ptogos*' are desperately poor people in material terms. Furthermore, the Old Testament conception of poverty and the proclamation of Jahweh in the Old Testament as the protector of the poor, as well as the reference to the poor in the prophecy of Isaiah are additional indications that Luke 6:20 refers to materially poor people and not the spiritually poor to which Matthew 5:3 refers. Also, the people to whom Luke refers in 4:18–19 and the socio-historic analysis of poor people in

the Jewish community, in addition to Luke's use of the term and his other references to poverty in his writings indicate that the '*ptogos*' is desperately poor in material terms. Luke refers to the person who is so poor as to have to beg – one who is completely destitute. The '*ptogos*' is a person that has nothing, who is an outcast, a beggar suffering all the misery of alienation and rejection. Luke 6:20 refers to those who are literally poor or who share the outlook of the poor and who occupy a pitiable position in the eyes of the society. The poor refers to all those who have been oppressed and marginalised in the larger society because of social, economic or other systemic factors. They are poor, they are hungry, they are homeless, they have no comfort, and they are hated, despised and avoided by society (Lk 6:20–22). They are also perceived to be a scandal in society (Stassen 1999:154). Jesus speaks here about the same people, not about different groups, but about poor people who experience all these forms of suffering (Co 2014:74; McKenna 2009:59). They are people who live with no dignity.

■ The blessing

These destitute, marginalised and vulnerable people will be blessed. Blessings will fill their lives with abundant happiness and joy, and they can share in flourishing personhood. The blessing is not only an eschatological reality, but here and now under the immanent reign of God. But how will this blessing be brought to fruition in their desperate situation? Under the reign of God, the blessing will come to them in the form of their fellow persons who are following in the footsteps of Jesus. Persons following Jesus in the pursuit of flourishing personhood will be a blessing to the destitute. The blessing for the poor comes to fruition in that they become part of a new community of persons, a caring and compassionate community. They can share in the relational character of the gift of life and they can pursue flourishing personhood. The character of this community is the love of Christ and the sign of their love of Christ is their love for and commitment to fellow persons, especially the poor and the destitute. Jesus elaborates on this principle in his prophetic sermon about the signs of the end of this age (Mt 24–25; Mk 13). The true sign of the righteous is the way they serve him with their deeds of compassion to the poor, the hungry, the sick and the captives. He commends them for their inhumaneness to Him. They will ask (Mt 25):

> Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick and in prison and go to visit you? The King will reply: 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me'. (vv. 37–40)

Serving Christ is not mere worship and spiritual comfort, it includes helping the weak in their real situation of misery. In Acts 20:35, the apostle reiterates this principle by saying that the work of Jesus's followers should be aimed at

helping the weak. These testimonies reveal that the core ethos of the immanent reign of God is love and love and compassion are the foundation of the new relationships in Christ. The love for the poor flowing from the love of Christ is more than just a new relationship or a mystical virtue. The Hellenistic meaning of the New Testament concept of love was to see to the interest of others (De Heer 2006:90). Serving Christ is to see to the plight of the poor. Neighbourly love is concrete and entails an attitude of compassion and humaneness that flows into actual deeds aimed at the alleviation of the plight of the poor. The loving person is compelled to address all the causes – social, structural, cultural and political – that obstruct flourishing personhood by forcing others into perennial despair. Neighbourly love could also take the form of peaceful social activism against impoverishing systems. The poor are blessed because they will not be rejected and despised, they will no longer be exploited and marginalised by society, but will be nourished, clothed and comforted by Jesus's followers as the new community under the immanent reign of God. Their blessing is fellow persons taking up their cause, being their voice, acting as their guardians and guiding them in the pursuit of flourishing personhood.

Jesus's teachings in this regard were not new in the Jewish community. His teaching about the blessing to the poor and the destitute can be regarded as a radicalisation of the Torah in the Old Testament where the people of God are instructed to care for the vulnerable and the weak. The act of constant care of vulnerable people (the poor, captives, strangers, sojourners, widows, orphans and fugitives) was an integral part of the Jewish life of obedience to God. Rituals, offerings and calling the name of Yahweh were senseless if the worship was not accompanied by caring for the poor and destitute. Therefore, the civil institutions and the ceremonial laws in ancient Israel provided not only for religious rituals but also for opportunities to take care of the vulnerable because (Dt 15):

> However, there need be no poor people among you, for in the land the Lord your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you, if only you fully obey the Lord your God and are careful to follow all these commands I am giving you today. (vv. 4, 5)

In the early days, Israelites all enjoyed the same approximate standard of living according to a study by De Vaux (1988:72). The poor did not form a separate social class in early biblical society (see J.M. Vorster 2019b:403ff.). The Old Testament Israelite community largely enjoyed a good and relatively equal standard of living. The nomadic and semi-nomadic mode of life of the Israelite tribes prior to the conquest also knew no sharp or rigid distinction between rich and poor. Members of the tribe had approximately equal rights and statuses as the defenders of the community (Bammel 1968:889). But even then, God gave explicit commands in this regard. Bammel (1968) explains:

> Exploitation of the poor fellow countryman is forbidden (Ex 22:24). Yahweh is against the oppression of the poor in the courts (Ex 23:6). Already in the fundamental laws, which on the one side, at least for the 7th year, restore the normal state of Yahweh's own exclusive right to the land, and on the other grant lasting protection to the poor, Yahweh, unlike the Greek gods, is the protector of the poor – a thought which was to endure throughout the history of Israel. (p. 890)

However, the circumstances changed over time. In the time of the monarchy, a class of officials developed who drew a profit from their posts and from the favours of the king. A class of landlords developed, who exploited the poor. Class differences emerged. These circumstances ran against the core values of Old Testament religion, as is clear from the many protests by the prophets. Protest against the ill-treatment of poor and vulnerable people became prominent in the prophecies. The quest for justice for the poor was included in their teachings about the coming new reign of God. Isaiah condemns the luxurious lifestyle of his contemporaries (Is 5:8). The rich landlords would speculate and defraud others (Am 8:5; Mi 2:1), the judges took bribes (Is 1:23; Jr 2:28; Mi 3:11, 7:3) and the creditors knew no pity (Am 2:6–8, 8:6; De Vaux 1988:73). The prophets called the kings, the officials and the rich people to repentance for oppressing the poor and the marginalised. They demanded social justice and founded their demands in the justice of God and his concern for the vulnerable and destitute.

■ Being a blessing

In his Sermon on the Plain, Jesus reiterates the Old Testament ethic of compassion, which must result in deeds and laws of justice for the poor and the destitute. He frames the parameters of a Christian approach to poverty based on Old Testament social ethics. Every aspect of Jesus's life deepens our insights into people's dignity and the vocation to always address the plight of the poor. Jesus invites his followers to think wholly new about how they may relate to God by living in harmony with others and how social structures could be reconfigured to further both these relations, says Matz (2017:40). Just as was expected from the early Israelites, Jesus' followers must take a firm stand against poverty and all the political dispensations and economic policies that cause, harbour and advance poverty in all its forms. His focus on the plight of the poor in the exploitive social structures of the Jewish society was reiterated and applied by the apostles in their teachings to the early congregations. God's care for the poor is also a constant theme in the rest of the New Testament (see J.M. Vorster 2019). This concern is apparent in Paul's preaching. He rejects any form of possible social distinction and class differences between the rich and the poor in the Christian community (Ga 3:27; Col 3:11). The letter of James contains a running attack on the rich, both inside and outside the Christian community. A reason for this attack on the wealthy is that God has chosen the poor before the world. Has God not chosen those who are poor in the eyes of

the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the Kingdom he promised those who love him (Ja 2:5–13)? The New Testament message was indeed directed at the social stratification of the Jewish and Roman communities of that period (J.M. Vorster 2019).

For the poor, becoming part of the caring community of Jesus's followers is a blessing. They will be accepted as human beings with dignity. They will share in the material gifts of the community. They will be nourished and loved. The community will be their voice in the world. The community will act on their behalf in an environment of exploitation and despair. Their plight will be prioritised in any form of economic and political planning. In short, they will enjoy flourishing personhood because of their God-given blessing of caring persons. The caring persons can find solace in the fact that they become a blessing. Being a blessing to the poor and the destitute is a sign of true personhood. This characteristic of the new communion under the immanent reign of God becomes apparent in Jesus's condemnation of the rich.

In contradiction to the blessing to the poor, Jesus predicts misfortune (woe) amongst the rich (Lk 6:24–26). They will be condemned. Who are they? Does the judgement include all affluent people? Does the kingdom exclude prosperity? Does this principle entail that a Christian ethic needs to oppose affluence and that all rich people could be viewed as transgressors under the immanent reign of God? These questions are weighed below in view of the anguish visited on the rich in Luke 6:24–26.

The Greek word used for the rich in Luke 6:24 is '*plusiois*'. In his thorough semantic study mentioned above, Topel (2001:115) indicates that this word is used 180 times in the Septuagint (LXX) to translate a variety of Hebrew roots, mostly '*šr*. In the Old Testament, '*ašîr* refers to people who are materially rich, in other words, the wealthy. The covenant theology of retribution and the Wisdom literature portray wealth as a blessing, but also as something deceptive that can turn one from God. During the social displacement, the prophets attacked the rich because they impoverished the many. Topel explains that Luke uses the word group more than the other evangelists, but in mixed sense – both positive and negative. He indicates that Jesus condemns the rich, but also associated with them. So did the community of his followers, which included the rich who continued to hold on to their private possessions. Jesus does not reject affluence as such. He even mixes with the wealthy leaders (Lk 7:36, 14:1). However, in his Sermon on the Plain, Jesus speaks about wealth in a negative sense only, namely as something that is accomplished at the expense of the poor and is used for a self-centred way of living. He refers to materially rich people who think that they are self-sufficient and do not need others. They are the oppressors of the poor.

Luke refers to the rich in this sense also in Luke 1:51–53, 12:16–21 and 16:19–31. In other words, 'rich' refers to issues of privilege and power and arrogant

self-security apart from God. These people are well fed, they laugh from the pleasures of life and they are loved and respected by society. They despise the poor and use their power and privileged positions to uphold and continue their status and to exacerbate the inferior position of the poor (Oosterhuis & Van Heusden 2007:62). In his Sermon on the Plain, Jesus therefore rejects the affluence gained at the cost of the poor. He reprimands the rich oppressors who neglect the poor and despise and exploit them. He reminds them that their focus on their own wealth, their self-centredness and their boasting about their special status and importance in the eyes of society will become an unsurmountable obstacle to entering the kingdom of God and understanding what this reign is all about (Stassen 1999:155; Topel 2001:116). Their reward is their affluence, which is temporary. Their grief (woe) will be their loneliness. They will be alone because they will not be part of the caring community of the followers of Jesus under the reign of God.

The relevance of Jesus's admonition of the rich becomes apparent when the sociohistorical conditions and the class differences in the ancient Roman world are examined. Kaufman (2013:26) discloses in his sociohistorical study that the poor in the Roman world numbered between 68% and 90% of the population. War, slavery, injury, exile and epidemics were realities of life, and these conditions promoted poverty and hunger. Inequality was sustained by social systems. Miller (2014:419) reaches the same conclusion in his research on social conditions in the Greek-East region where Luke's gospel circulated. He indicates that most people in these cities were poor non-elites: peasants, artisans, slaves, day labourers, beggars and other 'expendables'. They were expendable because they had no social status. Elitism was the order of the day, practised by the officials who comprised a very small minority. This social stratification in the Roman Empire penetrated Galilee. The Jewish society of Jesus's time was marked by the same class differences and exploitation. Houlden (2004:90) suggests in his sociohistorical survey that a significant portion of the Jerusalem church lived in extreme poverty and suffered the prejudices of the elite, the powerful and the wealthy. Furthermore, Galilee was a small, poor and very distant region of the Roman Empire. It was not regarded as worthy of development. Herod and his four sons were corrupt and so were many of the appointed officials. They enriched themselves with impunity. Also, many of the religious leaders were corrupt and misused their positions to enrich themselves and defraud the poor and the vulnerable. Matz (2017:51) explains how the religious leaders oppressed these common people, for example with their corrupt practices when selling animals and by exchange rates during festivals. Festivals were meant to remind people of God's favour towards them and were intended to be joyful events. Instead it became stressful to find the right animal and because of the money involved, as well as a fear of breaking one of the many laws. Therefore, it is not surprising that Jesus' ministry included attacks on the political and economic status quo of

Galilee. He even goes so far as to turn over the tables of the money exchangers (Mt 21:13; Mk 11:17; Lk 19:46).

In the three years of his public ministry, Jesus constantly criticised the hypocrisy of the rich religious leaders (Mt 23:1–7, 12–15). He challenged the repressive religious, political and economic social structures that held back the common people. Matz (2017:42–52) identifies the problems Jesus had with the religious leaders of his time. They oppressed the people with many more laws than God intended and the misuse of those established by God in the Torah. They claimed that more laws would ensure that the people do not break the Mosaic Law code like the people had done in the past. Jesus explains to the leaders that no person would love a God who restricts them with so many laws and who so easily finds faults with a person. Jesus dismantles the unjust system by giving only two laws: love God and love thy neighbour. He explains that with this 'great commandment', he has given the Torah its full meaning. Jesus does not abolish the Torah but teaches that this great command is the essential meaning of the Mosaic Law and the fulfilment of this command inspires a renewed joy in the relationship with God and the new life under God's reign. Jesus teaches in the Sermon on the Mount that it is less about external legalistic and rigid behaviour than the internal condition of the heart. He repeatedly says: 'You have heard, but I say'. It is not about the letter of the law, but about the spirit of the law. For example, to refrain from murder is to refrain from harbouring anger towards others. In that way obedience to the law takes care of itself. Matz concludes his survey by saying that with their rigid legalism, the religious leaders were destroying people's love for God. Such an attitude has to be opposed because it oppresses the people and tarnishes true obedience to God, the love of the neighbour and the compassion for the poor. That is what Jesus teaches in his constant confrontation with the religious leaders.

However, Jesus does not stop with a condemnation of the rich and the corrupt leadership. He also elaborates on the responsibilities of the rich in such a social environment as the society of his time. He proclaims that the rich in the community of the followers of Jesus have a special calling determined by their relationship with God and all people. It becomes a reality with the emerging new communion under the immanent reign of God. Rich people and people in leadership positions are expected to be caring and compassionate. This point of view is thoroughly developed in the scholarly research of Co (2014:84–86). She unfolds her viewpoint with the following pattern of reasoning: Various references to the writings of Luke in his gospel and in Acts indicate that one of Luke's solutions to the problem of poverty and the unjust and inhumane conditions prevailing in his community is for the rich to share their possessions and to address the inhumane conditions resulting from poverty in this way. Sharing is not only a matter of benevolence to the poor, but a challenge to establish a compassionate lifestyle in the community of the

followers of Jesus. This lifestyle of comforting and caring will enable the poor to live a dignified life according to their inherent human dignity. Besides the teaching on abandonment, Luke's gospel contains several parables and dictums on having and using possessions.

Co (2014:85) refers to many examples in the Gospel of Luke of people who use their possessions to benefit others. The women in Jesus's company mutually provide for each other out of their own respective resources (Lk 8:1–3). Zacchaeus's decision to part with his possessions (Lk 19:1–9) and the Samaritan's attendance to the needs of the man who fell amongst robbers (Lk 10:29–35) are examples of using one's possessions to help the needy (Lk 10:33–35). She also refers to the parable of the dishonest steward (Lk 16:1–8). In her opinion, it illustrates how followers of Jesus could deal with their possessions with the aim to secure their immediate future and to convey the message that there is a seminal way of dealing with possessions when living under the immanent reign of God. On the other hand, a negative example is given in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19–31). The rich man's neglect of his responsibility towards the poor and his failure to attend to Lazarus's needs, who was there at his door, leads to the rich man's anguish. The parable contains a serious warning to the rich who only think of this life and themselves with no compassion for the poor. In Luke's view, followers of Jesus, as a new community, ought to learn to deal with wealth and possessions, for these can be obstacles to living under the immanent reign of God and its blessings.

Co (2014:86) continues to explain the obligations of the rich under the reign of God, arguing that in the first Christian community, Jesus's followers, rich and poor, sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all as needed (Lk 2:45). This practice was a moral guideline for the rich. In this way they can be a blessing. They lived their community life in joyful table fellowship, prayer and holding fast to the teaching of the apostles. Luke (Lk 4) points out that the sharing of goods comes from an inner disposition of each believer who lives under the reign of God:

> Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common. (v. 32)

Here Luke paints a compelling picture of the complete unanimity and profound unity amongst the believers – rich and poor. The poor are blessed and the rich are their blessing. The basis of their unity and harmony is their common faith and love as persons living under the immanent reign of Christ. The union of heart and soul is further described as ingrained in a basic attitude of unselfishness, particularly concerning material possessions. No one makes an egoistic claim even to what is rightfully theirs. Their sharing of temporal goods is an external manifestation of the union of heart and soul, an outflow of their interior disposition of openness, detachment from material possessions and

freedom from self-seeking interests. The sale of possessions and distribution amongst the poor resulted in a situation where 'there was not a needy person among them' – an echo of Deuteronomy 15:4. In Acts 2:42ff. and 4:32ff., Luke pictures an ideal community inspired by the first group of Jesus's disciples who lived with Jesus and shared his life of poverty. Luke shows a portrait of an ideal Christian community permeated by the spirit of self-giving and generosity. The life of the new community of believers is a lesson to the rich about what it means for an affluent person to live under the reign of God. Hitherto the argument of Co concerning the obligations of the rich in the writings of Luke.

The rich who exploit the poor and who put their trust and life-fulfilment in their affluence and comfortable life will face misery and hunger, because with such an attitude they cannot live under the reign of God and share in the blessings of the new community. They will mourn and cry like the people who laughed at the prophets of old who reprimanded the oppressors of the poor. Jesus does not reject privilege and prosperity as such but reacts against rich and privileged persons who do not look beyond satisfying their own desires and who have no interest in the plight of the poor as they are instructed by the prophets and the Torah.

What can be learnt from the teaching of Jesus in Luke 6:20 in the context of a modern and developing society? Does this teaching have any bearing on modern political economy? In my view, we learn from Jesus's teaching to opt for economic justice for the poor in every attempt of social planning in any applicable domain in society. The ethic of the Sermon on the Plain boils down to one fundamental principle: the option for the poor ought to function as a leading guideline when formulating plans, policies and the construction of social structures. The poor must be prioritised (Battle 2009:54). Christians, as Jesus' followers who live under his reign, could be the voice of the poor in the world and the moral agents who take up the responsibility to see to it that the poor are blessed in every dispensation at hand.

Furthermore, Christians ought to be a blessing to all people in despair. The compassionate, caring, comforting and sacrificing life of Christ's followers is part of the royal blessing of Christ to persons in the realised kingdom. The blessed life of the person is a core characteristic of the gift of life and an indispensable part of flourishing personhood. Persons can be blessed by the love of Christ within all their relationships in life. It manifests also in the love of fellow persons. Loving other people as the agents of the love of Christ can serve as a blessing to others – especially to the marginalised and the vulnerable in society. Receiving this blessing and being the blessing is the fountain of joy. The blessed life is thus a joyous life. Recently, Moltmann (2014) revisited the Christian concept of joy as an addition to his theology and ethics of hope as developed over the past four decades. He affirms that Christianity is uniquely a religion of joy. He points out that the Gospel of Jesus Christ – his death and

resurrection – is the centre of the Christian faith and as such the ultimate source of joy. This joy comes to fruition in the blessing that flows from the new life in Christ and the ability to be a blessing to others. Let us then reflect briefly on the concept of joy.

■ Joy

God's constant blessings to his people are always closely connected to joy in life. People can find solace in the covenantal relationship and God's presence in their midst – even in times of despair. The earliest calls to rejoice were always in the presence of the Lord (Lv 23:40; Dt 12:7, 12, 18, 14:26, 16:11, 26:11; Ps 16:11). The people could trust God's promises and have faith in his liberating activity. His teachings were a reason for joy (Ps 19:8, 119:111). Complete joy can only be found when and where God reigns (1 Cr 16:31; Ps 97:1). The eventual coming of the Messiah is also associated with joy (Zc 9:9). The birth of Jesus (Mt 2:10; Lk 1:47, 2:10), his life (Lk 10:17; Jn 3:29) and resurrection evoke intense joy (Mt 28:8; Lk 24:52). Joy is a gift of the Spirit (Ga 5:22) and signifies the life of the early church (Ac 2:46, 8:8, 13:52, 15:3). Joy also has an eschatological dimension founded on the wedding of the lamb (Christ) and the bride (church) (Rv 19:7).

Paul is an exponent of the virtue of joy *par excellence*. He explains the joy and happiness of a Christian person in his letter of joy to the Philippians whilst writing in circumstances of great suffering because of his captivity, probably in Rome (see Guthrie 1970:526ff.). The apostle Paul uses the Greek words for joy and rejoicing 16 times in only 104 verses. Yet he writes from a dingy Roman prison, a place we would typically associate with misery and trial, which most people assume are the opposites of joy. He is surrounded by every conceivable obstacle to joy, but still he calls on the congregation to be full of joy: 'Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near'. The apostle finds this joy in the immanent reign of God (Phlp 3:1), but also in the communion of the believers (Phlp 2:2). Joy is something the person receives as the fruit of the Spirit (Ga 5:22). It can be radiated in any circumstances. Joy rests in God's act of renewal and not in the person itself. It becomes a reality because of Jesus's joyless death on the cross.

This view of the apostle contradicted the moral philosophy of his time, which emanated from the Aristotelian idea of happiness. In Aristotle's view the pursuit of happiness is the reason for the person's existence (Aristotle 1998). The Greek word that was used in Aristotelian moral philosophy, usually translated as 'happiness' is *eudaimonia*. Like most translations from ancient languages, there is a loss of the exact meaning in translation. The word can also be translated as 'well-being' or 'flourishing'. According to Aristotle, happiness is the central purpose of human life. The motivating force of human

life is the pursuit of happiness. Aristotle characterised moral life as the constant aim to attain one's own eudaimonia (Simmons 2019:46). His ethics thus boiled down a quest for happiness. But where does happiness come from? Aristotle and his school of thought founded a person's happiness in the person him- or herself.

In the Aristotelian moral philosophy, the human being is perceived as an animal with reason and a sense of neighbourliness, and therefore more than an animal (Simmons 2019):

> Humans must take responsibility for their own happiness since 'god' is a remote entity, the 'unmoved mover' who maintains the universe's motion, but with no interest in human welfare, nor any providential function of rewarding virtue or punishing immorality. Yet purposively imagining a better, happier life is feasible since humans have inborn abilities that allow them to promote individual and collective flourishing. (p. 46)

A moral life is a matter of action, not merely character. Accordingly, it is virtuous activity – not merely virtue – that fulfils the moral life and constitutes eudaimonia. This includes 'inclinations to ask questions about the world, to deliberate about actions and to activate conscious recollection' (Simmons 2019:46). Happiness comes from purposefully and intentionally living a virtuous life. But this happiness has a second component for Aristotle, namely external goods [that is, faring well], alongside virtuous activity [that is, living well], only because of the effect they have of enabling the virtuous person to live, and go on living, a fully virtuous life (Simmons 2019:46). Faring well and living well is necessary for moral excellence and this is true happiness (Aristotle 1998, 1095a:17–19, 1098b:20).

Both Augustine and Thomas Aquinas addressed the Augustinian idea of happiness. They introduced two different lines of thought about happiness to the Christian tradition. Augustine is well known for his dictum that only in God the person can find happiness, as he is the source of happiness. No person can attain final happiness through natural powers. This view was furthered in Protestantism. Aquinas attempted to Christianise Aristotle's moral philosophy by maintaining that happiness is a good that surpasses anything that has been created. No creature, even an angel, is capable of making man happy. Happiness is the reward for works of virtue within the confinements of natural law. This view was furthered in the moral theology of the Roman Catholic tradition.

If happiness evolves only from the possibility of human moral perfection, no person can ever attain joy. The New Testament perspective on the gift of joy and the exhortation to live and radiate a life of happiness runs against the thread of Aristotelian *eudemonism* that occupies moral philosophy to this day. The 'pursuit of happiness' is still a major ideal in political philosophy. In my view, the biblical perspective also runs against the Roman Catholic

virtue ethics. The Christian concept maintains the idea that happiness is a bequeathed gift of the Spirit of God to the renewed person. The way in which this gift is realised is to live a life of love of God and fellow persons – a chaste and moral life in a covenantal new relationship with the living God and the fellow person.

Moltmann's theology and ethics of hope offers a seminal explanation of Christian joy and its relevance for society today. In his view, joy sprouts from the knowledge and faith that Christ has risen, and that the resurrection brings joy to the believer and equips the believer to share and spread the joy. This joy, according to Moltmann (2014), is quite different from fun, which is a superficial feeling that must be repeatedly sought. The person cannot create this joy, because created joy is mere satisfaction. Joy is a deeper feeling of a whole existence that can only be experienced with the whole heart, soul and energy of the person. Joy is of divine origin – not of an apathetic god who makes its followers apathetic, but of the compassionate God that makes persons compassionate.

Being blessed and being a blessing culminates in joy. Christians do not have to pursue joy with a moral and virtuous life. With the gift of life and personhood, they are blessed with joy. This joy can blossom in all circumstances, even in times of despair and anguish. In the face of sickness, death and bereavement, the joy resulting from the cross and the resurrection Christ can be brought to bearing. In this modern world with its technological splendour and optimism about what humans can achieve, but also with its dark spaces of inhumanity, hopelessness and despair, the joy of the immanent reign of God transcends the human horizons and brings light to humanity. Christians can shine in this age as beacons and dynamos of joy. Joy is the final qualification of flourishing personhood. The gift of life, the attainability of flourishing personhood in the various dimensions of human life, is in the end sealed by joy.

The joy of the gift of life and flourishing personhood must be transmitted into the world. Christians as moral agents with an ethic of flourishing personhood are able to enlighten desperate lives and can inspire and motivate people who are hopeless by communicating that the kingdom of God in this world is the sphere of hope. Christian joy is not an isolated faculty of the life of the Christian person. We are not only called to come together and sing and praise in the spirit of fellowship. True spiritual joy spills over to life and action in the name of God, and life and action in the name of God enriches the blessing of joy. Joy is life-fulfilling, but also life-directing. The joy must reverberate in all the places, situations and spheres where hope is silenced by despair and anxiety. We live in a world with huge pockets of poverty, hunger, inequality, structural violence, ill-treatment of migrants and refugees. Can Christians be joyful whilst their fellow human beings have no joy in their

destitute lives? Praising the Lord in quiet closets of spirituality, with hymns and raising hands, with tears and hugs becomes hollow and senseless if it does not reach the suffering, the vulnerable and the despised. The raising hand must become a comforting hand, a giving hand and an uplifting hand. The tears must also be shed about the death of children because of hunger, about the cold-bloodedness of the some mega-corporations that turn a blind eye to the effect of their enterprises on suffering persons and the environment and about so many who disregard the hope-giving messages of the resurrected Christ. The hugs must cross borders to alienated persons in the grip of vulnerability. Joy must develop hands and feet to crawl into the dark places of human despair.

The gift of life is God's gift of a blessed life. When Jesus said: 'Blessed are the poor', he addressed us all. All of us can find solace in our communion with Christ and fellow persons by receiving and giving. This interactive communion brings the joy people long for. The blessing to give and receive is the source of joy and the ultimate component of flourishing personhood.

In the preceding chapters, I discussed the characteristics of the gift of life and its implications for Christian moral agency. These implications are the core elements of what I define as an ethic of flourishing personhood. In Chapter 8, I provide a delineation of what an ethic of flourishing personhood entails. This is a humble contribution from a traditional reformed perspective to the dynamic Christian–ethical discourse of our time.

An ethic of flourishing personhood

■ Introduction

Reformed theology is concerned with Christian life and moral agency in society. With a hermeneutic of congruent biblical theology, the biblical theology developed over the centuries by prominent exponents of reformed theology resulted in ethics and moral agency that address all aspects of social life. Their belief in the immanent reign of Christ motivates reformed Christians to constantly call for morality and justice. In recent history, reformed theology has reflected progressively on the concept of life as a paradigm for doing ethics. In an environment of evolutionary research and the new anthropology that comes with it, life sciences and the quest for effective bioethics on the one hand, and tremendous perennial human suffering and ecocide on the other hand, this new theological reflection deals with pressing questions. This includes amongst others: Who is the human being? What is human life? What is flourishing human life? What is humane morality? What are we doing with life? I approach these pressing questions from the perspective of creation theology as enlightened by Christology, pneumatology and eschatology.

In view of the proposed hermeneutic of congruent biblical theology, the creation narrative must be understood within the confines of a congruent biblical theology. The creation of the human being and the breath of life as

presented in the creation narrative and interpreted in the light of the reality of evil, Christology, pneumatology and eschatology bring to light an astonishing perspective on human life, personhood and moral agency for today. Human depravity because of the Fall entails that the person became completely unable to redeem itself and to make the most of the God-given qualities of personhood. However, the cross and resurrection of Christ and the Spirit of God add new possibilities to life and, in their new relationship with God, persons acquire the ability to be creative and to attain the flourishing personhood embedded in the gift of life. Personhood is the life-condition God gives us as his property in a world where evil is still present and where this evil devalues the grandeur of personhood. God's artistic act of sculpting the human creature out of clay, his endowment of *niš-maṯ*, his act of redemptive and restorative grace in Christ after the Fall and his bestowment of his Spirit on humankind, establishes the uniqueness of the life of the person and the possibility to pursue flourishing personhood. Flourishing personhood is a condition of abundant love, inner peace, joy, happiness, fulfilment, meaning, vision, idealism and direction. A Christian ethics motivated by the gift of life is essentially an ethic that pursues this flourishing personhood by an active moral agency in a world perverted by evil.

The recapitulatory comments below are founded on the pattern of reasoning in this book and briefly highlight Christian moral agency in the pursuit of flourishing personhood today. I trust that the core responsibilities of what I portray as an ethic of flourishing personhood will become clear, as well as the ways and means they can direct Christian moral agency today. These responsibilities can be encapsulated in the following annotations.

■ Be a servant

The concept of God's gift of the breath of life can serve as a plausible paradigm for doing ethics today. The gift of life models the human creature as a person with the ability to enjoy flourishing personhood under the immanent reign of God. An ethic of flourishing personhood is an ethic that makes every effort to unfurl the qualities of the gift of life to their full consequences in human experience with the aim of attaining the flourishing personhood embedded in the gift of life. Christian moral agency must enhance these qualities. I found my proposition on the core characteristics of the gift of life as they are revealed by a congruent biblical theology.

An ethic of flourishing personhood has an important caveat. Firstly, the gift of life and personhood does not elevate the person to a deity or a form of divinity. Each person lives completely under the immanent reign of God and is responsible and accountable before God with respect to all

human actions. No human reason, no philosophy or scientific endeavour can pave the way to perennial peace and prosperity of the kind sought in a human-made perfect world. All moral agency is possible because of God's renewing action in Christ and his bestowment of the Spirit on a creation blemished by evil. The person and its moral agency live, work and thrive because of the grace of the immanent reign of God. Secondly, the gift of life is not a transferral of life. Life remains the property of God. God gives life and takes life away. Persons are therefore not permitted to take life. Persons do not own life, they borrow life, and they must honour the borrowed life as part of their obedience and responsibility to and worshipping of God.

Thirdly, moral agency is not a tool to construct a human-made utopia without God or against God. Moral agency is possible because of the grace and mercy of God and the guidance of God's spirit. Also, flourishing personhood is possible by the grace of God and the immanence of God's reign in this age. Thus, moral agency in the pursuit of flourishing personhood is not the endeavour of a majestic autonomous human being with unlimited and far-reaching intellectual capabilities and uncontrolled optimism. Moral agency in the pursuit of flourishing personhood is driven by God's gift of life and occurs under God's sovereign, but also merciful and loving immanent reign over the whole of creation. Persons are completely in service of God and their servanthood is the core characteristic of personhood. Attaining flourishing servanthood supposes that one takes on the nature of a servant. Christian moral agency is servanthood.

∎ Choose life

Human life is borrowed life. This borrowed life is sacred because it ultimately belongs to God. The noble idea of the sacredness of a person's life must be enhanced in society today with its many life-threatening and inhumane currents fuelled by hatred, disrespect and plain carelessness – often with a call on rational morality. Christian moral agents have the God-given vocation to be the voice of humanity that calls on all to act on behalf of the sacred lives of all people – those enslaved in luxury and affluence, but especially the needy, the vulnerable, the destitute, the unborn child, the suffering sick and the captives. The call when facing all these life-threatening currents is to choose life. In doing this, we do it to Christ (Mt 25:31–46), and that is the essence of the Christian religion.

The view that values autonomous moral agency departs from the stance that human life is the domain of persons themselves. Therefore, the person can control and manoeuvre human life from the beginning to the end. Persons can preside over life and death. Moreover, persons can make choices about the lives of others – especially the lives of unborn children, the suffering elderly

and the homicidal. This self-idolisation knows no boundaries as becomes evident from the 'slippery-slope' arguments in the case of abortion on request and physician-assisted suicide. When life becomes the possession of the person, the person can set the limits of life and can define the value of life and the qualities and expectations of personhood. The autonomous person pursues the fun of prosperity, health, power over life and death, a lavish lifestyle, happiness and self-centred spirituality. They regard a life without these egoistic traits as worthless and empty. Therefore, the life of the unwanted unborn child with no prosperous future or perceived fixed position in the machine of human endeavour can be taken. The mother, as supreme ruler over her womb, can decide to end the life of the unwanted unborn child. Furthermore, the autonomous person can find the suffering self or the suffering other unworthy of life and the suffering meaningless and can therefore seek assistance to end the meaningless life because it no longer fits into the pattern of self-defined exuberance. The autonomous society can seek revenge by executing their offenders according to their rational design of law and order.

Theonomous moral agency respects the gift of life as something precious borrowed from God. Under the immanent reign of God, life, the person and personhood are subservient to him. Life must be protected, the person becomes a servant, and personhood comprises not the selfish lavish life, but a life for God and for others. In the many choices between life and death, a Christian moral agent ought to choose life – the life of the unborn child, the life of the suffering and the life of the offender. The child will always have a future of hope, the suffering has the mercy of God and fellow persons and the offender has the opportunity of a rehabilitated life. An ethic of flourishing personhood values the sacredness of human life and opts for life in any choice between life and death.

■ Advance human dignity

A dignified life as a characteristic of the gift of life to a person inspires Christian moral agents to be custodians of the value of human dignity and its derivatives, equality and freedom. Flourishing personhood depends on unfurling human dignity in real socio-political terms. Reformed theologians argue convincingly that the person's dignified life consists of a certain quality of life, but also a life for others with the aim to dignify their lives, not only spiritually but also in the socio-political domain. Human dignity inspires equality and freedom, which ought to manifest in the protection of human rights in the political domain. An ethic of flourishing personhood should therefore constantly focus on these crucial tenets of a dignified life.

The equality of all people is a creational principle (see J.M. Vorster 2019b). This principle is deformed by evil and this distortion results in inhumane and oppressive social institutions. However, Christ realised the immanent reign of

God and created a new humanity that conquers the dispensation of evil with all its destructive forces. The dispensation of evil is known for inhumane relationships such as patriarchy, androcentrism, racism and exploitation, amongst others. The new immanent reign of God in Christ restores the creational principle of the equality of all people. The equality of all persons is a new condition for human life brought forward by the reality of God's kingdom in human history. This equality must prevail amongst God's people, but it must also be pursued as a universal principle for all human relationships (J.M. Vorster 2019b).

The Christian anthropological principle of equality is thus in concert with the idea of equality in modern political philosophy. It can add value to the political discourse on equality as a foundational value in the human rights discourse. In political philosophy and the theory of justice, equality is seen as a natural condition that determines the range and application of conceptions of justice. Persons have the natural capacity 'of moral personality' and are therefore entitled to equal justice. Equality firstly pertains to the institutions' administration as public systems of rules. It secondly touches on the substantive structures of institutions, and thirdly on moral beings who are entitled to equal justice. Moral beings are capable of having a 'conception of their good' and of having a sense of justice, and a normally effective desire to apply and to act upon the principles of justice, at least to a certain minimum degree (J.M. Vorster 2019b). These ideas are in line with the creational gifts of the basic dignity of the person, the person as a moral agent and equality as a foundational principle in the relations of persons.

The immanent reign of God effectuates the liberation of the person touched by evil. Christ restores the creational quality of freedom as part of a dignified life. The liberated person's life is no longer under the bondage of evil. The person as a moral agent has the ability and freedom to resist the forces of evil. Such a person can resist the enslaving power that emerges from inner desires, reason or the external influences and pressures of ideologies and movements with new forms of enslavement and dependence. Therefore, freedom must not be seen as a passive condition of life, but as an active tool of resistance. It has not only an effect on managing the person's individual life but also on the threats enslaving the lives of others. Just as liberated persons practice the art of resistance to the enslaving forces threatening their own lives, persons have the vocation to resist all enslaving forces threatening the lives of others. The Christian moral agent has the vocation to strive for freedom in the socio-political sphere as an undeniable result of liberty in Christ and the power of the Spirit of God.

Human dignity, equality and freedom may not be vague values in pursuit of a dignified life but ought to be entrenched in political and social structures to create an environment where flourishing personhood can be pursued. In this respect, the campaign for the implementation of Bills of Human Rights modelled on the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)

makes a valuable contribution. Christian moral agents ought to embrace and promote this development in political economy. Human dignity, equality and freedom are in principle being enshrined as core values in liberal democracies, enabling persons to pursue flourishing personhood in the political domain. If human rights are held in high esteem, a dignified life becomes possible.

When people cannot live a dignified life because of dehumanising personal and socio-political acts, it affects all. A dehumanisation of a dignified life revolts against God's immanent reign with God's graceful gifts and goes against his will for people under his rule. It distorts everything Christian moral agents admire. One of the greatest threats to human dignity and the ensuing values of equality and freedom, is the phenomenon of racism. Even in liberal democracies with their high regard for human dignity, racism constantly raises its head in many forms. The recent worldwide protest under the dictum #BlackLivesMatter, painted a bleak picture of perennial racism in many societies. Racism is all about the violation of the dignity of a person's life.

God commands that we protect and promote people's dignified lives in the face of dehumanising powers. The vocation of Christian moral agents to be custodians of human rights is vital in the societies in which we live. They must be the voice of the homeless, the refugees, the poor, the displaced child, the abused and disadvantaged woman, and all other people in dire circumstances caused by the neglect of the powers in control. Christians have the duty to raise awareness, demand restitution, remind authorities of their God-given responsibilities to rule with justice and fairness, and stand up for the plight of the destitute before the approaching waves of economic progress that disregard the marginalised and the vulnerable. Christian moral agency is more than talking and preaching, more than spiritual experiences and the mystic self-isolation that was so common amongst churches in times of social turmoil in the past.

Christian moral agents worldwide can also support the endeavours of civil societies that campaign for human rights and the political and judicial institution of bills of human rights protected by constitutional courts. Up to this point in time, a liberal democracy seems to be the best way to enhance the values of dignity, equality and freedom and to ensure that persons can enjoy a dignified life.

■ Enrich relationships

In God's good and complete creation and his restoration of creation after the destruction caused by evil, God reveals himself as a relational God, a God with God's people and God's creation – not a god cast in stone and imprisoned by people in faraway temples on mountains or human-made holy places. God is not a silent statue to be fed and clothed by admirers. God is alive, omnipresent,

caring and speaking. God calls people into a relationship with God-self, which is possible because of God's suffering, death and resurrection in Christ and the presence of the liberating Spirit in the world amongst people in their constant alienation and distorted relationships. Because of God's relational actions during creation and reconciliation, stemming from the creation of the person in God's image, the person is essentially a relational being. Human life is a relational life. As God's interacts with the person, the concept of relationship and the comfort, blessings, spiritual enrichment, joy and peace, as well as the immense responsibilities it entails, come to the fore. Persons are created and liberated by God to be relational beings – beings in an intense loving relationship with the triune God, beings in relationships with fellow persons and stewards with a deep-rooted relationship with nature. Flourishing personhood depends on constructive relationships. An ethic of flourishing personhood has therefore the obligation to centre on enriching these relationships. In other words, Christian moral agency is duty-bound to strengthen, nurture and excavate the grandeur of these relationships to serve the common good and to accomplish flourishing personhood.

The first sphere of a person's relationships is that of marriage and family. Marriage and family are creational institutions that serve as the building blocks of society. This relationship is not merely a social construct that can be adapted according to social and cultural changes. The heterosexual monogamous relationship between a husband and wife is a covenantal relationship in the Lord. Therefore, the relationship is characterised by mutual love, trust, permanence and servitude according to the obligations of the covenant. Scripture does not consider any other marital relationship, such as same-sex or polygamous marriages. Where the covenantal marriage is blessed with children, a covenantal family emerges. Families become the building blocks of society and a major force in Christian moral agency. Marriage as a covenantal relationship is also an equal relationship with no subordination or subservience. Husband and wife can cultivate their spiritual gifts and talents freely as part of their mutual spiritual edification and the loving instruction of their children according to their own circumstances. This freedom leaves room for a marvellous relationship between husband and wife and a covenantal family that help, stimulate and encourage each other to pursue flourishing personhood within the confines of the covenant with God. Therefore, this relationship is an inspirational relationship enriched by the presence of the Spirit. Furthermore, the permanence of God's covenant could be mirrored in the permanence of a covenantal marriage, obliging a husband and wife to maintain a life-long relationship of love, commitment and fidelity. Such a relationship serves as the ideal environment for children to grow up in a sphere of well-being and love.

Marriage is the primary source of children's education. Parents are responsible for their children's moral, religious and spiritual training, with the

assistance of the church. Where academic training is concerned, parents could be involved either by establishing private Christian schools or by cooperating as far as possible in management and policy making with respect to public education. Christian moral agents must constantly engage in the formulation and execution of state-controlled education policies and raise awareness of the core values of flourishing personhood and a decent society. The children of covenantal families cannot be surrendered to the state as if they are commodities that can be sold to an agent for instruction according to its own ideology and values. Furthermore, Christian moral agents who are called must take the vocation of being a professional educator seriously, because value-driven education is the ultimate solution to the ills of societies. An educator gives direction in the learner's pursuit of flourishing personhood. Being an educator is the most important vocation in any society. Therefore, educators must be well selected, well trained, well treated, well remunerated and well protected. They contribute immensely to the future well-being of children and ultimately to the well-being of society. The pursuit of flourishing personhood depends on the constant instruction of persons to discover and live the values of the immanent reign of God.

The church as a relationship between Christians in a certain locality is a further embodiment of the relational character of the gift of life. The function of the church as a local visible community of people following Christ in faith and obedience, in the pursuit of flourishing personhood for all can be captured by three words: being, preaching and compassion. The local church could be an exemplary community that shows the world what true personhood entails namely, to live as reconciled people in love, peace, sharing and commitment to the values of God's immanent reign. But the local church also acts as a potent witnessing community. The ministry of Word and Sacraments and the subsequent testimony of Christians in society must reveal the splendour and values of God's immanent reign and offers people a glimpse of flourishing personhood. Preaching must inspire Christian moral agents to pursue their own flourishing personhood and to create the possibility for other people to do the same. Every local congregation ought to serve as a power plant that sends the values of God's immanent reign into society. Lastly, the local church ought to glitter as an epicentre of vibrant compassion not only within the confines of its own affiliation but also to the surrounding searchers of care, recognition, dignity and love. People may well be enabled to see in the activities of the local congregation the marvel of a spirited and compassionate community, they ought to hear the Gospel of God's immanent reign and they may well experience the love of Christ in the words and deeds of the 'people of the church'.

Christian moral agents are also citizens of the state. Together with other people, they are part of the tripartite political covenant and therefore deeply involved in political theorising and structuring. In the execution of this

relationship, they are bound to the foundational principle that all authority comes from God and must be executed in view of the principles of his immanent reign. Authorities are ultimately accountable to God. The state is a tripartite 'political covenant' between God, persons in authority and persons as citizens. When the persons in authority disrupts the covenant by ruling in an abusive and unjust way, citizens must have the ability to form a new covenant by way of peaceful democratic elections. Christian moral agents must therefore be the advocates of democracy and the rule of law. They must pursue politics that enable all people to pursue flourishing personhood without inhibition by the rulers of the day. They have the responsibility to opt for a state where the rulers maintain law and order by way of just laws and an independent judiciary. The judiciary is responsible for protecting the citizenry, promoting peace and protecting fundamental human rights and maintaining its sovereignty in own sphere whilst respecting and protecting the sovereignty in own sphere of churches and civil societies. Christian moral agents as politically active and responsible citizens or as part of the state machinery have the responsibility to verify that the authorities manage the tax paid by the citizens in a responsible way in their effort to develop the community and to alleviate poverty. As part of the citizenry, they must obey the rule of law and respect the authority as an institution of God.

These principles developed over many years within the reformed tradition. They are important for furthering flourishing personhood in people's lives within the context of a state. Distorted relationships in a state can impoverish or even destroy flourishing personhood. When rulers violate people's dignity by abusing power and revolting against the values of God's immanent reign, flourishing personhood is the first fatality. When all spheres of society are politicised and moulded into the tools of an authoritarian state, the space for the pursuit of flourishing personhood becomes limited. Abundant state control and a politics of power degrade persons to mere undignified tools of the state. Without dignity a person cannot enjoy life, prosper or have peace. When the state dehumanises persons because of colour, race, religion, gender, sexual orientation or any other social marker, the gifts of life and flourishing personhood are rejected and God is disgraced. Flourishing personhood depends greatly on the spaces provided by the political institutions. It will blossom in a state where persons are respected, where they can enjoy good education, where they can observe their religion of choice, where they can execute their fundamental rights, where they can move freely, where they can enjoy all their other relationships and where they are protected from the forces of evil.

Christian moral agency must constantly address constitutional development and political philosophy and can be ardent agents for democracy and the rule of law. Responsible politics leads to a form of rule where persons can have ample space to be persons and have the freedom to pursue flourishing

personhood and to enjoy God's gift of life. A liberal democracy founded on the tripartite political covenant is thus far the most suitable form of state and Christian moral agency can support and promote this concept until something better emerges.

Another expression of people's relational life is the relationships between persons in civil society. Civil society refers to the whole structure of associations, relationships and forms of cooperation that exist apart from the state with their respective constitutions, regulations, courses of action and focuses. Such organisations can be paradigm-driven or purpose-driven and they offer a valuable opportunity for Christian moral agents to further flourishing personhood. The actions of NGOs that address social problems are important and have in fact become indispensable. Christian moral agents in South Africa can become active participants, especially in purpose-driven NGOs, in an effort to assist the political institutions in a solidary-critical way. This form of involvement means that political powers can be supported and commended when they serve the common good and enhance the personhood of the citizens.

South Africa has many well educated and capable persons in every sphere of social life. Many of the educational institutions are on par with international standards and are equipped and able to do world-class research to address South African and African challenges. All these assets are available for use to develop society and to bring a better life and future to people still living in despair and hopelessness. A solidary-critical approach also means that purpose-driven NGOs could be critical whenever and wherever abuse of power and corruption emerges in politics and business. They could be timely whistle blowers when politics contorts into abusive social engineering when racism raises its head, when communities are sold out to incompetent officials and where people's fundamental human rights are violated. The efforts of NGOs in South Africa up to this point can be commended and new NGOs can follow this example. A person's active participation in civil society can enhance that person's pursuit of flourishing personhood. It can enrich the personhood of others when this segment of human life is organised and used in a responsible way. A well-ordered and peaceful society can develop in South Africa if we all aim to balance state, markets and civil society to serve the common good. Civil society is an indispensable vehicle in people's pursuit of flourishing personhood because it serves as a safeguard against power abuse by the state and it opens up the space needed for the pursuit of flourishing personhood.

A person's eco-relationship is another part of the relational life that flows from God's gift of life. Flourishing personhood is impossible in an environment of natural decay and ecocide. God's creation does not propose differing independent faculties of reality. There are no higher or lower orders in creation,

such as matter, vegetation, animal life and persons. They are all equal partners in God's covenant with God's creation and they are all included in God's household. God's concern is not for the person only, but for the totality of creation. The creation is also 'groaning' under the burden of evil. Christ redeems creation. In him, the kingdom 'is near'– a new heaven and earth, not only a new humanity. A restored creation under the reign of God will eventually emerge. Everything in creation stands in a relational harmony and is interdependent. This principle shows clearly in the ecosystems of which humanity is a part.

Although only the human creature becomes a unique living person because of the 'breath of God', the person does not become independent in the sense that it becomes a living being outside the universal creational relationships. The person is part of nature and the different ecosystems. The cultural mandate God gives must be exercised within the context of God's universal relationship with the totality of creation. It can therefore not be interpreted as an independent and absolute dominion of the person. Within the confines of congruent biblical theology, God's permission to rule over creation cannot be interpreted as an anthropocentric mandate. The use of creation for the benefit of people alone violates the continuous biblical call to servanthood and stewardship. In its ecological relationships and as part of the ecosystems, the person must be a caring, nurturing agent who lives in nature with a sense of neighbourliness instead of dominion and an agency of exploitation. Serving God without being a servant in the natural environment is hollow religion. Theology without ecology is incomplete and does not understand the full range of God's creational, redemptive and empowering involvement in his creation.

Based on this perspective, theology and Christian ethics have the opportunity to engage in the current interreligious, ideological and interdisciplinary discourses that aim to find answers to the growing problem of ecocide. Whilst the natural sciences develop new ways and means to protect the ecosystems and to limit environmental damage, theology can address people's reasoning and conduct. An ethic of flourishing personhood has the responsibility of shaping people's conscience by convincing them of the interrelatedness of flourishing personhood and nature by guiding them to become eco-sensitive. Christian moral agency today is duty-bound to fervently encourage persons to change their lifestyles, in some cases radically. They must be encouraged to develop new perspectives on wealth and prosperity, to pursue politics that advances environmental justice and to redress their habits. Of special importance is new Christian–ethical reflection on family planning, the need for smaller families and controlled population growth. In many cultures, the practice of having many children is still motivated by religious views that justify patriarchalism, the subordination of women and the belief that many children are a blessing to the father.

The life given by God is, amongst other things, a relational life. Persons are not independent individuals. We all live in relationships and these relationships can destroy or enrich the flourishing personhood we all are pursuing. An ethic of flourishing personhood must dictate the moral codes for healthy and inspirational relationships in marriage and family, churches, the state, civil society and the environment. Enriching all these relationships is a pivotal task of Christian moral agency in this day and age.

■ Transform society

Christians are God's representatives in this world. Christian moral agency is a vocation to be active in God's majestic and all-embracing transforming action in history. It means dedication to the glory of God in service of creation and for the pursuit of flourishing personhood. The essential tenets of this peculiar vocation become clear when it is illuminated by the biblical–theological perspectives on gratitude, election, the threefold office of Christ, stewardship and labour. Just as God's transforming action is all-embracing, moral agency ought to be an all-embracing transformative action. The foundation of this all-embracing ethic is the Decalogue, which has been given its full meaning by Christ and has been applied to all spheres of life by the apostles. They explicated the synecdochal character of the Decalogue as the directive for the active moral agency of persons as representatives of God's majestic and all-embracing transforming action. The grand range and contents of this dedicated life become clear when the synecdochal character of the Decalogue as derived from congruent biblical theology, is investigated. Jesus and the apostles reiterated time and again that the law has a new meaning. The law, as the call to love God and the neighbour, demarcates the gratifying life of the person. It is a guide to flourishing personhood. The law teaches the representatives of God what the right thing is to do under the immanent reign of God. The decalogue, in view of the new meaning Jesus gave to the law, portrays the all-embracing contours of a transformative moral agency by God's representatives in the quest for flourishing personhood.

Christian moral agency starts with the obedience and dedication of God's representative, who is the sole author of the all-embracing transformation of the evil-invested creation. Therefore, no other 'god' may be served. Nothing else can become the centre of human life and moral agency. Idolatry was a common temptation for the people of God in the Old Testament. On many occasions, they were disillusioned with the dominion of the living God and they longed to serve the visible idols of the surrounding nations. They envied the customs of their surrounding nations and abandoned their own commission. God punished them for this idolatry, but always within the confines of the covenant, which gave them the opportunity to turn back to God. In the New Testament, Jesus's followers were continuously cautioned not to become

subservient to the customs and aspirations of the unbelievers. Jesus warned them against the formalist dead religion of the Pharisees and the deification of the temple. The apostles constantly reprimanded Christians to turn away from the Mediterranean religions and the Greek 'gods', as well as the cult of the Caesar, because there is only one God and that is the God of the covenant – the Father of Jesus Christ. The history of humankind reveals many other gods in the form of emperors, ideas, ideologies and systems. Moral agency to appease these gods produced many inhumane and cruel human endeavours and misdirected the pursuit of flourishing personhood to an unending struggle of searching without finding. These self-invented gods fail their masters in the pursuit of flourishing personhood. Christian moral agency is a dedication to the one and only triune God, revealed in the book of nature and the written Word of God (Scripture).

Even more deceiving is idolatry in the name of God. Clothing a self-invented 'god' in the cloth of the triune God of Scripture is a deceptive act that dehumanises persons and suffocates flourishing personhood over time. History shows that idolatry in the name of God can enslave nations. Ideologies are covered with a veneer of 'Christian' and offered as the way to flourishing personhood. Usually these polished 'gods' lead persons to acts and systems of oppression, dehumanisation, degradation and shackling of others. Confronting idols is not always easy, especially when they present themselves as a kind of Christ-figure, speaking the language of Scripture and marketing the kingdom of God with fascinating catchphrases. The answer to these ideologies will be *semper reformanda* (always reforming) – constantly revisiting our motives, ideals, human relations and responsibilities with the assistance of the prophetic voices of Christians worldwide. A constant quest for an open society with the rule of law, free press, uninhibited dialogue, limitation of power and prophetic churches is indispensable in conquering these idols. A dedicated life enables Christian moral agents to cherish liberation from ideologies that pose as agents of God's immanent reign.

An ethic of flourishing personhood has to address verbal abuse and hate speech. In this way, Christian moral agents defend the name of God. We have to become deeply involved in the development of a culture of respect for personhood that transcends all the biases created by racist, sexist and homophobic ideologies. South Africa has a long way to go in this respect, because real reconciliation in this society is still being inhibited by many forms of hate speech, despite the attempts of jurisprudence to deal with this phenomenon. Such a moral agency requires thorough introspection, a turn away from the practices of the past, an admission of guilt, confession, and a willingness to redress and to restore. Many Christians and other moral agents in South Africa think that a liberal constitution that protects rights and liberties and creates an equal society in juristic terms is enough for reconciliation, but this is a mistake. Reconciliation is not cheap and does not live in words on

paper but in the hearts and minds of people. In the pursuit of flourishing personhood, persons are duty-bound to learn to use language that serves the spiritual and moral edification of the community. Responsible persons do not use abusive language but heed the call of God in the third commandment to cherish reconciliation by using glorifying and dignifying language when speaking about God and to fellow persons.

A large part of a person's life is consumed by a professional career. Therefore, the person's experience of daily labour is an important determinant of the quality of the person's life. We all sometimes ask the questions: Did my sweat and hours of labour achieve something worthwhile? Were my hard work and meticulous inputs instrumental in serving the common good? Can the future generation reap the fruits of my labour? The answer to such questions determines the value of a person's service to humankind as an instrument of God's renewing activity in the world. It also matters in the pursuit of flourishing personhood. However, labouring persons can take joy and fulfilment from their daily labour because of the eternal relevance of labour done with a theocentric vision and because of the value of labour in service of others and the renewal of the world under the immanent reign of God. Daily labour in the present day comes to fruition in a future society. Furthermore, other people, especially the poor, can reap the benefits of our labour and the beauty of creation can shine in our products. Cultivation, creativity, doing, caring, serving, restoring, healing, reconstructing and all other vocational actions enrich the life of the person and may be appreciated as indispensable components of flourishing personhood. Persons can enjoy their occupations and can find fulfilment in their daily labour when they realise that their daily labour, although with hardship, is God's tool for the renewal of creation and the coming of the Kingdom. It is thus beneficial to the common good.

How could we deal with authority? All authority comes from God and is instrumental in God's immanent reign. God-given authority means ruling to the benefit of all, not power abuse for the benefit and enrichment of a corrupt few. Christian moral agents can guard against abuses of power. They must always remind persons in positions of leadership to execute their authority as servants of God. They may support systems where the accountability of leadership is a legal standard. They must support the rule of law, the independence of the judiciary and the freedom of the media to call out power abuses by leadership. Ministering authority is necessary to promote peace and orderly association of persons in a corpus of people. The execution of this authority secures people's freedom to pursue flourishing personhood by enjoying and implementing the splendour of the gift of life without the yoke of restricting authoritarianism. Ministering authority can be visionary and inspiring and creates abundant opportunities for dignified lives and idealism. Abusive power oppresses, obstructs personhood, lessens the sense of morality

and eventually unleashes the forces of violence and revolt. God calls on persons to obey and honour authority but people in authority ought to be worthy of the obedience and honour.

The gift of human life may not be destroyed under the immanent reign of God. In addition to always choosing for life, Christian moral agency must also oppose all human actions that destruct the splendour of the life of the person and inhibits ways and means to a thriving life. We have to address the attitudes and societal structures that serve as a fertile breeding ground for violence. We may well deal in a critical and constructive problem-solving manner with the motives, desires and attitudes that lead to acts of violence and to psychological or emotional injury. Violence is born from attitudes of hostility, envy, hatred, wrath and the lust for revenge. These attitudes come to fruition in active violence, but also in social structures that limit the lives of people based on religious or ideological presuppositions. Examples include corporal punishment, bodily harm and the infliction of pain. Violence also blossoms as different forms of emotional violence, such as verbal abuse, belittling, humour at the cost of the vulnerable and the degradation of others. Every abusive action aiming to restrict flourishing personhood is immoral. We could rather actively enhance possibilities and open avenues for persons to live a thriving life and pursue flourishing personhood by condemning violence and the attitudes that fuel violence.

Scripture labels human sexuality as a sanctified heterogeneous activity within a permanent *de uire or de facto* marital relationship. As a result of the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, people today live in a culture where free sexual relations are perceived as normal conduct and part of the autonomy of the person over its own life and decisions. Life-long relationships of mutual trust, permanence and commitment and *de uire* marriages are no longer the norm for family life in Western societies. Temporary cohabitations (sometimes called *consensual unions*) have become a family form in contrast with conventional *de uire* and modern *de facto* marriages. Christian moral agents who experience the joy of marital and familial relationships need to be the guardians of the monogamous heterosexual marriage and chaste sexual relations. True and honest Christian testimony cannot bend over under the current defence and furtherance of the ideology of unlimited sexual freedom and the irrelevance of marriage and family life in modern societies. The noble values of marriage and family and sanctified sexuality could be demonstrated and professed by Christian moral agents. The person who appreciates the gift of life and who is sincere about flourishing personhood is duty-bound by the immanent reign of God to address the destructive and dehumanising effects of the current culture of free uncommitted sexual conduct and all forms of sexual promiscuity. Experiencing marriage and family as covenantal gestalts and sanctified sexuality as a joyous part of the gift of life deepens true personhood.

Gay sex and same-sex marriages are currently being vigorously debated in Christian ethics. A hermeneutical approach that regards all ethical principles in Scripture as time-bound and as cultural constructs of ancient societies approve of gay sex. They found their argument on modern scientific anthropological findings and presuppositions. A hermeneutic of congruent biblical theology has difficulty with such a point of view, because the consistent biblical message about gay sex in the Old Testament as well as in the New Testament denounces it. A hermeneutic of congruent biblical theology leads us to the understanding that Scripture denounces gay sex and presents marriage as a monogamous heterosexual relationship of mutual love, commitment and permanence. The debate about gay sex is basically a hermeneutical debate and although most biblical interpreters agree that promiscuous gay or heterosexual sex is immoral, the validity of a gay relationship of commitment, mutual love and permanence is part of the ongoing debate. An ethic of flourishing personhood can engage in the debate by considering whether the view that a life-long gay relationship of love, commitment and permanence within the confines of the gift of life and flourishing personhood can be accommodated from the perspective of congruent biblical theology. All people are after all persons and may pursue flourishing personhood. Christian moral agents must accommodate gay persons in this pursuit with respect and empathy. Therefore, Christian moral agency needs to denounce all forms of homophobic actions and conduct, discrimination and abusive treatment, just as with all other dehumanising treatment of people.

Part of the gift of life is the privilege of owning property, but ownership and management of property must serve the flourishing personhood of all. Property rights in modern liberal democracies are generally considered to be an individual right of a person or a group of persons in a corpus with a common interest. The ethic of ownership can be derived from the moral principles exposed by the congruent biblical theology's information about possession and acquisition of land. The right to land ownership was founded on the belief that all land belongs to God and that God appoints persons to be stewards of his property. Misuse of property, dishonest accumulation of property by stealing, corruption and the false impression of justice are forbidden under the immanent reign of God. God commands persons to labour and trade honestly and fairly and to promote and protect the interest of the fellow person. The management of ownership must serve justice and alleviate poverty. Land reforms in impoverished post-colonial communities should reconcile the right to private ownership and the plight of the poor in a just and fair way.

Seeking liberating truth is another important component of a person's pursuit of flourishing personhood. God commands his people to understand, grasp and nourish the truth because truth is deeply embedded in the immanent

reign of God. Liberating truth sits in the moral agent who comprehends truth as an obligation to God. Structures, controls and jurisprudence can assist the moral agent in seeking and telling the truth, but in the end liberating truth is served by persons with respect for truth as an obligation to and before God. Evil breeds deception and lies and obscures a person's perception of truth. Where the lie reigns, life loses its direction. The inability to get hold of the truth in the age of brokenness, keeps people in bondage. The lie enslaves, makes persons blind and obscures the way to flourishing personhood. Untruths force persons into the captivity of insecurity, doubt and a loss of direction. Liberating truth sets free. Therefore, the pursuit of flourishing personhood depends on liberating truth. Liberating truth can be grasped and advanced because under the immanent reign of God, truth and truth-telling is a precious gift that comes from the renewing act of Christ. Therefore, people can be free from the bondage caused by the lie with all its appearances, forms and destructive effects in the world today. Christ as the way to the truth, the guidance of the Spirit of truth, and the church as a pillar and buttress of the truth are all indications and guarantees that truth can prevail and can overcome the obstacles to flourishing personhood created by lies and deceits. Seeking liberating truth is a moral obligation in the emerging Fourth Industrial Revolution because of the availability, influence and tremendous propagandistic possibilities of information technology and the danger of manipulating societies with false information.

God's majestic transforming action offers persons a vision. Being a moral agent under the immanent reign of God is living with this vision. The vision is to pursue the splendour of flourishing personhood inherent to the gift of life. Christian moral agency ought to turn away from all the obstructions in life that may blur this vision or propose other directions to happiness. The vision that flows from God's immanent reign transcends all moral constraints when a person remains committed to human life as a dedicated life. The synecdochal character of the Decalogue when excavated from the rich elements of congruent biblical theology brightens, directs and constantly redirects this vision. This vision enlightens the route to flourishing personhood. The Decalogue, as explained in the light of Christ's fulfilment of the law, is indeed the plan of action for Christians as transforming moral agents in their quest for the flourishing personhood embedded in God's gift of life to all persons.

■ Be a blessing

Congruent biblical theology portrays the imminent reign of God as a reign with blessings with clear consequences for the present world. The essence of biblical theology is that the reign of God, which came with the cross of Jesus and the outpouring of the Spirit, turns judgement into blessings that give meaning to life amidst disappointments, despondency, cruelty, injustices

and hopelessness. These blessings fill life with abundant happiness and joy and that is what flourishing personhood is all about. Christ's cross, resurrection and ascension to eternal rule bestow blessings on creation and on the person as an essential part of the gift of life.

With each act, Jesus revealed something of these blessings of the immanent reign of God. Each deed is a present manifestation of the future complete and overarching kingdom of justice. When Jesus decried injustice, he simultaneously proclaimed a future reign of justice. He called for justice now as a manifestation of the future reign of justice. As he healed, he proclaimed a kingdom without suffering. When he drove out demons, he proclaimed a kingdom free from deception. When he forgave people their sins, he proclaimed a kingdom of peace with God. When he rose from the dead, he revealed a kingdom of eternal life that includes everyone who believes. All these proclamations of the future kingdom and its blessings are also relevant for the present life under the immanent reign of God.

The blessing and the call on persons to be a blessing becomes clear in Luke's Sermon on the Plain where he addresses the blessing of the poor by the affluent. The poor is blessed and the affluent is their blessing. Together they pursue flourishing personhood. The foundation of their unity and harmony is their common faith and love as persons living under the immanent reign of Christ. The union of heart and soul is further described as ingrained in a basic attitude of unselfishness, particularly concerning material possessions. No one ought to make an egoistic claim even to what is rightfully theirs. Their sharing of temporal goods is an external manifestation of the union of heart and soul, an outflow of their interior outlook of openness, detachment from material possessions and freedom from self-seeking interests. The life of the new community of believers teaches the rich what it means for an affluent person to live under the immanent reign of God. The outstretched hands of the poor and the giving hands of the rich is a model of what personhood entails and it models Christian life in the present world. It also models Christian spirituality and worship. A moral agency of receiving blessings by fellow persons and being a blessing to them models the flourishing personhood emanating from the gift of life.

■ Enjoy life

Being blessed and being a blessing culminates in joy. Christians do not have to earn joy by appeasing God with a moral and virtuous life. With God's gracious gift of the breath of life and personhood, they are blessed with joy. Therefore, persons can enjoy life, which means much more than having fun in life. Real joy blossoms in all circumstances – even in times of despair and anguish. In the face of sickness, death and bereavement, the joy resulting from the cross and the resurrection Christ can be brought to bearing. In this modern

world with its technological splendour and optimism about what humans can achieve and its dark spaces of inhumanity, hopelessness and despair, the joy of the immanent reign of God transcends the human horizons and brings light to humanity. Christians can enjoy life by shining in this age as the agents of joy. The joy is life-fulfilling, but also life-directing. The joy must reverberate in all the places, situations and spheres where hope is silenced by despair and anxiety. Celebrating life and bringing joy to others is the eventual goal of an ethic of flourishing personhood.

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Index

In The Gift of Life, Vorster contributes to the contemporary discourse on life from a biblical and Reformed perspective. After a long and distinguished academic career, he presents readers with a comprehensive vision of what flourishing personhood might entail in an era where life in all its dimensions is threatened. The book is clearly the culmination of the labour of a seasoned scholar who writes and structures well. In six chapters the notion of life is beautifully described as unique, sacred, dignified, relational, dedicated and blessed. The final chapter summarises the ethic of flourishing personhood in six brief maxims: be a servant, choose life, advance human dignity, enrich relationships, transforms society, be a blessing and enjoy life! The aesthetic of formulation is supported by wide and informed theological scholarship. One encounters in the work a spectrum of contemporary dilemmas and contested themes. Flourishing personhood is discussed in terms of, for example, evolution, abortion, suicide, human rights, racism, marriage, sexuality, civil society, ecology, and the poor! All of these emphasise the complexity of present-day society and the vitality of the Reformed Faith to charter a clear course amidst a stormy sea of ideas and views. The approach of the author displays a sophisticated balance between openness to the sensibilities of the present time, but also commitment to the biblical and creedal directions. He manages to talk about vocation, election and joy in one intellectual breath. This is an intelligent, wise and captivating book.

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The aim of the book is to promote a theology of life, to identify 'the pursuit of flourishing personhood in society today'. The author outlines what personhood is and how the human person can flourish. Thus, the nature of human dignity, equality, freedom, racism and human rights are discussed. Other key ethical issues discussed in the book include abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment, equality, racism, freedom, marriage, sexuality, property, land and the environment. The book contains a strong emphasis on the Bible and Reformed Theology. Vorster elucidates the role of presuppositions in the interpretation of the Bible, as well as the importance of genre and context. He further indicates where invalid biblical interpretations and false theological ideas have infringed on the innate human dignity of created persons and justified political and social oppression. He provides a biblical-theological platform upon which discrimination and exploitation can be exposed and resisted. In his discussion of marriage, the church, the state, civil society and eco-relationships, he emphasises the importance of a relational life and challenges his readers to re-think their values and to act to genuinely transform our troubled and conflict-ridden society. He further invites his readers to pursue an ethic of flourishing personhood by being servants, choosing life, advancing human dignity, enriching relationships, transforming society – in short – being a blessing. The value of the book is that it is an invitation to life.

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