

## **ABSTRACT**

That the centre of Christianity is rapidly shifting from the global North to the global South, particularly to Sub-Saharan Africa, is undoubtedly a great cause of celebration. But the impact of this shift on ethical life remains to be seen among many African believers both at individual and community levels. One main factor for this is that moral life for most believers continues to be guided by a traditional ethical framework which derives its foundational moral values and norms from the concepts of community and solidarity. In this way, African ethics shares significant similarities with Christian ecclesial ethics which regards church as an ethical community. But a conceptualisation that sees the church as an ethical community does not only find fertile grounds in African cultures and thereby enriched by its strong sense of community and solidarity but it also ought to meaningfully challenge and transform this cultural framework in order to formulate an ethics that is not just African but is genuinely Christian, evangelical and biblical. As this research argues, this is possible when the distinctive underpinnings of the gospel are taken seriously thereby ensuring a fruitful and sustained moral formation within Christian communities.

**Key words:** Church, community, solidarity, ecclesiology, culture, ethics/morality, evangelical

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## Chapter 1

### RESEARCH FOCUS

#### Introduction

One of the fundamental characteristics or attributes of the Church is that it is a community of the people of God. It is in this community, founded on God's saving grace through Christ by the Spirit, that Christians are called to a life not only of fellowship with God and one another but also of total and daily moral obedience to him. Thus, moral life as wrought and demanded by the gospel is by its very nature not only individual but also communal both in reflection and praxis, thereby rendering the Church both at local and worldwide levels as an ethical community.

In many respects, this ecclesiastical or communal characteristic of Christian ethics fits well into African societies in which life and morality are guided by a strong sense of community and solidarity. In the African societies, every aspect of individual life is organized and finds meaning only as it relates to the whole community. According to Mbiti (1990:106), for example, life in African societies rests on the traditional philosophy "I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am".<sup>1</sup> This stresses that identity and its consequence on moral life is communal in nature so that it is the community that forms and defines the moral way of life hence one can, for example, speak of "African ethics" (Bujo, 1998:41-42).<sup>2</sup>

Despite similarities in the emphasis on community as well as solidarity, Christian ethics is by its very gospel-nature different from African traditional ethics. Both the similarities or continuities and differences or discontinuities must not be conflated or confused in order to ensure a critical engagement between the gospel and African cultures particularly in ethical reflection and praxis. It is only by this engagement that Christian ethics can appropriately be

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<sup>1</sup> This strong sense of community in African societies is also stressed by K. A. Opoku (cited in Magesa, 1997:65) when he states "Life is when you are together, alone you are an animal". Concepts such as *Ubuntu* or *Ujamaa* also stress this sense of community in every sphere of life (Tanye, 2010:111, Metz & Gaie, 2010:274-275).

<sup>2</sup> Bujo (1998:41-42) justifies the use of the term to show a contrast with the Western ethical systems, with African ethics based on the community and follows a 'palaver procedure' in establishing moral values and norms while the Western ethic is based on a rationalistic and individualistic understanding of individuals and societies.

enriched by cultural values without compromising on its absolute and transformative nature which is counter-cultural.

It is thus imperative to explore the nature of the church as an ethical community and appropriate how this ought to inform and transform the African ethical world-view in order to formulate a Christian ethic that is not only African but is also evangelical, biblical, and Christ-centred. This endeavour also entails a careful understanding of the African concept of culture for, as Kunhiyop (2008:20) rightly points out, “[o]ne’s grasp of African morality is dismal if one does not come to terms with the profound concept of community”. This is the task that this research attempts to undertake.

## **1.1 Background and statement of problem**

### **1.1.1 Background**

In both the OT and NT, God’s redemption establishes people into a community – “the communion of the saints” (*sanctorum communionem*) and they are called to live accordingly. The rendering “communion of the saints” signifies two fundamental aspects of what church is: a community of holy people and/or holy things. With regard to holiness, Bayes (2010:1855-186) insists that the term “the saints” is correctly understood when both senses (“holy people” and “holy things”) are maintained since “Christians are holy people because God has set them apart for holy things – for holy gifts and holy works”. And as a community, “communion of the saints” signifies two aspects which, as Bayes (2010:197-203) argues, “are not mutually exclusive”: universal and particular or local fellowship of believers. That the church is a community implies that ethics, which is undergirded by the call to live in holiness, ought to take the same communal shape. In this sense, one is correct to assert that church is an ethical community. The inextricable relationship between church and ethics underscored by this category warrants us to speak of “an ecclesiological dimension in ethics” or “an ethical dimension in ecclesiology” (Wannenwetsch, 2005:57).

Any formulation of Christian ethics, therefore, that neglects or fails to fully grasp the communal dimension of Christian identity and life is theologically faulty for it rejects the very essence of what it means to be church or God’s people. It is for this reason that many scholars have laboured to argue for the importance of appropriating the church as community or communion of saints and reflected on the bearing that this has on Christian ethics. Writing from a reformed perspective, for example, Michael S. Horton (2008:14-16) comprehensively argues that the Church is a covenant community. This stresses two important things about the Church: firstly, it has its origin in God’s grace established first with

Israel and finds ultimate fulfilment in Christ. Secondly, the Church is a community of believers who are called into new relationships and thus communion with God and one another. The covenant ecclesiology underpins the fact that the community of believers has its being and life in God and can only live in obedience to him through his word in Christ. Thus, as Horton (2008:56) puts it, “the proclamation of Christ that gave and gives the church is also a canon that defines and norms it”. In this sense, ethics is not mere moral rules or a duty as demanded by the community but simply being what it is in total submission to the scripture.

The fact that the church is a community does not, however, mean that the individual persons are arbitrarily absorbed into the whole. In fact, it is a community because it is made of individuals who have come to believe in “one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all...” (Eph 4:5-6). Thus, as Horton (2008:169) argues, it is right to conceive the church as a “covenant *koinonia*: a community of persons”. It is the individuals who constitute any community. This is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1954:58) means when he stresses that both individual and the community have their existence and life in Christ. This means that the church exercises authority over the individual only as it stands under Christ’ authority and receives it from him. This underpins the fact that both the community and the individual members ought to continually submit to God through the scripture for this is what gives them identity and guidance for moral living.

Another scholar who underscores the inextricable relationship between moral living and the church is Allen Verhey. Verhey (2002:6) argues that the church as a community is integral in shaping its people to be and live as they ought to. Using the model of the early church in which Paul challenges the Christians to be “...able to instruct one another” (Rom 15:14), Verhey (2002:8) has a point when he argues then that “Christian congregations are, both by tradition and vocation, communities of moral discourse and discernment”. It is in the church community that members reflect on moral issues in the light of the scriptures and build one another in wisdom and virtue to live worthy of their salvation (Eph 4:1; Phil 1:27). With a narrative approach to scriptures, Verhey (2002:13) argues that the church lives rightly when it remembers Jesus such that “the test for conduct and character in Christian community is the church’s memory of Jesus”.

Stanley Hauerwas is another key scholar who conceives church as an ethical community. Influenced by Aristotelian ethics,<sup>3</sup> Hauerwas speaks of the church as a community of

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<sup>3</sup> Although this is the case, one notes that Hauerwas’ virtue ethics is significantly different from that of Aristotle. While the latter is essentially not Christian, the former is grounded in the believer’s faith in

character and thus emphasizes virtue ethics that is concerned primarily with what kind of people we ought to be rather than mere actions. Although he holds a strong separatist stance regarding the church-state relationship<sup>4</sup>, Hauerwas (1981:2) underscores the importance of the church community in cultivating moral values and virtues for Christians. He emphasizes that the church is a distinct community because it is grounded in and governed by Christ through the scriptures. Hauerwas (1981:42) thus states that “the Christian ethic is in its fullest sense a way and pattern of life for those whose faith in God has Jesus as its center”.

Inevitably, the imagery of Church both at local and universal levels as an ethical community reveals its social nature: it is human and historical. In a sense, this demands what James Gustafson (2009:29) calls a “social analysis theory” in interpreting the life and practices of the church, which as he argues, is like any other social community in its functions except for the fact that it believes in Jesus Christ. According to Gustafson (2009:xvii), this understanding renders exclusive use of a theological approach only in ecclesiological reflection as problematic for it “oversimplifies and distorts the church”. The social interpretation approach is thus critical “to make a contribution to our understanding of the community of Christians, with its continuity through history, and its identity across culture barriers and space” (Gustafson, 2009:5).

Gustafson's approach is helpful in highlighting the social nature of the church community sometimes obscured in ecclesiological formulations. Yet the approach needs to be accepted with a great deal of caution to avoid creating a church that is weak in its theology, thereby divorcing the social aspect of the church from its theological foundations. The church is distinct from other social communities by the fact that its existence and life is given by God in his act of redemption in Christ (Griffiths, 2005:402). It is a new community and it is social only in reflection of this divine reality. Bonhoeffer (cited in Wanneswetsch, 2005:61) is therefore correct when he describes the church as a “distinct sociological type”.<sup>5</sup>

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Christ which gives them new purposes and perspectives for moral life and actions (Hauerwas & Pinches, 1997:56-69).

<sup>4</sup> Hauerwas' overarching stance is that the church as a social community is not only distinct from the world because of its faith in Christ but also that it provides “the contrast model” (1981:50) or an “alternative polis” to other social communities (1995:6). According to Hauerwas (1994:14), this understanding is key in ensuring that the church retains its distinct nature in relation with other non-Christian communities, a stance which he insists does not necessarily mean “withdrawal” from any social engagements. However, a moderate model that seeks to engage comprehensively the wider society is more plausible and effective in gospel witness in both word and deed.

<sup>5</sup> Gustafson (2009:90) admits this fact when he defines the church as “a community of faith; a community that relies on Jesus Christ as the revelation of the knowledge and power most adequate

Although a social institution, church can be properly defined in the light of God's standards as revealed in Christ and the Word. It is for this reason that Webster (2005:79) is right in premising his ecclesiology on "the perfection of God" because it is from this that a proper evangelical church and ethics emanate (cf. Hauerwas, 1981:49). Without ignoring its social dimension, the church is what it is only as created by God and consequently right living means living according to his holy character.<sup>6</sup>

The understanding of Christian ethics in community categories has striking similarities to African ethics. In African societies, it is a 'given' that a person is what he is only in relation to others (Bujo, 2003:22; Kunhiyop, 2008:20; Coetzee, 2003). Thus identity as well as moral life is defined and guided by the community to which one belongs. In other words, one is moral or right only as one lives according to the ethos, values and beliefs of the community that aim at promoting solidarity and preserve life vitality (Magesa, 1997:31). Ethics, therefore, is intrinsically connected to the concept of community. As Bujo (2003:44) puts it, the community "plays an active role in shaping a meaningful moral life... this involves effective and active participation not only in the establishing of norms but also in the positing and the application of these norms". In this sense, the community becomes what Mbiti (1990:201) calls the "highest authority" for moral life in that any action or behaviour is judged moral or immoral, right or wrong based on ethical values and norms of the community, not necessarily based on individualistic or rational choices. In this regard, community and solidarity provide the paradigmatic framework for morality so much so that anyone who acts against this is not only regarded as immoral but also an enemy of the society.

From the African perspective, the community and thus ethics has a strong religious dimension for it includes not only the ancestors (the living-dead) and the unborn but also God (Masolo, 2006:15; Oduyoye, 2001:25). It is worth noting here that although the belief in God is not denied in African religious life, it is usually taken for granted (Bujo, 2003:20). God is far removed from the daily affairs of the people and overshadowed by the ancestors who, according to Mbiti (1990:202), are the "guardians or police of tribal ethics, morals and customs". Again Bujo (2003:19-20) stresses this religious dimension of African ethics when he writes "While it is unambiguously true that the idea of community is the starting point for African ethics, this is not limited only to the visible community: the invisible community, which

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for living, and for understanding God and human life before God".

<sup>6</sup> This means that any discussion on ecclesiology and ethics must be premised on a proper theological foundation, of course, without underplay its social dimension. With this understanding, one is justified to question Gustafson's approach which starts from the social ("the common") to the theological ("the unique") nature of the church (2009:13). This eclipses the church's theological grounding based on God's redemptive revelation.

is equally important for Africans, embraces not only one's deceased ancestors but also those not yet born and even God”.

From the above discussion, one observes common elements between the Christian ethics that emanates from communal ecclesiology and the African traditional ethics which is grounded in ideals of community and solidarity. For example, in both ethical systems, there is a strong emphasis on the community solidarity and ethics is strongly religious in nature. Undeniably, the similarities provide touching stones for Christian ethics in the African context. The elements that are compatible with the Christian faith need to be reinforced if the church is to be true to its nature and mission. A strong sense of belonging and meaning created by the African community serves as a good example. Inevitably, this is helpful in checking against tendencies of individualism often pointed out as one of the evils of Western ethical systems and ecclesiologies often grounded in a rationalistic understanding of autonomy and identity (Horton, 2008:2-3; Grenz, 1994:23; Volf, 1998:7). This also justifies calls for efforts of inculturation or contextualization of the gospel in the African context. Bujo (1998:18) is right in asking; “[c]ould the African tradition remind the modern, enlightened person of certain values which he/she has lost sight of in his/her life and community?” This question begs an answer in the affirmative.

It is precisely because of this failure to see the good in African cultures that most African scholars continue to blame mission Christianity of not only demonizing African cultures but also for imposing western culture on Africans in the name of the gospel (Bujo, 2001:100; Magesa, 1997:287). The result has often been that the Christian faith has either been distorted or remained alien in most African societies. Thus Bujo (2003:99) is able to say, “Christianity has not succeeded in meeting people at the point where their deep roots lie, all it has been able to communicate to Africa up to now is a surface morality”. And arguing from a feminist perspective, Mercy Oduyoye (2001:11-18) points out the need for the use of what she calls a “cultural hermeneutics” in reading the Bible in order to construct theology that is sensitive to the needs of women thereby becoming ethically relevant for African communities.<sup>7</sup>

Stressing the importance of the values of communion and solidarity<sup>8</sup>, Tanye (2010:247-249)

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<sup>7</sup> While Oduyoye is correct in pointing out the need for theology that is sensitive to the needs of women and hence the need for their involvement in theological discourse, her hermeneutic sacrifices the authority of the scriptures in favour of context. Her argument that this methodology “enables women to view the Bible through African eyes and distinguish and extract from it what is liberating” affirms this (Oduyoye, 2001:11).

<sup>8</sup> Tanye (2010:249) describes communion and solidarity as “fundamental values” of the church.

offers a warning that cannot be completely ignored if the Christian faith and its ethical implication is to reach to the hearts of Africans: “for the Christian message to touch the deepest layers of the African psyche, in order to affect change and transformation of the African mentality, we have to develop an African spirituality based on these solid values of solidarity and communion”. The challenge, of course, is how to do this without compromising the absoluteness of the gospel.

### **1.1.2 Statement of Problem**

Notwithstanding the similarities, there are significant differences that exist between the church as an ethical community and African traditional ethics. These differences touch significantly on questions of sources, values and motivations for ethical reflection and praxis. It is no wonder therefore that despite the fact that Christianity enjoys rapid growth in sub-Saharan Africa,<sup>9</sup> the ethical implications of this faith remain non-evident among many Christians, or at least, not yet. Or, as A. Balcomb (2011:31-33) points out, although one cannot deny that the gospel in making a noticeable impact on the ethical and social life of African societies, there is great need to maximise this impact so that it is congruent with the rapid growth of Christianity. It is no wonder that Christianity has been generally faulted for only scratching the surface in African societies thereby failing to address the deep spiritual and moral needs of the people (Magesa, 1997:5; Tanye, 2010:8). The differences, as briefly highlighted below, suffice to make the point clear.

For example, God, who is fully revealed in Christ, is the originator and life-giver of the Christian community. The Church at all levels only exists as it reflects the reality of God – it has its existence in the communal being and life of the Triune God (Zizioulas, 1985:15-17). Thus, community ecclesiology and true Christian ethics is trinitarian as well as Christological in nature. Focussing on Jesus’ teachings and practices as epitomized in the Sermon on the Mount as normative for what they call “kingdom ethics”, Stassen and Gushee (2003:11) stress that Christology is central for “Christian ethics and for the moral life of the churches”. Crucially, it is through his atoning death at the cross and resurrection that Christ provides the

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<sup>9</sup> Recent research by The Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project covering the last 100 years (1910-2010) shows a phenomenal demographic growth of Christianity from 9% to 63% in Sub-Saharan Africa with a decline from 95% to 76% in Europe and from 96% to 86% in America during the same period (<http://www.pewforum.org/Christian/Global-Christianity-exec.aspx>). While such statistics are only numerical and need not be accepted without proper scrutiny, they however generally indicate the fast rate at which Christianity continues to grow in Sub-Saharan Africa. Conversely, Carson (2008:5) observes what he calls a “serious decline” of Christianity in the west.

fundamental grounding for moral life. Oliver O'Donovan (1994:11-13) underscores this Christological locus when he locates the basis of Christian ethics in the work of Christ climaxed in his resurrection. Here contends that it is through this that “natural morality” is confronted with divine grace which not only brings about new moral life but also gives it an eschatological orientation (O'Donovan, 1994:11-13). For believers, ethics is therefore emanates from the gospel which challenges the believers to renew their hearts and minds as they seek to grow in faith and true redemptive knowledge of God in Christ (Rom 12:1-2; Eph. 5:14-15).

Given the above understanding, it is difficult to accept any position that regards ancestors as an important element of true African ecclesiology. For instance, Bujo (2003:188) argues that “a genuinely African model of the church must necessarily have recourse to the idea of the ancestors”.<sup>10</sup> While one can argue for the place of ‘ancestors’ in Christian ethics, their role or function cannot be more than being departed models for a moral life only if they truly lived according to the Christian faith. Inevitably, this also rightly serves as a warning that any discussion of African Christian ethics must properly attend to the doctrine of God and his acts in the world for it is on this that ethical values and norms hinge.

Another example is that in Christian community ethics, the scripture is the highest authority for morality. Horton (2008:37) precisely stresses the fact that the church as a covenant community is *creatura verbi* – it is created by Jesus Christ who is revealed in the Holy Scriptures and must live in total obedience to him. This is what it means to call church “a community of the Word” (Husbands & Treier, 2005:7-8). Against many (Western) ecclesiological formulations that underplay or even reject *creatura verbi*, Horton (2008:37-68) underscores that a true biblical church is that which appropriately acknowledges having its ontological identity and ethical life in the word of God. Similarly, Verhey (2002:10) underscores the centrality of scriptures in the life of such a community when he argues that the scripture is “a resource for nurturing, sustaining, renewing, and reforming the church as community of moral discourse and discernment”. And so, the church, at least the evangelical church, is what it is only when it listens and lives by the scriptures.

Additionally, African morality is largely deontological in that an individual has the duty to act according the moral requirements of the community rather than virtue. In this sense, as Mbiti (1990:209) admits, “a person is what he is because of what he does, rather than that he does what he does because of what he is”. This is different from Christian ethics where duty

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<sup>10</sup> Elsewhere, Bujo (1998:18) praises and attributes the tremendous growth of African Independent Churches (AICs) to the fact that they incorporate ancestral traditions in their theologies and practices.

for ethical living of a person or the community is primarily formed and shaped by the fact of who they have become in Christ – the people of God. In this, the duty for moral living fundamentally springs from the salvation event in that, as Hauerwas (1981:114) rightly argues “...a person of virtue is dutiful because not to be so is less than virtuous”.

Lastly, Christian ethics has a strong eschatological orientation. The motivation for moral living is to please God in anticipation of the glorious hope inaugurated at Christ’s coming and resurrection and will be consummated at his return. Thus the common good or *telos* of the community in Christ extends beyond the present life to the eschaton. While African ethics too has a religious dimension, it has no or little sense of eschatology in that life is largely understood in a physical sense and wrong or evil is punished in the present life by the community or the ancestors (Mbiti, 1990:205). Biblically, it is only God who is holy and just through Christ who is able to judge every man’s actions (Eccl. 12:14; Jn. 5:22) and this awaits the final judgement day when God will vindicate the believers and consummate their renewed life in Christ (Rom. 2:5-6; 2 Cor. 5:6-10; Matt. 12:36-27).

The differences highlighted above mean that too much emphasis on the similarities between the gospel and culture pose the danger of sacrificing the fundamental uniqueness of Christian ethics rooted in the gospel. This is often the trap that many African theologians have fallen into in their attempt to formulate what has come to be known as ‘African Christian Ethics’ – a Christian ethics that is regarded as culturally sensitive and relevant, thereby truly African. While the gospel affirms some cultural elements, it has power to reject and transform other elements to a faithful and total obedience to God. Miroslav Volf (2011:xv) rightly stresses this point when he argues that “faith stands in opposition to some elements of culture and is detached from others”.<sup>11</sup> In fact, the nature of Christian morality is distinct in that it demands a complete new start through repentance in Christ (O’Donovan, 1994:92).

One should expect that a healthy relationship between the Christian faith and African cultures will result into a clash of values and norms for morality. This is an unavoidable element in the transformation process of cultures as demanded by the gospel although this is often seen as unhealthy. But often, it is because of such clashes that most Christians revert to the old world-view thereby resulting in syncretism. This means that a community ecclesiology is not only an appropriate framework for Christian ethics in the Africa context

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<sup>11</sup> Volf (2011:84-92) analyses the various models of how the gospel relates to cultures (with emphasis on politics). These range from those who argue for total separation to those who contend for total accommodation. He argues for a model – “a better way” – whereby the gospel engages the culture while maintaining its unique identity centred in Christ. Volf (2011:95) correctly asserts that it is this difference that makes the gospel what it is: “the good news – something good, something new, and therefore something different!” The present research adopts this model.

but also allows for a meaningful engagement with the traditional ethical system in order to formulate a Christian ethics that is genuinely Christian, biblical as well as African.

Obviously, this is not to claim that when one becomes a Christian, he or she would change this traditional ethical world-view overnight. This is a transformational process enabled by the Holy Spirit as one grows spiritually on a daily basis in the knowledge of God and obedience to him. Even with this, the reality is that moral perfection awaits the eschaton. Reformer John Calvin (1960:1031) underscores this when he writes of holiness of the church that “it makes progress from day to day but has but has not reached its goal”. This is also not to argue that the problem of syncretism is the case for all Christians in sub-Saharan Africa. There are many mature and faithful Christians in many African church communities where the gospel is given a central place. Yet, even such Christians continue to face enormous tensions in that while they belong to the new community in Christ, they continue to live in cultural communities which, in one way or the other, influence their sense of identity, meaning of life and consequently their moral life. As a result, many believers tend to compromise the unique quality of their moral life and thus underplaying the distinctiveness of the gospel.

## **1.2 Research question**

The key question that this research seeks to answer is: How does a theological formulation that views church as an ethical community meaningfully and critically engage the African morality in order to formulate a Christian ethic that is not just African but is genuinely evangelical and biblical?

**The specific questions of the research are:**

- i. What are the biblical-theological foundations of Christian community ethics?
- ii. How do the concepts of community and solidarity provide the basis and framework for African ethics?
- iii. How does the Christian community ethic fits into the African context and how does it challenge and transform the negative elements of how community and solidarity are culturally perceived, thereby espousing a Christian ethics that is genuinely Christian, biblical and African?

## **1.3 Research aim and specific objectives**

The overall aim of this research is to explore how a conceptualisation of church as an ethical

community fits into the African context with its rich values of community and solidarity but also to explicate how such a conceptualisation challenge and transform the African moral framework thereby formulating a genuine evangelical and biblical Christian ethics.

**The specific objectives of the research are to:**

- i. Explore the biblical-theological foundations of the church as an ethical community.
- ii. Examine the concepts and functions of community and solidarity in African traditional ethics.
- iii. Assess how Christian community ethics fits into the African context and how it challenges and transforms the negative elements of how community and solidarity are culturally perceived thereby espousing a Christian ethic that is genuinely Christian, biblical and African?

#### **1.4 Central theoretical argument**

This research sets out to argue that while a conceptualisation that sees the church as an ethical community fits well in the African context with its rich values of community and solidarity, these cultural values ought to be meaningfully and critically challenged by a Christ-centred gospel in order to formulate an ethic that is not just African but is genuinely Christian, evangelical and biblical.

#### **1.5 Methodology**

The research, which is within a Protestant evangelical tradition,<sup>12</sup> adopts an “evangelical and practical” approach to the task of Christian ethics: it is “evangelical” in that it proceeds from a gospel-centred theology which aims for “the obedience of *faith*” and it is “practical” in that it seeks to create “*obedience of faith*” (Verhey, 2002:11). This emphasizes the fact that true Christian ethics is fundamentally inseparable from genuine faith in Christ: this is an ethic that is grounded in theology. This is also referred to as a “theological approach” (Clark & Rakestraw, 1994:10). It is with the same understanding that O’Donovan (1994:11) succinctly argues that “... Christian ethics must arise from the gospel of Jesus Christ...otherwise it could not be Christian ethics”.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> I am a member of Christian Community Church which falls within the Protestant evangelical tradition in its theological confession and practices.

<sup>13</sup> John Calvin and Karl Barth take the same approach in that their treatises on ethics begin with the doctrine of God (cf. Meilaender & Werpehowski, 2005:2).

The research uses literature analysis to investigate how the church as an ethical community defines and shapes evangelical Christian ethics in an African context. Here, interaction is made with literature written from both African and non-African contexts and from different ecclesiastical traditions. In this way, a point is made that Christian ethics is not only contextual but is also inter-contextual or cross-cultural because it is rooted in the universal gospel. Some sociological/anthropological analysis of the concepts of community and solidarity will be done in an effort to understand the social nature of the church as a community. However, as pointed out above, this will be done within the broader framework of the whole nature of the church as a new and distinct community in Christ.

In this research, the scripture is regarded as the '*norma normas*' for Christian ethics both for individual Christians and the church communities (Hays, 1996:10). Admittedly, while the scripture's authority is generally accepted as normative in Christian ethics, there is a plethora of views even within evangelical circles as to how the Bible should be interpreted particularly for moral practice (Hays, 1996:2-3; Carrol & Bock, 2010:371-372, Husbands, 2005:10-13). The present research uses what has come to be known as "theological interpretation" or "theological criticism" of the scriptures (Fowl, 2005:6; Vanhoozer, 2005:19-25; Treier, 2008). With this, the Bible provides not only the rules but also the motivation and values for moral living as believers seek to live in obedience to God within the broader framework of his redemptive purpose for man and the world in Christ (Carrol & Bock, 2010:372; Fowl, 2009:11; Vanhoozer, 2005:24-25).

As Fowl (2009:16-19) helps us to understand, central to the theological interpretation is the priority that "theological concerns" as well as "ecclesial concerns" have in interpreting the text over its "historical concerns". Thus, use of the theological means that historical, literary and sociological critical tools are used not for their own sake but to serve the theological meaning and its transforming implications in the life of believers. In this light, Vanhoozer (2005:21) is correct in stating that any interpretation "that remain on the historical, literary, or sociological levels cannot ultimately do justice to what the texts are actually about". Also, Vanhoozer (2005:20) argues convincingly that using these approaches alone, as is the case with modern post-Enlightenment scholarship, is problematic due to "its tendency to treat Biblical texts as sources for reconstructing human history and religion rather than as texts that testify to God's presence and action in history".

Thus with the theological interpretation approach, the above tools are not rejected but are used to aid believers to hear God's word which challenges and guides them to be Christ-like in their everyday life (Vanhoozer, 2005:22-23). Such tools are helpful, for instance, in understanding the socio-historical context and setting in which the scriptures were written

thereby enabling appropriate application in modern contexts and settings.<sup>14</sup> As Carson (2011:189) correctly argues, this is key to avoiding one of the limitations of theological interpretation method “often cast in terms of the conflict between history and theology”.<sup>15</sup> This is of particular importance in relation to the aim of the present research, which is to conceptualise the church as an ethical community and explicate how this communal ethics can be appropriated in the Sub-Sahara African context. Yet, the ultimate purpose on interpretation remains that the church as an ethical community should hear God’s word and live ethically to please God.

Clearly, the theological interpretation method underscores the *extra nos* authority of scriptures without the need to reject the interpretative function of the community within particular contexts. Without seeking to impose meaning on the text, this asserts that biblical texts cannot be understood separately from its theological underpinnings centred on the nature and character of the triune God, his redemptive work revealed in Christ; and his purposes for the world. Using Verhey’s terms, this understanding demands that the Bible must be read “humbly”, “in community”, “as a canon”, “with exegetical care” and “prayerfully” (2002:56-68). It is in the same vein that Fowl (2009:66-68) considers “truth seeking/telling” “repentance”, “forgiveness”, “reconciliation” and “patience” as important signposts in interpreting scriptures theologically. With this, the church as a community, not just individuals, moves from mere critical reading of the Bible to listening with all readiness to be transformed by the help of the Holy Spirit.

In discussing how community Christian ethics engages and challenges African cultures, the research makes reference to African cultures in general in that there is no particular tribal group which is used as a case study. “The chief advantage of this method of approach” as Nyamiti (2005:9) rightly puts it, “is that it makes it possible to construct an African theology which is common and relevant to any black community in our continent.” While admitting that

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<sup>14</sup> The limitation of the method, as Fowl (2009:23) admits, is that “it will not always be clear how and in what ways the priority of theological concerns will need to take shape in specific times and places”. But such difficulty does not in any way offset the importance of ensuring that biblical interpretation is not divorced from the theological meaning as well as application of the text. Thus, as Fowl (2005:6) argues elsewhere, the theological method used herein “is always directed toward a more faithful worship and practice so that we Christians might move toward ever deep friendship or communion with God and each other”. This fits well with the goal of the present research.

<sup>15</sup> Carson (2011:188-206) helpfully lays out what he consider as the six main “propositions” of the Theological Interpretation of Scripture (TIS) but he goes a step further to point out not only the strengths but also the weakness of this exegetical method. Most of the strengths are no different from the arguments raised above. Clearly, one weaknesses that Carson mentions of the wrong assumption that history is exclusively contradictory to theology serve to safeguard TIS from the danger of losing its social-historical and human contexts and relevance and this overspiritualizing the scriptures.

this approach gives in to “unwarranted generalizations” thereby failing to take into account the differences that exist among different ethnic or tribal groups (cf. Maluleke, 1996:20-22), Nyamiti (2005:10) insists that the approach helps in acknowledging scripture as the final authority for Christian theological reflection and moral practise for all cultures. The same applies to Christian ethics. However, wherever necessary and recognising the differences among African peoples, examples from various tribal groups including those in Malawi where the author comes from, shall be used to stress or clarify specific points being made.

## **1.6 Value of research**

The research envisages contributing to the ongoing theological reflection on the relationship between the gospel and culture in Africa by focussing on its implications for ethical reflection and practice. As this research propounds, a Christian ethic that sees the church as a community of ethics is pivotal in addressing the moral challenges of African Christians. By exploring the concepts of community and solidarity, which are the paradigmatic coordinates for traditional African ethics, the research aims to show how Christian ethics not only affirms but also critically challenges a common world-view which shapes morality among many African Christians. In this way, Christians not only in Africa but worldwide are transformed and equipped to live morally as the people of God. By this, the research will make a humble contribution to achieving the task of Christian ethics which is to “nurture the renewal and reform of the moral discourse and discernment of the churches” (Verhey, 2002:11).<sup>16</sup>

This research also seeks to contribute to evangelical ecclesiological ethics which is observably deficient in Africa. Admittedly, not much has been written on the subject from an evangelical perspective. Here contributions from other traditions, the Roman Catholic Church in particular, must be commended. Key examples include B. Bujo (1990, 1998, 2003), L. Magesa (1997, 2004) and G. Tanye (2010) which this research dialogues with. The conceptualization of the evangelical church as a community of ethics harnesses genuine fellowship, true discipleship and admonition for moral living in the light of the glorious hope to be fully revealed at the eschaton when the Lord Jesus Christ returns.

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<sup>16</sup> Here Carson (2008:ix) is right in warning against Christian reflections that narrowly focus on one culture because the fact that the church lives in “extraordinary diverse cultural settings” demands that any good Christian reflection consider other cultures in order to have relevance for the global church. Thus, while this research focuses on sub-Saharan African cultures, it seeks to make a contribution to the global universal church thereby transcending any cultural or social differences.

## 1.7 Concept clarification

It is only right to clarify some of the key terms and concepts used in this study due to various meanings attached to them by different scholars. Herein, *Africa* is used to refer to sub-Saharan black Africa with its many common cultural beliefs and ethical practices including the strong sense of community and solidarity. With this, allowance for generalization is given without ignoring particular cultural differences among the specific people of Africa.

Church (with capital C) refers to the universal body of Christ which is “paradigm of community” for all Christians (Griffiths, 2005:401) and church or churches (with small c) refers to local communities or congregations. Local church is an expression of the universal Church in space and time. In this sense, church may also refer to a denomination which is simply a fellowship of local congregations. Although the research focuses largely on local communities, denominations may also be regarded as ethical communities for they too function as communities for moral formation and practice.

The term “evangelical” also needs clarification due to the many senses in which it is used in different circles. It is however used in this research to denote commitment to a Christ-centred gospel in the confession, life and mission of Christians both as individuals and as a community (O'Donovan, 1994:11; Reuschling, 2008:15). With this, the distinctive features of the gospel are strongly maintained; the key ones being *sola scriptura*, *sola gratia* and *sola fide*. Thus an evangelical community is that which genuinely believes that salvation is purely by God's grace (not works) received only through faith. This is what forms the grounding for Christian morality in that the scripture is regarded as the supreme authority and source of ethical norms and values. Clearly, the church is only evangelical when it properly recognizes that it is created by the Word and not vice versa (Webster, 2005a:76-78). Ultimately, the authority of the scriptures is given by Christ. As Webster (2005a:76-77) rightly notes, this challenges postliberalism ecclesiologies in which the church is regarded as “*doctrinal substratum*” – the church that has all authority because it is Christ's physical body.

The study uses the terms ‘ethics’ and ‘morality’ interchangeably although a loose differentiation commonly made between the two is followed at various points for the sake of emphasis. Wayne Meeks (1993:4), for example, highlights such a difference when he defines “ethics” as “a reflective, second-order activity... it asks about the logic of moral discourse and action, about the grounds for judgement, about the anatomy of duty or the roots and structure of virtue” and defines “morality” as that which “names a dimension of life, a pervasive and, often partly conscious set of value-laden dispositions, inclinations, attitudes, and habits.” In a sense, one can say that ethics is largely concerned with the ‘how’

or prescriptive aspect while morality focuses on the 'what' or descriptive aspect of moral knowledge and praxis. But the two are not exclusive from one another. Thus although Meeks (1993:5) prefers the term "morality" over "ethics", he does so "only to focus attention on the broader dimensions of the latter" rather than for the sake of mere differentiation.

And lastly, the study adopts anthropologist Clifford Geertz's definition of "culture" as "an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic form by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life" (1973:89). Here "life" touches on every aspect human society including morality (Geertz, 1973:89-90). This what sociologist Anthony Giddens asserts when he argues that culture includes "the values the members of a given group hold, the norms they follow, and the material goods they create" (Giddens, 1993:31). The definition is comprehensive and explains well the African cultures which refer not only to the politics or art of the people but also their religious beliefs and practices which are integral to their life.

## **1.8 Chapter outline**

**Chapter 2** explores the biblical-theological foundations of the church as an ethical community in both reflection and practice. The key underpinnings of true biblical and Christ-centred ecclesiology are discussed thereby espousing ecclesiology which provides a paradigm for normative evangelical Christian ethics relevant for every context.

**Chapter 3** examines the concepts of community and solidarity in African cultural context and assesses how they provide the framework, values and norms for traditional African ethics. This is the ethical system that, as many African scholars contend, needs to be appropriated in the church if the Christian faith is to be meaningful to believers in Africa and beyond. The assessment is done using three categories: communal, religious and perspectival.

**Chapter 4** is an engagement of the theological ethical formulation with the African ethics. The chapter, firstly, explores how Christian ethics with its communitarian characteristic finds fertile grounds in African cultures and is thus enriched by the values of community and solidarity; secondly, it examines how the gospel critically challenges and transforms the negative elements of the cultural values of community and solidarity. Finally, it will espouse a Christian theological ethic that benefits from the rich values of community and solidarity thereby making it meaningful for African Christians but without compromising its nature which is grounded in Christ.

**Chapter 5** summarises and synthesizes the key arguments of the research and draws out

implications (as well as recommendations) crucial to ensuring a fruitful and sustained moral formation within Christian communities today in sub-Saharan African contexts and beyond.

## Chapter 2

# BIBLICAL-THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF CHRISTIAN-COMMUNITY ETHICS

### Introduction

One of the fundamental realities of church is that it is a community of a people who belong to God and ought to live accordingly. Using the concept of community, this chapter therefore aims to explore the biblical-theological foundations of the church as an ethical community thereby espousing an ecclesiological understanding that provides a paradigm for normative evangelical Christian ethics. The main assertion of this chapter is that God's redemption both in the Old Testament (OT) and the New Testament (NT) establishes his people into a community(s) whose ethical life is motivated and shaped by a clear self-understanding of being community. Using the concept of community, the chapter begins by providing a working definition of church and proceeds to explicate its bearing on moral reflection and praxis for believers. Following from this, the chapter explicates the function of the church as an ethical community in moral formation for the believers both at individual and communal levels. Then, the chapter explores the key marks of Christian ethical community before it concludes by summarising the key theological elements of church as an ethical community.

### 2.1 Church as an ethical community: definition and meaning

One of the most difficult and yet critical tasks in any reflection that touches on ecclesiology is to define or explain what church is. The task is difficult mainly because, as one Biblical theology scholar Paul. S. Minear (1960:25) admits, the Bible does not give a one clear-cut definition of church. This has resulted into divergent views on the meaning of church. It is for this reason that Minear (1960:52), for example, suggests one can understand what church is by exploring the various images used in the NT and thus he is convinced that "images maybe more effective than formal dogmatic assertions". Indubitably, as Minear (1960) has shown, the various images or metaphors used in the Bible particularly in the NT such the body of Christ, the household of God and the kingdom of God provide key insights in understanding the nature of the church. This applies to the ethical life of church.

However, the continued differences that emerge with different ecclesiological traditions even when such images are used, as Minear (1960:17-27) also concedes,<sup>17</sup> make the present task no less significant. In this light, Volf (1998:127) avers that the significance of the task is that it explicates “the *sine qua non* of what it means for the church to call itself church in the first place”. As Volf (1998:127) further points out, answering the question is crucial to locating the very foundations of “what supports and shapes the entire life and mission of the church”. A correct understanding of church is therefore crucial not only to locating its identity but also to explicating its ethical and missional ramifications. Although no one definition can claim finality due to the fact that church is a dynamic and multifaceted entity to be explained exhaustively in one way, the task is not only practicable but also remains important in order to make a guided contribution to any study of the present nature. Only a brief discussion suffices here because, as stated already, the onus of this chapter is to explore the biblical/theological foundations of the church as an ethical community and not to present a comprehensive systematic doctrine of church.

The term church is from a Greek ἐκκλησία (*qahal* in Hebrew)<sup>18</sup> and simply means “assembly”. Thus Volf (1998:137) defines church as “the *people* who in a specific way assemble at a specific place”. By italicising “people,” Volf makes a deliberate emphasis that church is primarily the believers and therefore not so much about the particular times when and location or building where such a gathering takes place. But as Volf (1998:145) insightfully states, “a church is an assembly, but an assembly is not yet a church... an indispensable condition of ecclesiality is that the people assemble in the name of Christ”. Using Matthew 18:20,<sup>19</sup> Volf (1998:138) insists therefore that church in its primary sense refers not necessarily to a cluster of local churches or denomination but rather to local assemblies in so far as they gather in Jesus’ name. As he puts it, this means that “the local churches are always the one *whole* church existing concretely at various places” (1998:140).

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<sup>17</sup> For instance, Minear (1960:17-27) admits to the problems that exist in interpreting the images of church due to factors such as the gap between today and the bible times in which the images were originally used as well as the difficulty in determining which aspect of church is portrayed in a specific image.

<sup>18</sup> Kelvin Giles (1995:231-243) discusses in detail the use of *qahal* in the OT (used 123 times) in reference to any gathering but most of which are in reference to Israel as a people of God. This is depicted clearly in another word Hebrew word *edah* translated *sunagoge* in the LXX. Of course, Giles (1995:5-7) is right in pointing out that while the word *ekklesia* is key in defining church, one cannot build the whole doctrine of church on this technical word alone.

<sup>19</sup> Volf’s understanding relies heavily on patristic fathers such as Tertullian and St. Cyprian (1998:129-145) although Bidwell (2011:180) critiques Volf of grossly misrepresenting the views of the fathers.

It is such an assembly that, as the Belgic Confession declares in Article 30 (Beeke & Ferguson, 1999:198-200), requires:

... that there must be ministers or pastors to preach the Word of God, and to the administer sacraments; also elders and deacons, who, together with the pastors, form the council of the Church; that by these means the true religion may be preserved, and the true doctrine everywhere propagated, likewise transgressors punished and restrained by spiritual means; also that the poor and distressed may be relieved and comforted, according to their necessities.

Thus a local assembly is a church if it does not only has leadership but is centrally commitment to the teaching and the practice of God's word and administering sacraments, among other things. Thus, as reformer John Calvin (1960:1023) posits, this locality of the church is not without true marks: "Wherever we see the word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according Christ's institution, there it is not to be doubted as church of God exists [cf. Eph. 2:20]."

But while insisting on the locality of church, Volf goes further to assert its universal nature which he contends is eschatological rather than institutional. "It is important to note, however, *ἐκκλησία* that in this second sense refers not to the Christians dispersed throughout the world or to the totality of local churches but primarily to the universal church as a heavenly and simultaneously eschatological entity." (Volf, 1998:139) It is on this basis that Volf (1998:133-139) critiques the Western (Roman Catholic) and Eastern (Orthodox) ecclesiological traditions whereby church is largely perceived to be universal in its earthly or institutional form. Here, the local church is regarded as a church in its full sense only as it is part of the one worldwide institutional church. But Volf's understanding is in line with the reformed confessions. For example, Article 27 of the Belgic Confession declares (Beeke & Ferguson, 1999:188):

We believe and confess one catholic or universal Church, which is a holy congregation of true Christian believers, all expecting their salvation in Jesus Christ, being washed by His blood, sanctified and sealed by the Holy Ghost.

Volf's formulations, as discussed above, reveal four key elements of what church is. First, church is first and foremost about *people* who gather together. In this sense, church is not a building or an institution but a community of God's people. Secondly, church is about people who gather at a specific *locality*. It is on this basis that Volf argues for the primacy of local over any organised form of church as construed in episcopal hierarchical ecclesiologies. Of course, the local church stands in ecumenical relationship with other churches on the basis that they share the same faith in Christ mediated through sacraments of baptism and the

Lord's Supper (Volf, 1998:152-155). In fact, Volf (1998:156) regards "the openness of every church toward all other churches as an indispensable condition of ecclesiality". Thirdly, church is *Christological* because only a group of people that gathers in the name of Jesus that can rightly be called church. Lastly, church (both local and universal) is *eschatological* because it awaits final consummation when all believers shall gather before God.

Horton (2008:34), writing from a covenant-reformed perspective, defines church as "that place – wherever it is in the world – where Jesus Christ is faithfully heard as God's "Yes," generating the "Amen" of faith to the ends of the earth". Rooted in "the Trinitarian economy of grace" which is expressed in the covenant that God establishes with his people, Horton's understanding of church emphasizes four key elements: firstly, church has *locality* in the world (although not specific); secondly, church is *Christological* in that Christ is not only the head of the church but also the center of its entire life; thirdly, church is a *community of faith* because it is constituted of people who have experienced God's covenant grace; lastly, church is an *eschatological* because it is lived in view of its glorious end yet to be consummated at the return of Christ.

Horton's overall ecclesiology shares some significant similarities with Volf's. For example, both Horton and Volf understand church in communitarian terms rooted in the Trinity and they both put emphasis on the locality, Christological as well as the eschatological dimensions of the nature of church and its bearing on practice. However, Horton's covenant ecclesiology is different from Volf's congregational ecclesiology. For example, unlike Volf who bases the trinitarian foundations of church in the ontological life and interpersonal relations of the immanent Trinity, Horton views church as trinitarian because it is established and sustained by the redemption work involving the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, hence his understanding of "the Trinitarian economy of grace" (2008:1). Thus, when Horton (2007:132-135) elsewhere mentions of "the eternal pact between the persons of the Godhead", he insists that this should always be understood in the context of God's redemptive revelation in history and not just immanently.

Also, as Horton (2008:177) rightly critiques Volf, the Free Church ecclesiology promotes "a voluntary covenant, which not only entails the independence of local churches but also independence of individuals within them until they mutually agree on the terms of that relationship". Thus according to Horton (1998:176-184), there are clear problems wrought by this individualistic ecclesiological model: for example, the overemphasis on the "faith and confession of the local assembly" as condition of ecclesiality downplays the functions of God's covenant grace as the origin and life of church and the overemphasis on independence of local churches renders obsolete any form of "institutional church".

Inevitably, this demands that church be understood in communal categories.

Going by the above criticisms, Horton's "third way" ecclesiology which not only maintains the positive elements but also critiques the negative elements of both the episcopal and congregational ecclesiologies seems plausible (2008:181). With this, church as a "redeemed community" is both local and catholic not only eschatologically (invisible) but also historically (visible) and that it is established and sustained not merely by the believers' "faith and confession" but primarily by the covenant grace of the triune God (Horton, 2008:200-201). Important to this understanding of church is that it is a community of God's people which has foundations in God's covenantal grace first revealed through God-Israel (Grenz, 1994:464; Giles, 1995:231-235). In the same vein, Hays (1996:46) and Thompson (2011:53-56)<sup>20</sup> see the church, or at least in Paul's theology, as "a covenant community".

Thus we proceed by briefly exploring how the concept of community as highlighted above provides the appropriate category for understanding the theological and sociological dimensions of church and how this is critical for ethical reflection and practice.

### **2.1.1 Church as a community**

It is increasingly acknowledged that the concept of community is fundamental in explicating the nature and the ethical life of the church (for example, Grenz, 1994, Volf, 1998, Chan, 2010:252-253; Sarot, 2010:37). Meeks (1993:2-3) shows that this has been the common designation for believers since the early centuries of the Christian history although, as Stowers (2011:238-239, 253) contends, one must avoid generalized usage of the concept which fails to differentiate the way this would have used in early and modern societies. But, first, what is community? Answering this question is important not only due to differences in its meaning but also because usage of the concept is not exclusive to theological discourses. Sociologically, George Wood and Juan Judikis (2002:12) define community as:

... a group of people who have a sense of common purpose(s) and/or interest(s) for which they assume mutual responsibility, who acknowledge their interconnectedness, who respect the individual differences among members, and who commit themselves

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<sup>20</sup> Writing specifically on Paul's ethics, Thompson (2011:53-56) argues that Paul's use of the term *ekklesia* in reference to the church presupposes a continuation between the church and Israel not only in their identity as a community but also in their moral life as defined by their God-given law. Thus the church, just as Israel, is established in God's act of redemption and is called to live in holiness thus distinctively from the rest of the people. It remains important, however, to maintain that the law is ultimately and radically fulfilled in Christ through whom a new community of God's people is created. With this, the law is not nullified but rather it is given a new, comprehensive and radical meaning in Christ.

to the well-being of each and the integrity and well-being of the group.

Similarly, John Franke (2005:172-174) defines community as “a group of people who are conscious that they share a similar frame of reference”, “engage in a common task” and “draw a sense of personal identity from the community”. Although the aspects of the two definitions apply differently in different communities, both underpin a strong sense of togetherness expressed through shared identity, beliefs, values, and purpose of life which translates into the behaviours of the people concerned.

Understood this way (as above), one can therefore define church as a community of a people belonging to God and to each other and they share a common identity and moral life through their one faith in Christ. Capitalising on the differentiation between community (*gemeinschaft*) and association (*gesellschaft*) first developed by the German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies, K. Gowdy (1982:565-377) emphasizes that church is a community because it is primarily established not as “the product of natural processes” but through the believers’ given faith. As Gowdy (1982:377-378) explains further, it is this faith that creates not only “love” but also “a sense of oneness” in that it provides a common understanding and way of life for all Christians.

Thus it is for no other reason that “*communitas*/community” becomes what Kelvin Giles (1995:22) suggests to be “the integrating church concept” because it profoundly expresses the theological and sociological nature of church/*ekklesia*. Similarly, Grenz (1994:23-24) describes “community” as a key “integrative motif” not only in ecclesiology but in theology as a whole “not only because it fits with contemporary thinking, but more importantly because it is central to the message of the Bible”. For Grenz (1994:23), this concept underscores the corporate nature and life of church and this is paramount in addressing the problem of individualism prevalent in modern societies including the church. Volf (1998:7), one of the key proponents of Trinitarian communal ecclesiology, echoes this concern when he bemoans that the strong sense of community is slowly dying in the Western church in that “faith lived ecclesially is being replaced by faith lived individualistically”. Although Volf’s communal ecclesiology does not go unquestioned,<sup>21</sup> its stern challenge against individualistic formulations of salvation and ecclesiology needs to be heeded with urgency.

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<sup>21</sup> Bidwell (2011:195, 180), for example, critiques Volf’s ecclesiology not only because it is rooted in a Trinitarian understanding which “focuses exclusively on the communion that exists between the divine persons and not on the divine unity of essence” but also because of weak exegesis on biblical texts used. On the basis of such criticisms, Bidwell (2011:212) thus concludes that “Volf’s social doctrine of the Trinity unmask a model that has a narrow base, built upon subjective presuppositions, speculations, and anthropological concerns for human identity and equality”. Also, Sarot (2010:43) critiques Volf for emphasizing the diversity of churches thereby underplaying the unity of the church as the one body of Christ. Taken seriously, these observations are helpful in ensuring that any

However, as Hays (1996:196) emphasizes, to call church a community is to underscore “the concrete social manifestation of the people of God”. As a community, believers not only become a corporate entity but also, and most importantly, embrace a specific and distinct way of way of life that expresses what it means to be God’s people. And, morality is clearly one of the central aspects of the believers’ corporate or ecclesial life. This makes it possible to speak of what Bernd Wannewetsch (2005:57) phrases well as “an ecclesiological dimension in ethics as well as an ethical dimension in ecclesiology”. Yet, to cite Gowdy (1982:378) again, moral living is not just an expression of the believer’s corporate identity but is also directed towards building the identity itself; hence community “represents an ideal, a hope, a goal” towards which the people aim to attain through everyday life. Wood and Judikis (2002:16) make a similar point when they argue that a realisation of community “establishes specific expectations for the behaviour of community members”. This shows the inextricable relationship between community and ethics.

### **2.1.2 Evangelical communal ecclesiology and the Emerging Movement**

It is important to qualify at this point that defining church as a community as also emphasized by the Emerging Movement (EM) in North America and Europe does not entail endorsing wholesale its theology and its ethical caveats. The EM, whose key proponents include John Franke and Brian McLaren, is defined as “communities that practice the way of Jesus within postmodern cultures” (Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger cited in McKnight, 2006:7-8). From the definition, one notices that the fundamental characteristics of the EM theology is the centrality of community or fellowship based on love as well as praxis which, according to McKnight (2006:15-22) centres on “worship”, “orthopraxy”, “social justice”, and being “missional”. This means church is a community of people who belong to God and are to express this in their relationship with each other and the world as a whole (cf. Franke, 2005:174).

However, in emphasizing communal relationships the EM goes far in rejecting entirely the understanding of church as an institutionalized local community or denomination (McKnight, 2006:8-9). Also, for the EM, the gospel is true so long as it remains relevant to the contemporary cultures and this implies that while universal in its absolute sense, truth is dependent on cultural contexts in which the church as a community finds itself in (cf.

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communal ecclesiology avoids distorting the biblical teaching of God and the community of his people.

McKnight, 2006:11-12). As Carson (2005:125-138) points out, this postmodernist understanding of truth underplays the absolute nature of the gospel.<sup>22</sup> Very importantly, the EM is deficient of a biblical and evangelical ethic in that the movement overemphasises fellowship at the expense of the gospel truth. McKnight's (2006:16) assertion, for instance, that "the emerging movement thinks how a person lives is more important than what they believe" affirms this.

But it is appropriate to maintain that just as theology without ethics is dead, ethics or moral teaching without correct theology is not Christian, at least, not in its true biblical sense. Thus any church as an ethical community can only be said to be all inclusive and ethical when it seeks to live uncompromisingly in accordance with the teaching of the Bible rather than contradictory to it. This means that there cannot be genuine Christian love or communal fellowship, at least as understood from a reformed perspective, without correct doctrine which is exclusively revealed in Christ. What then does the Scripture teach about the church as a community and how does this provide the paradigmatic framework for Christian morality? We begin by exploring the OT and then turn to the NT.

## **2.2 Ethical community in the OT: Israel as a covenant people of God**

At the heart of the OT is the story of Israel as the people (*ekklesia*) belonging to Yahweh. As shall be discussed in some further detail, the overall theological framework of Israel's communal identity and ethical life is undergirded by the reality of covenant (*berit*) that God establishes with the people (Gen. 15:18; Ex. 19:5; Lev. 26:12). As Wright (1983:19ff) propounds, it is the covenantal relationship between God and Israel that defines and shapes the people's communal identity and most importantly their communal ethical life. It is with this strong emphasis of community that, citing H. W. Robinson, Sarot (2010:38) also speaks of Israel as "corporate personality". Based on this assertion, the Israelites become an ethical community in that they are established and are called to live out on a daily basis the inextricable relationships with God and each other and the rest of creation.

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<sup>22</sup> In his response to this charge, McKnight (2006:12) argues for example that "emerging Christians don't deny the truth, and they don't deny that Jesus Christ is the truth, and they don't deny the Bible is truth – but they might be gentle when it comes to their use of the word "truth"". But this is raises one obvious question which begs a convincing answer: To what extent can Christians be "gentle" in the way they confess and live out their faith without compromising its distinctiveness rooted in the objective gospel truth?

## **2.2.1 Israel's communal identity and ethics: creation, the fall and covenant**

Our understanding of the relationship of creation, the fall and covenant follows the lead of Christopher Wright (1983:31-64). From the beginning, God creates man not only in his image "our likeness" which carries the sense of plural of the Godhead but also places him in a communion of male and female as well as the environment (Gen. 1:26-27). Therefore the communal relationship at creation has three dimensions: relationship between God and man, relationship between "male" and "female" or simply among people, and relationship between man and the environment. It is of no wonder that the fall brings insufferable damage to all the three dimensions of the communion. The consequences of sin that follow immediately are revealing: shame in man that leads to attempts to hide from God's presence (v8-9), blame and accusations between Adam and Eve (v12-13), curses (v14-19), banishment of man from the garden symbolizing broken fellowship or enmity with God (v22-24), murder of Abel by Cain (Gen. 4), increased levels of evil climaxed in the attempt to "make a name for ourselves" at the tower of Babel during the time of Noah (Gen. 11:4).

In this state of sin, man is totally hopeless and cannot restore the broken communion with God and one another. In fact, man deserves nothing but death as declared by God (Gen. 2:17). But, in his great mercy, God chooses to intervene in history in order to redeem man and therefore restore the communal relationship in all its dimensions. Through the Abrahamic covenant, God promises and establishes a people of his own thereby revealing explicitly his redemptive plan (Gen. 12:1-3; 15:5-6). It is this nation of Israel that Yahweh promises deliverance from the bondage in Egypt and subsequently makes a law covenant with her at Mt. Sinai through which Israel becomes God's special people and he becomes Israel's personal God (Ex. 6: 2-9; 19:1ff, Lev. 26:11-12; cf. Hos. 2:23).

It is in the Mt. Sinai account as recorded in Exodus 19-22 that meaning and terms of God-Israel covenant (the commandments) are clearly stipulated. Agreeably, Exodus 19 provides the wider theological context for understanding the Decalogue and other laws in chapters 21-24 (Childs, 2004:370; Durham, 1987:258ff). In Exodus 19:5-6 (ESV),<sup>23</sup> God makes "the people of Israel" to be his own special people when he declares; "...you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples... and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation". Thus from this time onwards, Israel has become God's covenant people and God has become theirs, hence the firm declaration: "I am the LORD your God" (Ex. 20:2). As

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<sup>23</sup> All scripture citations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless stated otherwise.

John Durham (1987:290) suggests, this declaration means that Israel only becomes God's people fundamentally because God has in the first place become their personal God. With this, God gives Israel the law "as a gift to an already redeemed community" (Frethem, 1991:22).

Yet it is inescapable to notice that the establishment of the covenant is closely linked with God's acts of redeeming Israel from the bondage in Egypt and his care for them in the wilderness (Ex.20:1-4). The declaration at Mt. Sinai affirms God's faithfulness to his covenant promises first made to Abraham. And as Terence Frethem (1991:209) states convincingly, "the covenant at Sinai is a specific covenant within the context of Abrahamic covenant". It is based on the same observation that Brevard Childs (2004:366-367) views the Mt. Sinai covenant as the "goal" of God's deliverance from Egypt. But if this is part of the Abrahamic covenant, one needs to account for the promise of land which is yet to be fulfilled, at least, by Exodus 19. That the land is yet to be given to Israel suggests that the Mt. Sinai experience is not the final "goal"; but rather it is the breaking-in of Israel's eschatological reality. This reveals three dimensions of the covenant: the *past* through which God first made the promise of the covenant through Abraham, the *present* through which God announces the establishment of covenant through Moses, and the *future* in which the covenant is completely fulfilled when the land is finally given to the people through Joshua (with all its eschatological implications). But these aspects are interrelated by the reality that the same God who brought Israel out of Egypt is the guarantor of her future (Wright, 1983: 51f; Durham, 1987:262).

But one most significant dimension of the covenant is that the people are established into a community and ought to live ethically as such, hence Israel's new identity and moral responsibility creates an ethical community. A brief discussion on Exodus 19 as well as 20-24 is revealing of this reality.

### **2.2.2 Israel as a community: a new identity**

That Israel has become a community is expressed in Exodus 19 and the subsequent four chapters (20-24) where the laws guiding her ethical life are stipulated. In vs. 5-6, Israel has cooperatively become a "treasured possession" just as it is "a kingdom of priests" and "holy nation" (v5-6). As Durham (1987:262) insists, these descriptions carry a strong sense of community among the people, something which did not exist before, at least, in this concrete and special way. Also, God speaks to Israel in a plural "you" (v3-6) and the people respond affirmatively in a plural "we" (v8) (cf. Childs, 2004:367). For Durham (1987:262), it is the call by God and "affirmative response" it demands which marks the "birth" of a community of

God's special people in that Israel is no longer to be individual persons or tribes. Yet, as Durham (1987:262) emphasizes, the "if" (v5) means that people must willingly accept the conditions of the covenant through the laws God was to give them. According to Walter Brueggemann (1999:24), the "blind act of allegiance" by the Israelites is largely "because anything would be better than Pharaoh, or because they had come to trust this God of liberation". The latter reason is more plausible and resonates well with Durham's assertion.

That Israel is a community is also evidenced by the form of the laws as given by God. While the first four commandments are concerned primarily with God, the last six commandments focus on relationships and the ethical life in the community. Durham (1987:285, 290) expresses this succinctly when he writes: "The first four commandments set forth the principles guiding Israel's relationship to Yahweh; the last six commandments set forth the principles guiding Israel's relationship with the covenant community, and more broadly, with the human family." The rest of the laws in Exodus 21-23 also known as "the Book of the Covenant" (Childs, 2004:394) express this communal dimension of Israel identity and ethical life. One must point out here, however, that the commandments relating on the communal life of Israel can only be appropriately understood within the context of the commandments which focuses on Israel's relationship with God. This is to emphasize that the nature and quality of the people's communal relationships and practical life is primarily determined by the nature and quality of their relationship with God.

The reality of community reveals that God has chosen to relate to Israel cooperatively rather than individualistically. Even Moses to whom God speaks personally is only as mediator between God and the people. Thus without underplaying the significance of Moses' role as mediator of the covenant, which for example Childs (2004:358) regards as central in the whole covenant narrative, it is right to insist that the covenant which is divine initiated centres on the people of Israel as community than it does on individuals including Moses. Durham (1987:264) makes this point clear when he asserts that "the Advent of Yahweh" and "the fact that this gracious act of God "was experienced by the whole people" is the heart of the whole covenant story thereby rendering the role of Moses only "secondary". But as a community belonging to God, Israel is called to a life of holiness in reflection of his character and demands. This means that the covenant creates not only a new identity which is communal in nature but also new ethical life which takes the same shape. The next section turns to this.

### **2.2.3 Israel as a community: a new ethic**

Israel's new identity wrought by the covenant has a direct bearing on the people's daily ethical life. John Goldingay (2006:182) helpfully highlights three key elements about

covenant: first, it is solely initiated by God; second, it makes the people to be one or community on the basis of their belief in monotheistic God (Deut. 4:9-14; 29:14-15); and lastly, it obligates the people to be holy on the basis of God's holy character. While the first two aspects explain the grounds of Israel's identity, the third emphasizes the ethical implications of the first two. As Wright (1983:21) argues, this means that God's redeeming covenant "is the starting point for the moral teaching of the Old Testament" in that "God takes the initiative in grace and redeeming action and then makes his ethical demand in the light of it". That the people have become have become a community creates a new ethic for them.

Brueggemann insightfully explains at length this relationship between Israel's community identity, the belief in God or the "Other" and her ethical mandate as God's people. According to Brueggemann (1999:20), Israel finds its identity as a "communion" in her "mutuality" relationship with God which is at the same time "not commensurate" in that he remains the main actor and demands "obedience" from the people. What Brueggemann (1999:20-21) underscores here is the reality that the people's ethical life springs from a proper understanding of God-Israel covenantal relationship characterized by "a dialectic of assertion and abandonment". With this, Israel finds self-realization not only as given by God but also through her self-giving to God through true worship and total obedience to his command.

A helpful way of understanding the nature and dynamics of Israel's ethics is that suggested by Wright (1983:20-63 cf. 2004:17-20). Using "God", "Israel" and "land" as the "three primarily factors" that define Israel's ethics and theology as whole, Wright (1983:19-20) argues that the framework of Israel's ethical system has three key angles. First, is the "theological angle". This emphasizes that Israel's identity and ethical life are divine initiated in that they are established and sustained by God. Following from this, it makes sense that the first four commandments of the Decalogue express how the people ought to relate to God. For instance, they forbid the people not only from worshipping other gods but also from making any image like him (idols), profaning his holy name which in this case is Yahweh and honouring God's holy day, the Sabbath (Ex. 20:3-7) (Childs, 2004, 401-417; Durham, 1987:283-290). Israel's ethics is first and foremost God-centred before it is anything else. But Israel's ethics is not only God-centred but it also communal-centred and this takes to Wright's second angle.

Second is "the social angle" of Israel's ethics. This emphasizes that God's redemption expressed through the covenant and its moral caveat concerns the social life of community as a whole. Thus according to Wright (1983:35), Israel's ethics "is not simply a compendium of moral teaching to enable the individual to lead a privately upright life before God"; rather, it is concerned with "the moral and spiritual health of that whole community". This places high

regard on the people as a corporate entity rather than as individual or private persons. Israel's obligation as a community is clearly articulated in the many laws given to Israel (as shall be discussed below). But the "theological angle" and "social angle" of Israel's ethical is in linked to the gift of land. It is from this that Wright (1983: 19-20; 46-62) proposes the third angle of Israel's ethics: "the economical angle".

At the centre of "the economical angle" is the fact that the people's spiritual, social and economical prosperity is dependent on this land which God had first promised the land to Abraham (Gen. 12:1ff) and is to finally fulfil it through Joshua (Josh. 1:1-6; 2:24-3:1ff). In this sense, the land not only "functioned as proof of the relationship between God and Israel" but also assured the people of God's faithfulness to them and continued blessings (Wright, 1983:52-53). There is one response to this: people must obey God and love him with "all your soul and with all your might" when they enter in this land (Deut. 6:1-5). As Wright (1983:58-59) points out, a proper understanding of land "generated a strong set of rights for both the nation and individuals" and "generated a wide range of responsibilities". Thus the people not only have equal claims to the land in so far as it is God's and that they ought treat each other equally and justly, among other things.

#### **2.2.4 Living as an ethical a community**

In the context of the Mt. Sinai covenant, the demand for moral responsibility is plainly stated when God says "... if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples..." (Ex. 19:5). It is with this condition in mind that the Israelites make a positive commitment: "All that the Lord has spoken we will do." (19:8 cf. 24:3, 7). This implies that the people must fulfil their obligation by living in the light of the terms of the covenant although the covenant is solely initiated by God. As Goldingay (2006:188) states, "the covenant means that Israel's security depends originally on Yhwh's sovereignty and commitment and not on Israel's fickleness, but that Israel's commitment is an absolutely necessary corollary of Yhwh's commitment to Israel". Thus without claiming that God's commitment and faithfulness to the covenant depend on Israel's moral achievement, one should insist that the people's moral obligation is indispensable so much so that as Childs (2004:382) points out, "there can no be separation theologically between the two". The indispensability of the people's responsibility therefore provides the appropriate framework for understanding the meaning and function of the laws given to Israel.

The basis of these laws is love which demands that people treat each other equally and justly (Wright, 1983:57-59). For example, the people are to honour both their fathers and

mothers, they are to avoid murder which constitutes lawless taking away a life of another member of the community, adultery which constitutes engaging in sexual activities with other married persons, theft which infringes the right to property ownership, giving false witness and coveting the neighbour's property (Ex. 20:12-17, cf. Ex. 34). In the same way, masters should not abuse their slaves but treat them fairly and justly (Ex. 21:1-11; 20, 26-27); men should treat women with all care and respect (21:15,19); and, one should not oppress but rather take care of the less privileged such as the sojourners, the poor, the widows, the orphans and other groups of needy people (22:21-27; 23:6-9).

From the above discussion, one observes that these laws stress the fact that the people's moral values and norms are strongly tied to the reality of being a community. In this way, morality is never a private or individualistic way of life. It is unsurprising that on some instances, the sin of the individual members invokes judgement upon the community as a whole. A good example is when Achan steals the devoted things during Israel's wars, it is "the people of Israel" that have sinned and must repent corporately (Jos. 7:1-15). However, it is important to stress this emphasis on community does negate the individual's identity and moral responsibility (Wright, 2004:363). Goldingay (2009:19) affirms this when he argues that "Israel has a strong sense of solidarity and community combined with a living individuality, an awareness of personal responsibility for one's own life". Yet, as Wright (1983:34-35) also stresses, such concern for individual responsibility is set within the context of the communal social life.

But Israel's moral obligation goes beyond legalism. God demands obedience springing from the people's genuine fear of his holy name and deep appreciation of his redeeming love for them which is the basis of their life. It is with this conviction that Brueggemann (1999:25) describes the commands as "not mere rules, but a theological datum about the covenant God of Israel". Commenting on the last six commandments, Durham (1987:290-299) also stresses the same point when he argues, for example, that murder is immoral because it destroys life whose value is given by God while adultery is seriously immoral not merely because it brings shame or because it damages the sanctity of marriage but because, as Durham (1987:294) rightly puts it, adultery "like idol worship" constitutes "a turning away from commitment to Yahweh".

Throughout their history, Israel is often reminded of the grace of God which establishes them as the community of his chosen people and the fact that they have an obligation to live morally according to the covenant (Wright, 2004:74) which Goldingay (2006:15) calls "Israel grace". The message of prophets such as Amos is to remind and challenge Israel of her moral responsibility both vertically and horizontally. Israel should live morally right both at

corporate and individual levels characterized by justice and equality (Amos 2:6ff; 5:18ff). Even when they have failed to meet their covenantal obligation, the Israelites must not give up but must repent and turn back to their faithful God. It is this “shared story”, as Goldingay (2009:14) describes it, that the people must carefully observe and teach their children in the subsequent generations (Deut. 4:9; 6:4-9). However, as we shall see next, it is in the NT that God’s saving grace fully expressed in Christ creates an ethical community, the church.

So far, the discussion has been an attempt to show that the OT ethics is grounded in the covenant relation between God and his people within the framework that this covenant establishes. By virtue of their relationship with God, Israel has been established to be a community. They are not private individuals but a community belonging to God. It is this new identity that defines and shapes the people’s ethical life; hence one can speak of Israel as an ethical community.

But as we turn to the NT, it is worth pointing out briefly how the OT relates to the NT. Our discussion follows the lead of Wright (1983:88-102) who persuasively suggests three important ways of how the OT ethics relates to the NT and Christians ethics in general, these are “paradigmatic”, “typological” and “eschatological”. According to Wright (1983:88-102), the OT ethics is, firstly, “paradigmatic” because it provides “models” for formulating and appropriating ethical norms and values that seek to please to God and are relevant to all people including non-Christians. Secondly, it is “typological” because it provides the example which finds “spiritual” and “theological” meaning in Christ and the church as a new community of God’s people. Lastly, it is “eschatological” because it finds its ultimate fulfilment in Christ and the new community he establishes. Wright’s threefold approach accounts clearly for both the continuity and discontinuity between the old covenant (Israel) and the new covenant (the church) and their ethical caveats.

### **2.3. Ethical community in the NT: church as a covenant people of God**

At the centre of the NT story is God’s full and decisive redemptive revelation through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Through the Christ event (life, death, resurrection and ascension) and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, man is brought into the intimate fellowship with God and fellow man. This is the restoration of the fellowship that was damaged by fall and God has been working and promised to restore through the story of his covenant people, Israel. This is decisively fulfilled in Christ through whom the church as a new covenant community is established. It is here that the “covenant ecclesiology” proposed by Horton (2008:3-4) becomes a helpful category for appropriating what the church is and how it ought to live ethically. This undergirds the reality that church as a community both in identity and ethical

life is established and defined by God's saving covenantal grace revealed in Christ. This also reveals that morality is inseparable from the identity of church as a community. It is from this stand point that one can assert that church is an ethical community.

While several scholars settle with Horton on the significance of using covenant as the appropriate framework for explicating church and ethics (and theology in general), one critical question that has caused an intense debate is: How does the NT covenant established in Christ relate to the OT covenant established with Israel? Are the OT and NT covenants different or the same? The question touches significantly on how much continuity and/or discontinuity can be allowed between the OT and NT covenant(s) or the gospel and the law, hence the debate between reformed theology scholars and the proponents of New Perspective on Paul (NPP). There are three major positions that have emerged in response to this question: first is "covenantal nomism" associated with E. P. Sanders and stresses the radical continuity between the OT and the NT covenants (see Horton, 2007:14); second is "the renewed covenant" of N. T. Wright (1991) which stresses strong continuity between the two covenants while maintaining that the Christ event has transformed the old covenant; lastly is the "new covenant" position of Horton (2007) which stresses the radical discontinuity while maintaining some continuity on the basis of God's covenantal promises first made to Abraham.

The first position is rejected by both Horton (2007:81) and Wright (1991:156) for it downplays the centrality of grace and faith in the "new" covenant. This then leaves us with the two positions for consideration. Wright's (1991:xi) position correctly emphasizes that, just like the OT covenant, the NT covenant is based on the same covenantal grace of one God first established with Israel and "had reached their climactic moment in the events of Jesus' death and resurrection". With this, the gospel or faith in Christ understood in its Jewish context does not nullify the law but rather fulfils it thereby enabling the believers (both Jewish and Gentiles) to obey God through the Holy Spirit (Wright, 1991:137-140). However, one must take seriously the discontinuity between the two covenants as highlighted by Horton (2007:84) who insists that "...something more radical has appeared with Christ than the renewal of the Sinai covenant and restoration of Israel". Thus, while Christ fulfils the OT, he does so in a decisive and radical way thereby establishing a new community of Jews and Gentiles on the basis of grace and faith alone (Horton, 2007:84-85).

Therefore, a plausible biblical/theological understanding of church as covenant community must adequately account for both continuity and discontinuity wrought in Christ and the Holy Spirit and its ethical implications. This is important to ensuring that faith in Christ and the law are not exclusively separated without underplaying the priority of faith in the scheme of

salvation especially in relation to practical life. Using “union with Christ” as the category for apprehending the relationship between the old and the new covenant, Robert Letham (2011:36-37) balances the continuity of all God’s covenants in history with the discontinuity as seen through the lens of “new covenant”; thus he argues “all of God’s historical covenant are centred in Christ and fulfilled by him”.

Just as with the OT, our task in exploring the NT teaching is therefore double-layered: to establish the foundation of the corporate identity of the church and to show how this defines and shapes the believers’ moral life both at individual and community levels. In doing this, several communal images of church as an ethical community including *koinonia*, body of Christ and family or household are highlighted but within context of a focussed theological reflection on Ephesians 4:17-5:1-21. Also, a brief reflection on 1 Corinthians 5:1-13 is presented in order to show how church as an ethical community functions particularly with regard to moral discipline.

### **2.3.1 Ethical communities in the Gospels and Acts**

From the gospel narratives of Mark, Luke, Matthew and John, one gleans that those who follow Jesus are established into a community and are thus challenged to live accordingly. Although Hays (1996:158-160) is right in warning that any approach to NT ethics that starts with the Gospels risks being bogged with a quest for “the historical Jesus” (hence his preference to start with Paul’s ethics), one cannot ignore their strong sense of community and ethical ramifications centred on Jesus. In fact, as Jan van der Watt (2006:615-616) notes, the centrality of Jesus in the narratives affirms that fact that Christian ethics “is Christologically determined”. Of course, Hays (1996:73) has a point in insisting that the Gospels are different from Pauline writings in that although they are pregnant with moral instructions, they are not addressed to specific churches but rather to Christians in general. Thus a brief sketch of the moral teaching of the Gospels as seen within the framework of community, in which case the four Gospels provide what Minear (1960:146) describes as “a paradigm with a message for the church”, is sufficient here.

In the gospel of Mark, for example, the ethical teaching centres on the central themes of “Christology” (Jesus’ identity), “discipleship” (the way of the cross) and “eschatological hope” (the climax of the life of discipleship) (Hays, 1996:75-88). In this way, Mark portrays Jesus not only as “the Son of God” (1:1; 3:11; 15:39) but also as the suffering Messiah expressed through his death at the cross (8:31-32; 9:31; 10:45) and he demands that those who truly follow him must take up their cross and sacrificially serve others as exemplified by the cross (8:34-9:1) in anticipation of their future glory (13:1ff). In Matthew, the primary concern is “the

transformation of character and of the heart” but within the context of a community of Jesus’ followers rather than individual followers (Hays, 1996:98-99). As Hays (1996:97) further argues, Matthew’s ethical teaching, as epitomised in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7), calls for radical moral life on the part of those who have committed to follow Jesus. In the Gospel of John (and the epistles of John), Jesus is the divine Logos who reveals God’s love which is paradigmatic in shaping the new Christ-centred community characterized by genuine love for one another (Hays, 1996:140-148).

But it is Luke-Acts that a clear sense of community among believers and its inextricable consequence on everyday way is expressed. In Luke, Jesus is “the Spirit-empowered servant” who comes “to inaugurate the liberation of God’s people” and establishes them into a community that follows him under the guidance of the Holy Spirit (Hays, 1996:115-121). Explicitly, it is in Acts 2 that sense of community comes into clear shape. Without claiming that Acts 2 is “the birthday of the church”, a view that Minear (1960:133) argues to be “erroneous” on grounds that the word ‘church’ is not mentioned, one observes that it is in this account that the believers are expressively seen to form a *koinonia* following the disruptive outpouring of the Holy Spirit promised by Jesus (1:1-8). The *koinonia* is principally characterized by sharing of every aspect of life including material possessions; hence Acts 2:44-47 (NIV) states:

All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people.

Clearly, the life “in common” (κοινῶν) which is given through faith and empowered by the Holy Spirit touches on every aspect of the people’s daily life (ἅπαντα – all things): worship, prayers, material possessions and sharing of food particularly with the needy (Acts 2:41-42). The ethical dimension of what it means to be church is realized when the believers fulfil their obligation towards one another. Thus the reality of *koinonia* or communal fellowship not only motivates the people to share their lives with others but also obligates them to love sincerely and practically. When Sapphira and Ananias, for example, decide to lie to the community and ultimately God who owns the community, the consequence is nothing less than death (Acts 5:1ff).

But this interrelationship between the identity of church as a community and ethics is explicit in the Pauline letters and provides connecting strand for his ethical exhortations. But due to

lack of space, a detailed exploration of the all the letters of Paul is impossible; hence we give a specific attention to Ephesians specifically 4:1-5:2 although other texts are not completely ignored.<sup>24</sup>

### **2.3.2 Church as community: new identity**

At the heart of the message of Paul's letter to Ephesus is the oneness of believers as a body of Christ founded on the one gospel of Christ and the ethical ramifications that this brings on the believers. It is in this light that John Calvin (cited in O'Brien, 1999:1) describes the book as "the crown of St. Paul's writings". Through the atoning work of Jesus Christ, God has chosen to redeem the people so as "to unite all things in him" (1:10). The individual believers are united through their one faith in Christ; hence they have a new identity and way of life (cf. 1 Cor. 12:1-31; 1 Thess. 4:1-12). Although this redemption is not dependent on human works "so that no one may boast" (2:8-9), yet the believers are "created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared before hand, that we should walk in them" (2:10). This is the life of holiness (1:3-4). But this life springs from his understanding of the believers' new identity as a community belonging to God. Thus Paul writes in Ephesians 4:1-6:

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the blood of peace. There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call – one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

According to Paul, the believers have become one body by virtue of their one faith and baptism in Christ through the work of the Spirit (v4). Here "body of Christ" becomes one of the key images used by Paul for the church (Best, 1998:359, cf. Rom. 7:4; 1 Cor. 12:12, 27).

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<sup>24</sup> The continued debate on authorship and audience of the book makes it expedient to state that the research takes the traditional position of Pauline authorship, a position which although scholars including Ernest Best (1998:xiii-xiv) doubts, he does not completely rule it out as a possibility. Peter O'Brien (1999:4-46) and Harold Hoehner (2002:2f) clearly defend the Pauline authorship. Regarding audience, Best (1998:1ff) holds that the letter is likely to have been written to believers in Asia Minor in general rather than to a specific community. But O'Brien (1999:48-49) argues for the view that Paul wrote to a specific congregation in Ephesus on grounds, for example, that it is through his personal ministry that the church was first established (Acts, 19:8; 10,20:31). But even if Best is correct that the letter is general or as Hoehner (2002:112) insists that *ekklesia* in this book refers "primarily to the universal church", this does not change the theological and ethical relevance of the letter to any specific Christian communities which is our focus. Even Best (1998:73) admits that the letter is largely "concerned with the nature of the church and the kind of behavior to be expected from believers" and Hoehner (2002:500) ascertain without hesitation that "Ephesians contains more specific practical applications for daily life than any other NT book".

The imagery, among other things, underscores the communal relationship among believers (Best, 1998:446-447). In the body of Christ, the divide and hostility between the Jews and gentiles created by nationality, racial or gender differences have been transformed through the work of Christ (3:11-22). But such equality and oneness is only possible because the people are “in Christ” through whom they have been reconciled to “one God and Father of all” (4:6). As Paul has already hinted, the believers’ salvation and new identity in relationship to Christ and one another is dependent on them being in “in Christ” (1:3; 7, 11, 12; 2:6, 7). Thus, it is on the basis of union with God through Christ that believers can become one; hence the believers who were once enemies of God and of each other have been established into one community of God’s people.

### **2.3.3 Church as community: a new ethic**

After establishing the basis for their identity, Paul then goes on to instruct the believers to “to walk in the manner worthy of the calling” (ἀξίως περιπατήσαι τῆς κλήσεως ἧς ἐκλήθητε) (4:1). This renders Christian life a continuous transformative journey to be characterised by particular behaviour shaped of the gospel. As Francois Malan (2006:260-261) stresses, there is an inextricable relationship between the believers’ new identity in Christ and moral life in that the latter (the “ethical ‘imperatives’”) springs from and is shaped by the former (“the ‘indicatives’ of God’s saving work in Christ”). And, the goal of the latter is to attain maturity “to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” thereby “building up the body of Christ” (4:12-14). Thus they should act “with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love,” and “eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (4:2-3). All these are moral attributes that not only maintain the unity of the community but also display the self-constituting ethical character of being a community of believers.

Christian conduct, as Paul sees it, springs from a renewed mind and putting on a new self enabled by the Holy Spirit (v22-24 cf. Rom, 12:1ff); hence the people are “to put off your old self...and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (4:22-24. cf. 5:1). But Best (1998:417) is correct to remind us that by “mind” Paul means the “‘mind-set’, the total person viewed under the aspect of thinking” and not simply “the ability of his readers to reason”. In this way, the new mind means a complete transformation in the believer’s worldviews and attitudes translated into practical way of living both at individual and corporate levels (cf. Hoehner, 2002:584). Thus as a body of Christ, the believers ought to act in holiness before God and are supremely motivated by love which is primal to maintain the unity of the

community. In this sense, Malan (2006:271) has a point when he describes love as “a pervading theme of the letter” because “it binds the believers into one fellowship, to God and to one another (2:16)”.

But for believers, love for others has foundations in God’s love demonstrated through Christ’s sacrificial death at the cross (5:2; cf. Rm. 5:8). According to Best (1998:468), the meaning of Christ’s sacrifice in relation to Christian living can be understood in three basic ways: “casual (Christ’s love as motivation) or comparative (Christ’s love as example) or a mixture of both”. The latter refers to the atoning significance of Christ’s death which is constitutive of the believers’ new identity while the latter only see Christ as the moral exemplar. Although Best does not completely reject the former, he contends that the latter seems to be Paul’s primary purpose (1998:470-471). Yet, it is correct to understand the two as inseparable because Christ’s love on the cross is both constitutive of the believers’ new identity and provides a perfect example of how to love others sacrificially. This reality of love presupposes a community initiated in Christ (its identity) and is called to live expressing this love for each other. In fact, this is what makes the Christian community distinct from the “gentiles” (v17-19) who according to Best (1998:421), “they are insensitive in distinguishing what is morally good from what is evil”.

Paul’s moral teaching to the believer is not just theoretical but is also, and most importantly, practical. Thus Paul labours to explicate the practical life shaped by the new identity in Christ which opens new possibility to be ‘imitators of God’ (5:1). For example, it is unethical to speak lies, to keep anger against others, to steal, to talk carelessly, and to slander; instead, one should always speak truth, forgive others quickly and work to help the needy (4:25-31). Paul goes further to condemn as unethical practices including sexual immorality, idolatry, foolish talks and jokes, bad use of time, and drunkenness (5:3-21). Contrary to Best (1998:487) who claims that the moral instructions in v3-21 are concerned with the individuals only, one notices that these behaviours are not private but affect the community. For example, sexual immorality can be said to be wrong because it violates the values of marriage as held by the community. It is no wonder that Paul goes further to forbid even the mention of such a practice among the believers (5:3).

But Paul’s instruction does not only condemn certain practices as mentioned above but also contain instructions that provide values and norms to guide the believers in their daily life. O’Brien (1999:334-335) emphasizes this when he notices that “each negative prohibition is balanced by a corresponding positive exhortation”. Thus the believers ought to be “kind to one another”, “tenderhearted and “forgiving one another” (4:32). Also, they ought to “walk in love” in a sacrificial way (5:1), always seek to do what is right (v7-10), and they ought to

“submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ” (v21). Again, the emphasis on “one another” (ἑσμεν ἀλλήλων meaning “we are of one another”) (4:25) as “his neighbour” (πλησίον) (v22) in the moral instruction reminds the people of their new ethical responsibilities towards others. In this way, ethics is strongly tied to Christian community in that an action or behaviour is judged moral or immoral, right or wrong, or good or bad based on how this maintains community solidarity and is ultimately pleasing to God.

But the emphasis on communal life does not to underplay individual moral responsibilities. Paul’s frequent use of “each one of you” (ἕκαστος) in v25 affirms this. After all, “grace was given to each one of us according to the true measure of Christ’s gift” (4:7) thereby showing the indispensability of the individual members in the community (Best, 1998:412-413; O’Brien, 1999:273). This is particularly so because not only is the community constituted of the individuals but also its identity characterized by unity is maintained through acts of the individual in relation to one another. In this way, O’Brien (1999:273) is correct when he states: “This diversity is not a variance with the overarching unity, nor is it at the cost of unity.” On one hand, the emphasis on community not only prevents the folly of individualism and privatized morality but also resources values and norms for ethical living. On the other hand, the emphasis on individual believers ensures that the community does not usurp the place of the individual and their moral responsibilities. Having discussed Paul’s presentation on church an ethical community, it remains for us to discuss the function of this community in shaping the moral lives of its members.

## **2.4 Distinctive marks of the church as an ethical community**

The discussion above from the OT and NT affirms that the church is an ethical community of God’s redeemed people. Through Christ and by the Holy Spirit, God redeems people and establishes them into a community that ought to live accordingly and thus distinctly from other non-communities. In what sense then is church as an ethical community distinct from other communities? Or, what are the distinct marks of an evangelical ethical community? The distinctive marks discussed include the fact that such a community is divine initiated, one and diverse, holy, Christ or word centred and eschatological.

### **2.4.1 Divine-initiated**

As highlighted above, it is by his grace that God redeems people and establishes them into his covenant community. This means that the church is a community that is established by God by grace through the work of Christ and the Holy Spirit. Significantly, it is this divine nature of the church that makes not only its identity but its ethics distinct from other social

communities or assemblies. Thus as cited already, “a church is an assembly, but an assembly is not yet a church...an indispensable condition of ecclesiality is that the people assemble in the name of Christ” (Volf, 1998:145). Thus a particular community is called ‘church’ not by mere human decision but because it is initiated by God’s act of grace revealed in Christ. It is from this divine act that the church’s sociological and ethical life fundamentally springs from. This is to assert that church as an ethical community is a spiritual community *prima facie*.

However, to argue that church is a spiritual community risks the danger of over-spiritualizing the church, a problem which David Horrell (2005:76) describes as “overconcentration on the distinctiveness of the church”. Admittedly, the church is a social or historical institution for it is constituted of social beings that belong together within space and time. To this end, Gustafson (2009:2) is justified in arguing for what he calls a “social analysis theory” if one is to understand the social nature of the church. The approach focuses on the historical and social nature and life of the church and claims that one can understand the invisible spiritual nature of the church only after understanding its sociality (Gustafson, 2009: xvii). Thus according to Gustafson (2009:100), the approach is key to avoiding the problem of “theological reductionism”; a problem which leads to “the exclusive use of biblical and doctrinal language” in ecclesiological as well as ethical discourses.

Based on this, the church can be defined as “a human community with an historical continuity identifiable by certain beliefs, ways of work, rites, loyalties, outlooks, and feelings...with temporal and spacial dimensions” (Gustafson, 2009:2). This means that church is not different from other social institutions such as trade unions or professional clubs whose members share common language and ethical values, among other things (Gustafson 2009:8-10). Thus Gustafson (2009:8-13) is correct when he contends that the church is only different from other communities because of the object of its purpose and meaning of existence, which he admits is faith in Christ, and not necessarily in its functions and formation.

Nevertheless, the church is fundamentally a community because of God’s act of redemption only expressed historically and socially. Without denying its historical or social nature, it needs to be stressed that the church is a community of faith before it is anything else. As Webster (2005a:82) puts it, the church is not any other social community but “the social reality of salvation”. Bonhoeffer affirms these two natures of the church when he argues that it “is simultaneously a historical community and one established by God” (1998:126). But Bonhoeffer (1998:126) goes further to emphasise that “one must focus on what this church acknowledges as constitutive, namely the fact of Christ, or the ‘Word’”. It is no wonder that

Bonhoeffer (1998:31-33) grounds his sociological understanding of the church the *sanctorum communion* in the gospel. According to Wannewetsch (2005:61), this means that “Christian ethics should be concerned with what the church has to say, but more also with the word that the Church has to hear.” It is from the word or the scriptures that the church derives its authority and resources for moral formation and praxis.

It is apparent, therefore, that while the church may be said to be similar with other social communities from a sociological point of view as Gustafson (2009) argues, it can only remain a true church because its unique purpose, meaning, functions and organization rooted in God’s act of redemption. In other words, as an ethical community, the church’s practical life spring from its ontological essence rooted in divine-initiated redemption a redeemed community. It is in this light that Webster (2005b:103) correctly describes the ethical life of the church including sacraments and government as the “attestations of God”.<sup>25</sup> This means that Christian ethics is not merely doing ‘good’ or ‘right’ as man’s attempt to reach to God but rather simply being the people of God. The next mark of the church follows from this understanding.

#### **2.4.2 United and diverse**

At the heart of the identity and life of the church is the people’s relationship with the triune God and with one another. This significantly means that the church, both at local or universal levels, is communal. Inevitably, the church is comprised of people from diverse backgrounds and yet they are united through their one faith in Christ. In this way, to argue that the church is community is to affirm not only the unity (oneness) but also its diversity (differences of the members) and this bears significantly on Christian living. As the following discussion expands, the unity and diversity of ecclesial community are based on Christological and Trinitarian grounding of what church is.

First is Christological. It is through our relationship with God through Christ that church as a community of God’s redeemed people is established. In this way Letham (2011:1) has a point in suggesting that “union with Christ” is the “right at the centre of the Christian doctrine of salvation” (cf. Horton, 2008). This means that through the Christ event, the believers enter into a communion first with the Triune God and then with each other in the fellowship of the church. The communality of salvation and consequently of church is established by its one faith in the one Lord (Rm. 12:4; 1 Cor. 12:13-14; Eph. 4:1-7) so that the church is the one

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<sup>25</sup> Although Webster does not discuss specifically the ethical ramifications of this understanding, the approach is crucial in properly locating the church’s social as well as ethical life in God.

body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:27; Eph. 3:23-25). As Paul puts it, the believers are dead to sin and are made alive “in Christ” (Rm. 6:11) through whom they have eternal life (Rm. 6:23; cf. 1 Cor. 1:30; 2 Cor. 1:21; 5:17).

For Paul, just as all men as sinners were one through one Adam; the believers are one through redemption is achieved through Christ (Rm. 5:12-21). More explicitly, he writes: “For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.”(Rm. 5:19). As Thomas Schreiner (1998:284) interprets this, the comparison between Adam and Christ as heads of mankind community breaks on the point that Christ does not only achieve the good which Adam failed but also that through him (life and the cross) the problem of sin is rectified in that his righteousness is accredited to man through faith. Hence, he can declare: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation... the old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Cor. 5:17).

But as Letham (2011:102) points out, the “union with Christ” refers not only to God's “forensic” but also to the “transformational” dimensions of salvation achieved through Christ's atoning death and the empowering work of the Holy Spirit. Locating “union with Christ” in creation, in incarnation and the coming of the Holy Spirit, Letham (2011:5, cf. 5-54) argues that union with Christ “is inescapably corporate”. In the same way, Horton (2007:2) regards “union with Christ” as an appropriate category in explicating “the forensic and the effective, the legal and relational, the individual and the corporate dimensions of justification and union”. This implies that our relationship with God through Christ is simultaneously concerned with the definitive standing with God both individually and communally as well as with our relationship with one another.

Consequently, church, as an entity created on the basis of union with Christ, is a community in which all people are one and are equal without erasing their differences. This is unity in diversity that Paul affirms when he declares in Galatians 3:28: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” This clearly means that the union established in Christ supersedes any differences including culture, race, gender or social status. Inextricably, the new relationship in Christ creates has consequences on how the people ought to conduct themselves towards one another. Thus the unity is not only in faith; it also touches every aspect of life including behaviours, fears and hopes. The Westminster Confession of Faith expresses this thought forcefully (26:1):

All saints, that are united to Jesus Christ their Head by His Spirit and by faith, have fellowship with Him in His graces, sufferings, death, resurrection, and glory: and, being united to one another in love, they have communion in each other's gifts and

graces, and are obliged to the performance of such duties, public and private, as do conduce to their mutual good, both in the inward and outward man.

As Horton (2007:139) contends, there are two senses to understand the ethical implications of “union with Christ” (*inio mysticus*): “We in Christ (inheritance)” and “Christ in us (resemblance)”. In the former sense, *inio mysticus* is understood as referring primarily to the atoning function of Christ through his death at the cross through which believers receive their new identity and therefore their new way of life (cf. Chan, 2009:25-30). In the latter sense, Christ is an example of moral living. It is in this regard that Volf (1996:22), making a similar point, sees the cross largely as a model for sacrificial life-giving for others. This underscores that believers are true disciples of Christ when they have the same attitude and mind like Christ and thus live sacrificially for the love of others other than the self (Phil. 2:1-11; 1 Pet. 3:17-18). Similarly, Richard Burridge (2007:3-4) insists that any serious attempt to construct a true “New Testament ethics” that has meaningful contemporary relevance should be centred on “the person of Jesus”. Here Burridge (2007:3-4) places a particular emphasis on imitating the example of Jesus’ words and actions as seen in the Gospels and Paul’s letters. Paul’s charge that believers imitate him just as he imitates Christ makes affirms this point (1 Cor.11:1).

But the two positions are not mutually exclusive in that Christ is to be seen as both an example for sacrificial moral living and one who atones for the sins of the people. This what one might call the double function of the union with Christ in the Christian life: atonement and moral influence or forensic and progressive sanctification. Thus Hays (1996:32) is correct in affirming this double function of the cross when he argues “Jesus’ death is an act of faithfulness that simultaneously reconciles humanity to God and establishes a new reality in which we are set free from the power of sin, able to be conformed to the pattern of his life”.

But, as Chan (2009:29-30) avers, one needs to maintain the moral value of the cross emanates from its atoning function through which man is redeemed, justified and reconciled to God. The believers can only live truly like Jesus (*imitatio Christi*) if they have been transformed into a new creation in Christ. On this basis, Chan (2009:25) condemns as “reductionistic” any attempt to reduce the salvific significance of the cross to moral influence for believers; hence, argues “it is not enough to say that the cross is morally influential; one must enquire into how Christ’s love is displayed on the cross” (2009:25).<sup>26</sup> Thus it is

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<sup>26</sup> In underscoring the significance of the atoning function of the cross over the exemplarist model in Christian ethics, Chan (2009:25-26) cites Emile Nicole who shows how absurd it would be if Christ died simply to be an example: “If I should die in attempting to save a drowning child, my action may

expedient to stress that the atonement is primary because of its constitutive nature for it is within the matrix of the salvific significance of the cross as well as the empowering work of the Holy Spirit that believers are able to follow the example of Jesus (Hays, 1996:27). Allan Torrance (2006:170) makes this point explicit when he argues that morality begins by “paradigmatic transformation” that is only possible at the cross and through the working of the Holy Spirit.

The unity as well as the ethical framework of the church is not only Christological but also Trinitarian in its foundations and shape. Jesus’ prayer that all believers be one just as he and the Father (including the Holy Spirit) are one is revealing of this point (Jn. 17:11, 22, cf. Jn.14:16ff). The church community is Trinitarian not only because it is established by the redeeming work in which all three persons of the Godhead (the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit) are involved but also because its personal relationships are built on mutual love and equality. It is for this reason that Miroslav Volf (1998:2) construes church as “the image of the triune God”. Although Volf’s ecclesiology does not engender specific ethical applications, its trinitarian foundations provide not only the basis but also the framework for conceptualising ethics for believers. Thus Volf (1998:11) states clearly that this communal ecclesiology has a direct bearing on how the Christian faith “is to be lived authentically and transmitted effectively”. This means that ethics as well as missions is the inevitable implication of the Christian faith grounded in the reality of church as a community grounded in the Trinity.

With regard to unity, Volf (1998:205) argues that community that mirrors the Trinity affirms and preserve both the individuality and the communion of believers because “person and relation emerge simultaneously and mutually presuppose one another”. Thus, like in the Trinity, the “I” only relates to the “not-I” through *perichoresis* which means mutual indwelling or interpenetration of the persons (Volf, 1998:187-189). With this perichoretic relationship, each person does exist together with others, not individually. It is at this point that Volf (1998:18) faults the hierarchical ecclesiology of the Roman Catholic Church in preference for communitarian ecclesiological model of the Free or Independent Church. But he does not accept the latter wholesale and thus he critiques its individualistic tendencies often caused by the pressure to satisfy the personal demands of the people (Volf, 1998:18).

The call to maintain unity in diversity becomes critical when one considers the challenges prevalent in the church today. They mostly border on issues of gender, cultural, racial, and economical status differences, just to mention a few (e.g.: discrimination, nepotism and

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be judged heroic and exemplary. But if I thrust myself in the water to give an example to those present, my act will be seen as insane and far from a paragon of virtue”

oppression). Such challenges hinder full realization of what it means to be a community of God whose relationships are *prima facie* based not on the outworking of God redemptive grace. Hence, as Carson (2008:55) states: “The locus of the new covenant people of God is not in a nation... but in a transnational community made up of people from every tongue and tribe and people and nation”. Similarly, Volf (1998:236) contends that the nature of the church communion rooted in the Trinitarian relation demands that leadership must not be oppressive but be modelled on principles of equality, love and self-sacrifice. Volf (1998:236) here propounds an egalitarian ecclesiology in that “the more a church is characterized by symmetrical and decentralized distribution of the power and freely affirmed interaction, the more will it correspond to the trinitarian communion”. This understanding, however, needs not to be used to deny biblically recognized offices and structures such as pastors or overseers.

Ethically, the church derives its life from the character of the Triune God who defines the norms and values for the church’s moral life. The key moral characteristics of church that mirror the Trinity include holiness, love, self-giving and respect for other persons including those outside the church. Inevitably, this becomes the paradigm for Christian moral life in relation to itself and its social engagement with the outside world. Giles (1995:299) expresses a similar understanding to Volf when he states that the church seeks to “uphold, proclaim, and seek to see implemented” the principles of “community”, “equality”, “freedom”, and “love” that are expressed in the Trinity. This demands that, regardless of their various differences such ethnicity, gender, or social status, the believers must seek to embrace one another sincerely and must have a high concern for others expressed through acts of love, hence genuine *koinonia* (1 Tim. 1:5; 1 Pet. 1:22).

Important to mention, however, is that any argument that uses the Trinity to model church needs clarification for it not without limitations. Even Volf (1998:198) with his strong Trinitarian ecclesiology admits that “although trinitarian ideas can undeniably be converted into ecclesiological ideas, and indeed are so converted, it is equally undeniable that this process of conversion must have its limits, unless one reduces theology to anthropology or, in a reverse fashion, elevates anthropology to theology”. Key to emphasize is that the church only images the Trinity (“the immanent Trinity”) based on what God has revealed himself in his salvation (“the economy Trinity”).<sup>27</sup> Thus, for example, unlike in the Trinity where unity is ontologically divine, the life and unity of the church can only be understood in the light of

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<sup>27</sup>This understanding clearly critiques Karl Rahner’s famous claim that “the immanent Trinity (God himself, apart from the world) is strictly identical with the economic Trinity (God creating and redeeming) and vice versa” (cited in Trier & Lauber, 2009:14).

God's salvific revelation in Christ. Also, that the church's moral perfection can only be achieved in new heavens and new earth means that one should avoid the danger of over-realized eschatology by overstressing the relationship between the Trinity and the church. Thus, despite his own admittance with regard to the limitation of this analogy, Volf can be critiqued for overstressing the social relations of the church based on the Trinity which he regards as "the social programme" of the church (2006: 105ff). In the same way, Mark Husbands (2009:126) has a point when he critiques Volf for reducing the Trinity not only to social relations but also to mere model of the church's moral social life rather the source of its life.

### 2.4.3 Holy

By its organic nature rooted in God's act of redemption, church is a holy community. It is in this regard that the believers are called the 'saints' (ἁγίοις - the holy ones) on the basis of their faith in Christ (1 Cor. 1:2 cf. Eph. 1:1). The church is holy not only because it is divinely initiated but also because it is sustained through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. In many respects, this means that sanctification is primarily a "forensic act" for "it is a definitive claim made by the triune God" rather than a mere human achievement (Horton, 2008:191).<sup>28</sup> The holiness of church, however, has ethical ramifications in that the believers are constantly challenged to live distinctively according to the redemptive revelation of God (1 Pet. 1:13-17 cf. Lev. 19:2; 1 Jn. 2:28). In this way, church is distinct from other communities in both its identity and ethical life.

But to assert that Christian community is distinct is by no means to claim that such a community does not share moral values with other non-Christian communities or is it to reject the relevance of such an ethic in the wider society. In fact, it is from the standpoint of shared morality (*sensus moralis*) and the need to be relevant that one can legitimately argue for the need to makes appeals to certain elements from different cultures.<sup>29</sup> Horrell (2005:24), for instance, argues convincingly that Christian ethics, at least according to Paul, is not only for the church but extends to other communities in that it shares many values and norms with the broader first century Graeco-Roman world. Although Horrell (2005:46) does

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<sup>28</sup> For Horton (2008:195), this understanding also renders conversion an "inherently ecclesial experience" so much that even children are integral members of the community through infant baptism. Horton's assertion is strong in underscoring that justification is solely a divine act and is not primarily dependent on human works. But one needs to guard against the extremity which underplays man's collaborative and progressive role in salvation.

<sup>29</sup> It is on similar grounds that the present research engages African culture(s) with a view not only to critique its evil elements but also to appreciate its moral values and thereby enrich Christian ethics.

not deny the distinctive theological dimension of Christian ethics, he contends that morality is not limited to the ecclesial domain but engages “the contemporary ethical theory”. Horrell (2005:280), therefore, concludes that “while the motivational structure of Paul’s ethics draws on distinctively Christian convictions; their substantive content overlaps considerably with other contemporary traditions”. Some African theologians, for example Magesa (1997:14), strongly argue on similar grounds for the need to contextualise the gospel in Africa cultures thereby affirming its universality.

However, in emphasising the universality of Christian morality, one should avoid drawing too much similarity between the church and non-communities thereby blurring the distinctiveness of Christian morality. Any argument for shared morality that does not seriously take into consideration the effect of sin and the great need for redemption underplays the Christological nature of Christian ethics. This is critical when one considers the fact that conscience, as Bonhoeffer (1930:108) argues, is a consequence of sin for there was no knowledge of good and evil before the fall. This in his attempt to formulate an ethic which has contemporary relevance using Paul’s ethics, Horrell (2005:290) seems to fall into this trap when he, for example, argues:

We might then conclude that to generate an ethic appropriate to our plural, indeed global, society, we need to articulate new stories, new myths, about human solidarity and difference which avoid the notion that only Christ can provide their basis, and so doing go not only beyond but also against Paul.

Without taking the separatist position associated with Hauerwas, it is important to maintain the distinctiveness of the Christian community and most importantly its ethics which is Christ-centred. It is the believers’ distinctive identity that defines and shapes their distinctive moral life. This is what James Thompson (2011:16) affirms when he states that “ethics is the expression of our identity” grounded in our faith in Christ. One should add to the identity of believers, the purpose as well as the motivation for moral life of the people.

It is at this point that Carson (2008:63) views the church as distinct and yet part of the wider culture or society. For Carson (2008:61), this means that the gospel must be allowed in some ways to appreciate and be enriched with the good in other cultures while at the same time allowed to transform the elements that are not compatible with the gospel. While the church community shares some values with other communities, it must keep a good distance in order to avoid compromising, if not losing, its identity and mission in the very society it exists.

Similarly, Thompson (2011:46) affirms that the distinctive nature of new identity and morality is two-fold: “the radical separation of their present existence from their former identity” and

“the separation from the surrounding communities”. Paradoxically, this means that the church as an ethical community can only be relevant to the outside societies if it maintains its distinctive character of holiness. In sum, the church’s relevance springs from its difference in Christ (cf. O’Donovan (1994:85).

#### **2.4.4 Love**

It is probably understatement to assert that love (*agape*) is the central mark of what it means to live a Christian life. It is no wonder that Stassen and Gushee (2003:327), for example, asserts: “For Christians, love is the heart of living, of being human.” Love is what fundamentally defines and drives the believer’s relationship first with God and consequently with others. This is succinctly summed up in the Greatest Commandment when Jesus describes love for God and love for others as the most important commandments of all the scriptures (Matt. 22:37-40; Mark 12:28-31 cf. Deut. 6:5; Lev. 19:18). Crucially, the very act of God’s redemption through Christ and his death at the cross is an act of ultimate love (Rom. 5:8; Jn. 3:16). With this, love not only becomes the basis for the believer’s new identity in Christ but is also the paradigm for their new way of life in that they ought to live out this love in the way they relate to others including enemies within and outside the church (Jn. 13:34-35; 1 Jn. 3:13ff; Matt. 5:43-47).

The centrality of love in Christian life is crucial when, as this research propounds, one conceives church primarily as a community of God’s people. Certainly, there is no true Christian community without love so that one can speak of church as a community of love. It is love that, for instance, enables people from different cultural, racial, or social backgrounds to relate to each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. In this way, love becomes the basis for both unity and diversity for any ecclesial community or *koinonia*. But love does not only enable fellowship but also sustains it for it motivates the believers to act in a way that seeks to build the community. In fact, as Paul has already explained, others important virtues for Christian living such as humility, patience and gentleness are built on love (Eph. 4:2-3) (cf. Malan, 2006:271).

But for Christians, love should be understood from the distinct perspective of the gospel. This is love that, for example, enables people to treat one another equally, justly, compassionately and practically. Clearly, love is not a mere doctrine but a way of life expressed concretely through actions. Yet this gospel-centered love is not self-indulging for it is also outward looking. Thus, besides loving another within the community, the believers ought to love the outsiders in the society including the enemies. As asserted throughout Jesus’ teaching, the love for neighbor has been radically redefined to include the outsiders.

For example, the teaching of the Sermon of the Mount (Matt. 5:43ff) and the parable of the Samaritan woman (Jn. 4:1-45) reveals the missional nature and shape of new Christian love (Stassen and Gushee, 2003:338-342). As Volf (1996:9-29) argues, it is this love centred on the cross that provides the basis not only for loving those from other racial or ethnic groups but also for the church's genuine concern for the poor, the oppressed and other needy people needy in the wider society.

#### **2.4.5 Word-centred**

As a community of God's people, the church has its being and life in the word (the scriptures). There are at least two senses to understand what it means to speak of the church as word-centred. In the first place, the church is organically created by the word which is the good news of God's redemption ultimately revealed in Christ (Horton, 2008:37; Wannewetsch, 2005:61). There cannot be a church without the word for through it, the Holy Spirit works to create and matures faith in the people (Rm. 10:14-18 cf. Acts 2:37). The church is also 'the community of the word' because its ethical life is principally defined and shaped by the Bible. And so, as Horton (2008:56) affirms, "the proclamation of Christ that gave and gives the church is also a canon that defines and norms it". It is because of this word that Christian communities, in Paul's words, "spur one another on toward love and good deeds" (Heb. 10:24) and is thus able to administer appropriate admonition and discipline for those who have slacked in their Christian life.

Accepting the scriptures as normative for Christian moral living means that Christian communities must submit in total obedience to its authority in every aspect of their moral life. Thus, morality is essentially obeying God both at individual and community levels as revealed in the scriptures. In this sense, the church becomes what Webster (2005b:110-111) aptly describes as "a hearing community" before it is anything else. Inevitably, this entails properly recognizing that the Bible as the authoritative word by which God through the Holy Spirit speaks and works to transform his people into a Christ-like image (Webster, 2005b:110). Only a community that listens and is transformed by the word of God is able to cultivate godly character in its members. It is in this light that Philip Esler (2005:7-8) argues for an "Aristotelian ethics" which as he argues "the emphasis falls on the formative, not the normative". As Esler presumes, the centrality of scriptures in ethics goes beyond stipulating of rules for Christian living to forming "virtuous persons" within the social context of church as community. This also underscores the centrality of the role of the community in interpreting the scriptures (Esler, 2005:40).

But, in asserting the centrality of the Bible in the life of church community, one must be careful to avoid any position that suggests that the Bible is the book of the community. For instance, in stressing the significant role of the community in scripture interpretation and consequently moral cultivation, Hauerwas (1981:53) contends: "The authority of scripture derives its intelligibility from the existence of a community that knows its life depends on faithful remembering of God's care of his creation through the calling of Israel and the life of Jesus." This suggests that the scripture is given meaning and authority by the community in which the word is accepted. While Hauerwas' assertion emphasizes well that a text cannot be understood correctly in isolation from its social context or when read individualistically, this can be critiqued for giving too much authority to the community thereby underplaying its *extra nos* authority rooted in its divine source - God.

With this, one is justified to critique Hauerwas for overemphasising the significance of the community in determining the meaning of the text according to its various contexts. Inescapably, such understanding reduces the Bible to mere word of the community rather than God's and presupposes that the community exists before the word. The meaning and authority of the Bible are determined by the fact that it is God's revelation. After all, true Christian community exists because it believes in the word in the first place. This is what Verhey (2002:60) affirms when he states: "The church did not so much create Scripture as acknowledge it as the texts within which the Spirit moved to give life and to guide." Horton (2008:38) expresses same point when he locates the final authority of the scriptures in what he calls the "external word (*verbum externum*)" as given by God.

But the emphasis on the *extra nos* authority of scriptures is not a rejection of the church's role in scripture interpretation and consequently in moral formation. Here Hauerwas (1981:57) makes an important point in warning against a reductionist understanding that suggests that the Bible literally contains a "revealed morality" for all matters of life in modern societies. No serious reader of the Bible, therefore, can deny use of other sources if one is to interpret the texts faithfully and relevantly. Thus while holding to the traditional doctrine of *sola scriptura*, Hays (1996:209-211) argues that sources such as "traditions", "reason", and "experience", if defined appropriately, are important for sensible scripture interpretation and application. For Hays these sources are important so long as they are not used to compromise the authority of the scripture (1996:210-11). In this vein, while asserting the critical function of church as a community in Bible interpretation and moral formation, Verhey (2002:56-68) stresses that it is not the church that gives the scriptures authority but rather that the church uses the scripture because it accepts its authority for faith and moral life. In this way, the Bible becomes the narrative or story of the church so long as the church is

continually challenged by it to live rightly “in memory of Jesus” (Verhey, 2002:38).

### **2.4.5 Eschatological**

The nature of the church is that it is an eschatological community awaiting consummation at Christ's return when all things will be made new in total communion with God (Eph. 1:13-14; 1 Pet. 1:3-9; Rev. 21:1ff.). This eschatological thrust has significant bearing on the moral life of the believers in that they ought to live in ardent anticipation of the final and perfect glory. With this, it is not surprising that hope for the future glory as well as judgement becomes the hallmark for Christian life (Rm. 5:2, 4-6; 8:23-25; Eph. 1:17; 1 Jn. 3:2-4). In fact, Christian living is to live eschatologically in a way launched through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Emphasising this eschatological focus, Wright (2010:ix) makes an important point when he asserts: “Christian life in the present, with its responsibilities and particular callings, is to be understood and shaped in relation to the final goal for which we have been made and redeemed.” Two things regarding morality are deducible from this. Firstly, morality which is rooted in Christ's redeeming event means living responsibly in anticipation to eschatological reality when all believers “will be ultimately transformed to the image of the Son (Rom. 8:23, 29; Phil. 3:20-21). Thus, as Thompson (2011:45) affirms: “The time between the coming of Christ and the final day is the occasion for moral transformation.” For believers morality therefore means living rightly in the now life (the present) in reflection of what Christ has done (the past) in anticipation to the perfect glory awaiting his return (the future). In this sense, hope becomes an integral motivation for ethical living.

Secondly, the moral life and thus holiness of the church now remains progressive towards this ultimate eschatological holiness. It is in this way that Grenz (1994:653-654) regards holiness (as well as evangelism) as a key implication of church's eschatological hope. That moral perfection is progressive should encourage believers not to compromise on its moral life but to strive for holiness in view of future glory. God shall not only reward those who live according to his moral standards but also to judge any unrighteousness. Without arguing for salvation by works, this means that how the church lives now matters seriously in view of the impending judgement of God. The salvation by grace demands good works either by its implications or obedience. This thought is explicit in 1 Peter 1:13-17 (NIV):

Therefore, with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming. As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: “Be holy, because I am holy”. Since you call on a Father who judges each person's work impartially, live

out your time as foreigners here in reverent fear.

Positively, the future hope guarantees that even when the church fails to meet the moral standards of God because of sin and human frailty, the church will be perfectly holy in the new heavens and new earth. This understanding is key to avoiding the common danger of over-realized eschatology whereby moral perfection is demanded in the now life to the existent that Christian morality is reduced to a mere human project rather God's (Grenz, 1994:657-658). This motivates believers to embrace a new ethic to be perfected in the new heavens and new earth without underplaying the place of human obligation. With this, continual confession of sin becomes an integral mark of what it means to live as a true community belonging to God (Hauerwas, 1995:6).

## **2.5 The function of the church in moral formation: reflection and praxis**

In reference to Paul's call for the believers "to instruct one another" (Rm. 15:14), Verhey (2002:15-21) argues that the church even today is first, a "community of moral discourse" in that it reflects on "what" is moral or immoral; second, a "community of moral deliberation" when it explicates "why" a particular action is moral or not; and lastly, a "community of moral discernment" in that it makes moral judgement based on the teaching of the scriptures. As Gustafson (2007:30) defines it, discernment "involves a perception of what is morally fitting in the place and time of action". And in line with the emphasis made by Gustafson (2007:39), one of the integral elements for moral discernment for believers is the community. What then is the specific function of church as an ethical community? As shall be discussed below (and in further detail in chapter 4) in answer to this question, the church's function in moral formation has two key but related aspects: reflection and practice.

### **2.5.1 Ethical Reflection**

In ethical reflection, the church engages in a deliberation on ethical issues that concern the believers. The aim of this process is to establish moral teaching that are biblical or are attuned to the will of God and are practically meaningful to the people within given particular contexts. Thus, as Verhey (2002:7-8) points out, the churches as "communities of moral discourse and discernment" play a profound role in shaping the individual members to act according to the scriptures and guidance of the Holy Spirit. According to Verhey (2002:8-9), the church fulfils this role through the various aspects of its life and mission, which as in the case of the early church in Acts 2:42, are centred on "attentiveness to the apostles' teaching, sharing a common life, breaking bread together, and prayer". The process, therefore, involves commitment to faithful studying and listening to the scriptures. And the fact that the

church is a community presupposes diversity and this demands that all people, regardless of any differences including gender and rational capabilities, must be involved in the moral deliberation

To some extent, one must admit that moral deliberation involves critical reflection. As O'Donovan (2006:37) contends, this ensures that moral values and norms formulated by a particular community are "universal, transcending particular differences of time and circumstance" thereby meeting God's moral standards. This also points to the importance of critical interpretation of the scriptures and reflective engagement in a way that seeks relevant application in the contemporary world. Yet, while critical and reflective, this deliberation cannot be reduced to intellectual argumentation which promotes postmodernist and individualist forms of morality (cf. Carson, 2008; Bujo, 2003). Instead, all people regardless of any differences must be involved because such deliberation engages issues that concern the community as a whole.

Also key to the moral formation function of the church is to cultivate habits or virtues in the members. Through its daily life and practices, the community becomes critical in shaping the believers into Christ-like image. As already highlighted, morality is more than mere keeping rules of the Bible but rather living out the character of the new person created through salvation in Christ. Certainly, Christian ethics springs from the character or behaviour of new life in Christ empowered by the Holy Spirit. Yet, without arguing for salvation by works, the Christians are challenged to continually do what is good thereby working out the godly desired character or virtue which is not "natural" to them (Wright, 2010:28-29). The church therefore functions primarily to cultivate the desired virtue in the believers both and communal and individual levels. Besides preaching and teaching through which believers are given moral instructions, moral formation is done through various practices of the church including worship and discipline.

Worship, as Philip Kenneson (2004:54) puts it, means "ascribing honour and worth" to a particular object(s) through particular activities. Hence: "Every human life is an embodied argument about what things are worth doing, who or what is worthy of attention, who or what is worthy of allegiance and sacrifice, and what projects or endeavours are worthy of human energies." (Kenneson, 2004:54). This underscores that the object and the acts of worship are inextricably related to the moral conduct of the worshippers in that the latter not only expresses the former but is also formed by it. In other words, what and how people worship is determinative of their moral life. Thus for Christians, worship which centrally involves liturgy has a triune God as its object and he challenges the believers to properly acknowledge that they are his people who ought to live rightly according to his moral

standards and mission (Kenneson, 2004:58). Kenneson (2004:60-66) makes an important point when he suggests four key ethical benefits of worship: “learning to glorify and enjoy God”, “learning to pay attention...to the things of God”, “learning to speak truthfully”, and “learning good posture” in relation to the world. These elements underpin that as the believers worship God, they are not only aligned to the will and character of God but they are also transformed, for example, to live hopefully, lovingly, justly and compassionately, among other things (Kenneson, 2004:60-66).

Writing specifically about the role of hymns and praises in moral formation, another scholar Griffiths (2005:405) explicitly states: “These responses of confession and praise, when deeply written upon the worshipper's body, order his actions and attitudes as much without as within the assembly's worship.” Through activities such as singing and prayers, the worshippers therefore develop new energies and right perspectives on what it means to live ethically. Again, the identity of the believers as a community belonging to God becomes paradigmatic for Christian morality. Goldingay (2009:26) makes clear this connection between worship, ecclesial identity and morality when he argues that it is through worship that “the community declares who Yhwh is and what Yhwh has done, and thus finds an identity for itself and submits to a reforming of its attitude to itself and to the world”. Both Griffiths and Goldingay underscore persuasively that worship is vital in shaping the believers moral life. It is for no other reason that Kenneson (2004:53) asserts boldly: “No issue is more central to Christian ethics than worship”.

But a worship that has “the formative power”, as Kenneson (2004:54) calls it, is that which goes beyond mere rituals but springs from genuine and repentant hearts, hence worship that is “in spirit and truth” (Jn. 4:24 cf. Deut. 12:31; 30:17; Isa. 1:11-17). True worship is that which is driven by the believers’ desire to be a community that reflects God’s holiness as revealed in the scripture. This is the worship that is word-centred so that in Bonhoeffer’s (1998:227) words: “The church-community, united by one word, hears this word again and again while assembled; conversely, the word that created the church-community again and again calls it together into a concrete assembly”. In this sense, ethics means living in accordance with God’s holy character revealed and expressed through all elements of worship.

In addition to worship, one significant aspect of the church’s role in moral formation is discipline for those living contrary to the values and norms of the community. According to reformer John Calvin (1960:1230) “discipline is like a bridle to restrain and tame those who rage against the doctrine of Christ; or like a spur to arouse those of little inclination; and also sometimes like a father’s rod to chastise mildly and with the gentleness of Christ’s Spirit

those who have more seriously lapsed”. According to Calvin, and rightly so, this means that the primary aim of discipline which can be in the form of excommunication is to preserve pure doctrine which gives shape to the moral identity of the church community and to ensure correction for the moral offenders.

As part of his moral instruction to the Corinthians church marred by division and serious moral degradation, Paul, for example, recommends expulsion from the community of “a man” involved in the heinous sin of incest with “his father’s wife” (1 Cor. 5:1-2). From the OT, this sin is serious and attracts serious forms of punishment including death (Lev. 18:7-8; 20:11; Deut. 22:30) (Garland, 2003:158). As vv. 9-11 indicate, Paul had written the people “not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler – not even to eat with such a one” (v11). One notices that the purpose of moral discipline is twofold: to correct such a man with the aim to save his soul on judgement day (v5) and to avoid contaminating the whole community with sin - “Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened” (v6-8). While not all scholars hold to this understanding,<sup>30</sup> one important fact that this reveals is that individual’s moral choices affect the community as a whole, hence the need for discipline of the individual members (Garland, 2003:159).

Yet, it is important to note that Paul’s instruction to discipline the moral offender does not contradict his emphasis for love for brothers in the community (see 1 Cor. 13:1ff; Eph. 4:1ff). It is possible that the community would tolerate sin in the name of love for one another but Pauls charges the community to exercise discipline on the same basis of love. This charge for moral discipline applies to every member of the community without any favouritism or segregation. However, as Calvin (1960:1235) insists, the exercise to exert discipline should involve the whole church community in order to ensure that it is not abused by a few (the leaders) and that it serves the intended biblical purpose.

### **2.5.2 Ethical praxis**

However, the church can only be called an ethical community when it expresses concretely

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<sup>30</sup> For example, Garland (2003:153) argues that the aim of this discipline is “to purify the community of the contagion, and to create a situation that drives home the seriousness of the man’s sin and his need for repentance”. In this case, the destruction by Satan upon the man turns to be “a means of his deliverance” (Garland, 2003:154). But Smith (2008:181) contends that Paul’s instruction to hand a moral offender to Satan is not restorative but rather, it means “the man is to suffer death as a consequence of the curse”. According to Smith (2008:178-180), through the “physical suffering and death”, the man concerned is completely cut off from the community. Despite the differences, both positions emphasize the effect that such sin may have on the whole community.

its faith all that it has become through faith in Christ. Thus the church is an ethical community and is able to cultivate the virtues in the members when it puts into practice its beliefs and teachings undergirded by its Christ-centred commitment. This means that not only is the church a community of moral discourse, deliberation and discernment as Verhey argues, but it is also a community of moral practice. Here, both the communal and individual dimensions of the church are emphasised so as not to negate the individual's responsibility in daily moral life or vice versa (Verhey, 2002:16-17). Yet, as stressed throughout this chapter, central to the church's function in moral formation is its faithful commitment to the word of God.

It is on this basis that, for example, Paul's instructions in Ephesians 4:1-5:2 is not merely theory but stress that the believers both at individual and community levels should put such instructions into practice. It is the people who ought "to walk in the manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called" (4:1; 17-24). Based on this, Paul instructs the believers to exercise honesty by not telling lies, to refrain from theft, sexual immorality, and above all to practice genuine and sacrificial love for one another (4:25-5:1-21). As a community of love, for example, the people who are now one and equal in Christ ought to care or show compassion for one another sacrificially (cf. 1 Cor. 13:1ff; 1 Jn. 3:11-24). Thus for the believers, morality is not merely a matter of following a set of rules but it's a way of life on a daily basis.

But important to underscore here is the fact that moral Christian living, at least as Paul understands it from above, not only springs from the reality of being a community but is also community-forming. As Stowers (2011:242) also points out, Paul urges Christians ought to conduct themselves towards building a community to which they already belong. Thus the community not only provides the basic coordinate for ethical life in that the people conduct their lives to express their shared communal identity as well as beliefs and moral values through their one faith in Christ but also the goal of such life is to preserve and contribute towards building the community itself. As already explained, communal life is grounded in the believers' relationship with God and with one another, not excluding the unbelievers.

## **2.6 Preliminary conclusion**

It is clear from the foregoing discussion that the church is biblically and theologically an ethical community of God's redeemed people called to live both corporately and individually according to God's moral standards. Thus while the church is no less a sociological community like any other society, the nature of identity and moral life makes it distinctive. This is the case for Israel in the OT and *mutatis mutandis* the church in the NT. In the NT, this God's

redeeming grace revealed in Christ brings moral obligations based on new moral values and norms rooted in their new identity in Christ and the call to imitate Christ through the empowering work of the Holy Spirit. It is this community that functions to bring moral formation to its members based on gospel ethical convictions.

As an ethical community, the church is divine initiated, united and diverse, holy and distinct, word-centred and eschatological. This inevitably means that Christian morality fundamentally springs from a response of a community of believers to God's act of redemption in Christ's atoning work which is yet to be consummated in the eschatological glorious new heavens and new earth. In the meantime, the Christian communities strive not only to deliberate but also to live according to God's will and character guided by the authority of the scriptures. This emphasis on ethics as a community is indispensable to evangelical ecclesiologies in all cultural contexts, African context inclusive. But in order to formulate an ethic that is biblical as well as meaningful particularly for the African context, the next chapter will examine the African concept of community and solidarity which provides the framework, values and norms for morality in African communities.

## Chapter 3

# THE CONCEPTS OF COMMUNITY AND SOLIDARITY IN AFRICAN CULTURES AND ETHICS

### Introduction

The biblical/theological ecclesial ethic espoused in chapter two (2) ought to be applied to all contexts including Sub-Saharan Africa if the church is to live truly according to its identity and eschatological hope in Christ. But the appropriation of ecclesial ethics in the sub-Saharan context demands a clear grasp of the traditional ethic which is strongly grounded on the concept of communal life and solidarity. This chapter therefore aims to examine the concepts of community and solidarity in African worldview and explicate how these two concepts provide the framework, values and norms for traditional African ethics. The key questions that this chapter seeks to answer are: How does the strong sense of community and life together form the foundations of African ethics? How does the individual relate to the community and what are the implications of this for moral decisions in the African worldview? What are the key positive and negative elements of the African ethics that provide appropriate touching stones for contextualizing the gospel and its ethical injunctions in Sub-Saharan Africa? The chapter begins by defining African ethics and then proceeds to explore the foundations of African ethics before it assesses the key features.

### 3.1 Defining African ethics

African ethics refers basically to the moral life as conceived and practised within the specific context of African traditional life. This emphasizes the fact that while morality is universal and that it exists to be discovered by all people; it has practical meaning and finds meaningful expressions only within particular cultural contexts (Bujo, 2003:27, 1998:46; Coetzee, 2003:274). It is on this basis that Bujo (1998:41), for instance, strongly objects to any arguments that seek to universalize morality in such a way that rejects cultural or contextual pluralism and he thus makes a case for “a specific African ethic”.<sup>31</sup> In African ethics, moral values and ethos are embedded in the concept of life and communal solidarity as understood with African cultural contexts. It is for this reason that Metz and Gaie (2010:273),

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<sup>31</sup> In fact, Bujo (2010:88), describes any such attempts as “a form of neocolonialism” which does nothing except “to be oppressive” to African people. Here Bujo makes a helpful reminder on the need to maintain the africaness of African ethics, of course, without losing its universal relevance.

writing from a philosophical point of view, can speak “Afro-communitarianism” ethics. This is an ethic that is first “essentially relational” in that the individual becomes a full moral agent only in relation with others and second, it aims to achieve “community or harmony with others” (Metz and Gaie, 2010:275-276). In this sense, communal solidarity provides a paradigm for morality is Sub-Saharan African.

One important feature of the African concept of community is that it is deeply religious in nature because it is constituted of not only “the living” but also “the dead and the yet-to-be-born” and ultimately “God” (Bujo, 2010:79-81; cf. Magesa, 1997:3-4). This is what Bujo (2010:81) refers to this as a “four-dimensional” nature of African concept of community. But as Magesa (1997:31) insightfully points out, it is this religious beliefs that define the “purpose or goal of human life” and therefore orients the people to live accordingly. Thus, contrary to Getz (2007:328) who contends that there is no relationship between religion and morality in African societies, it is nearly impossible to explicate an African ethic without accounting for its religious grounding. And any categorisation of African ethics into “philosophical,” “religious”, and “cultural” by Ronald Nicholson (2008:1) is helpful only to an extent that any such aspects are not to be used exclusively.

Although there exist differences among various African cultures, there are also significant common features that justify a good degree of generalization when speaking of Sub-Saharan African ethics without ignoring their differences (Nyamiti, 2005:9-10; Buys, 2008:5; Metz & Gaie, 2010:274). Wherever necessary, specific examples are used in order to explain specific elements of various African cultures. But before we turn to discuss in detail the distinctive features of African ethics, it is proper to sketch out a brief overview of the western ethical models which Bujo (2003; 1998), our key conversation partner, seeks to dialogue with. This is key to understanding the criticism as well as the appraisal that Bujo (and other African scholars) raises in dialogue with the Western models of ethics.<sup>32</sup>

According to Bujo, the three main models of western ethics as Bujo are: liberal ethics, communitarianism ethics and discourse ethics. However, Bujo mainly engages the last two models based on their similarities with the African ethics which places emphasis on community and social contexts as well as past traditions thereby critiquing the liberal ethics

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<sup>32</sup> We should stress that our focus here is not to give a detailed comparison between the African and western ethical models but rather to examine the concepts of community and solidarity which, this research argues, provide a framework for moral living in Sub-Saharan Africa. For a detailed comparison of the two models, see B. Bujo’s *Ethical dimension of community: the African model and the dialogue between North and South* (1998), and D. Masolo’s *Self and Community in a changing world* (2010), just to mention a few.

for its undue emphasis on the individual and reason.<sup>33</sup> Although Bujo draws from the good elements of these western models ethics, he criticizes both models not only for their overemphasis on rationality or natural law and their disregard of ancestors and the unborn in their concept of community thereby becoming individualistic just as the liberal model that they seek to critique.<sup>34</sup>

## **3.2 Western ethics and African ethics: a juxtaposition**

### **3.2.1 Communitarianism ethics**

One of the key proponents of the Communitarianism ethic is Alasdair MacIntyre.<sup>35</sup> In one of his major work *After Virtue*, MacIntyre critiques not only the emotive ethical theory of C. L. Stevenson and Lytton Strachey which bases its moral judgement on personal feelings or attitudes but also the dominant liberal ethical theory of Emmanuel Kant for promulgating a morality purely based on reason. According to MacIntyre (2007:29-34), both models tend to be individualistic in the sense that moral judgements are solely based on individual's personal choices thereby discarding the cultural or historical context in which people as moral agents exist. It is against this backdrop that MacIntyre (2007:29-34) makes a strong case for an Aristotelian virtue ethics that takes seriously the social or historical heritage and traditions because they form and informs the moral identity of the people and gives them the social framework for moral reflection and praxis.

For MacIntyre (2007:ix), the critical importance of traditions or historical heritage in moral discourse lies in the fact that moral values, whether corporate or individual, have meaning and find universal justification within “a context of practical beliefs” and “a shared conception of the human good” . And central to the traditions in the Western context, as MacIntyre (2007:16-17) further argues, are religious beliefs (Christianity) which provide not only the meaning but also the goal of human life. With this emphasis on traditions and social context, MacIntyre (2007:221) understands personhood in communal categories in that the individual

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<sup>33</sup> The stress on use of reason is one of the key features of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment (MacIntyre, 2007:37).

<sup>34</sup> In his critical review of Bujo's ethics especially how the individual relates to the community, Maina (2008:192) is correct in describing it as “a search for an authentically African ethics different from [W]estern moral theories, and especially the natural law tradition of [W]estern thinking”. But as this research argues, such “an authentically African ethics” can only remain Christian and evangelical if it does not compromise on its gospel-centeredness rooted in the believer's faith in Christ.

<sup>35</sup> It is interesting to note that although a proponent of communitarianism, MacIntyre (2007:xiv-xv) is hesitant to categorize himself as a communitarian for fear that he may be perceived as promoting not only the good but also the evil or oppressive elements of community in relation to the individuals.

exists as a social being who has personal and moral identity only in relation to others within a particular context. It is the social context that not only provides the values for moral decision but also shapes the individual's moral identity.<sup>36</sup>

Thus, unlike the liberal ethics where an action or behaviour is judged right or wrong, moral or immoral solely on the basis of rationality and individualist understanding of personhood, the communitarian ethic takes seriously the social traditions. It is these traditions which are strongly tied to history that inevitably provide the moral values, language, stories and the space for enhancing "the human good". Using MacIntyre's terms, it is the social context that provides key pillars for moral life, the "narrative" (the stories) "intelligibility" (the meaning) and "accountability" (checks against individualistic tendencies) (2007:218). With this, the moral good is defined on the basis of traditions and social relationships rather rationalistic argumentation alone. It is based on emphasis on traditions, social context, virtues and communal understanding of personhood that Western communitarian ethics resonates with African ethics.

Yet, one of the major critiques that Bujo (2003:131-135) levels against this model is that its concept of community has no regard for the ancestors and the unborn and is premised on the individual rather than the community. It is against this that Bujo (2010; 2003; 1998) espouses an ethical model that is premised on the wider and comprehensive African understanding of community which extends to include the ancestors, the unborn, the cosmos and ultimate God.

### **3.2.2 Discourse ethics**

Another Western ethical theory that shares some similarities with African ethics is the discourse ethical theory whose major proponent is a German social theorist Jurgen Habermas. In his seminal work *The Theory of communicative action*, Habermas articulates a social ethical theory that seeks to find justification for morality in interactive communal discourse. The model is based on presupposition that it is through rational interaction that moral values or principles are not only formulated, tested, sustained and internalized but also receive universal validity (Habermas, 1981:301-308). This means that a particular claim or action is accepted as moral both contextually and universally only when it passes through reflective discourse based on rationality which Habermas (1981:22) defines as "a disposition

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<sup>36</sup> MacIntyre (2007:221) aptly explains this when he writes; "What I am, therefore, is in key part what I inherit, a specific past that is present to some degree in my present. I find myself part of a history and that is generally to say, whether I like it or not, whether I recognize it or not, one of the bearers of a tradition."

of speaking and acting subjects that is expressed in modes of behaviour for which there are good reasons or grounds”.

Thus according to Habermas (1981:2), the communication action theory which he also calls “the theory of argumentation” is grounded in the fact that human behaviour is morally valid only when it can pass the test of reason. Inadvertently, this means that personhood is inseparable from the capacity to reason and argue. Habermas (1981:15) makes explicit the connection between personhood and the ability to make moral argumentation when he argues:

In contexts of communicative action, we call someone rational not only if he is able to put forward an assertion and, when criticised, to provide grounds for it by pointing to appropriate evidence, but also if he is following an established norm and is able, when criticised, to justify his action by explicating the given situation in the light of legitimate expectations.

In this regard, just like the communitarian ethics, the discourse ethical theory stresses the importance of social background and the individual’s relationship with others for meaningful moral life. Decisions, actions or behaviours are judged moral if they meet the accepted standards within a given context (‘a lifeworld’) achieved through continuous discourse. It is the context that provides not only the language but also the traditional values that form the background for meaningful moral discourse and practical moral living. Although he sees some similarities with his conception of “palaver” which emphasizes communal dialogue, Bujo (2003:78-97) critiques discourse ethics for its emphasis on reason as the basis for morality in such a way that only those who are able to argue rationally are regarded as moral thereby excluding the dead, the unborn, the elderly as well the marginalized including the handicapped.

Important to emphasize here, though, is the fact that the preceding discussion only focuses on few aspects of Western ethics particularly as they relate to the critical analysis of Bénézet Bujo. This is to admit that Kant, MacIntyre and Habermas are only a few representation of Western ethic thinking. A comparative study between African and Western ethical thoughts would demand a comprehensive engagement with other key ethical thinkers including Aristotle (and the exponents of virtue ethics) as well as the John S. Mills (and other exponents of utilitarian ethics).

### 3.3 The foundations of African ethics

#### 3.3.1 The anthropological dimensions of community ethics

Most African scholars have comprehensively argued that life in the traditional African worldview is communal (Bujo, 2003; Magesa, 1997; Tanye 2010). Bujo (2003:22), for instance, argues that in the African context, to be is “*cognatus sum, ergo sumus*” (“I am related, therefore we are”) rather than “*cogito ergo sum*” (“I think, therefore I am”). This means that in African worldview, communal relationships are a defining coordinate for one’s identity and moral life. In this sense, life has meaning and purpose within the context of social relationships rather than mere rationality. Bujo (1998:73) further stresses this point when he argues that in the African worldview, a person does not live as “I-for-myself” but as “I-in-the-community-for others”.<sup>37</sup> It is in this regard that community and solidarity form the basis for understanding all aspects of life including morality particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa.

In the African worldview, communal relationships are principally governed by kinship or blood ties (Bujo, 2003:113; Tanye, 2010:15; Coetzee, 2003:277). According to Shorter (1998:84), kinship refers to “a social relationship founded on a real (biological) or putative (assumed) blood relationship”. Community in its primary sense refers to the family both in its nucleus and extended forms.<sup>38</sup> Several families form a clan, which Shorter (1998:89) defines as “a category of putative relatives, usually dispersed, rather than corporately residential”. This understanding of family and clan stresses the close interconnectedness of family relationships based on blood or kinship ties. One is fundamentally a member of a particular family and the community by virtue of birth and maintains it through moral or good behaviour. This is an important characteristic of African concept of community.

However, community extends beyond family or clan to include the outsiders or strangers on the basis of common humanity (Metz and Gaie, 2010:276; Setiloane, 1986:10). Bujo (2003:114) affirms this point when he argues that although communal relationships are

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<sup>37</sup> This resonates well with Geertz’s understanding of culture in terms of “meaning” as given by people in social relationships rather than mere cognitive knowledge by human individuals (1973:12-13).

<sup>38</sup> Tanye (2010:18) thus defines family as “a group of people who claims descend from a common ancestor, a particular progenitor”.

primarily understood in familial or ethnic categories, the African people “understand community as a *world community* in which they can encounter every single human person”. The relationships in this “world community” are rooted in common humanity as given by God (Bujo, 2010:81). With this in mind, one appreciates that the insistence on the particularity of African ethics does not in itself mean rejecting its universal validity. The bone of contention, rather, lies on how the particularity of African ethics relates to its universality. Significantly, this touches on the questions of how the individuals within specific ethnic groups ought to relate to people from different ethnic backgrounds. But the problem of continued violence and conflicts in Africa fuelled by ethnic or tribal differences (Tanye, 2010:25), for instance, begs for more reflection on African concept of community and its implications on morality.

One important concept that underscores the strong sense of community in African cultures is the concept of *ubuntu*. According to Metz and Gaie (2010:274-275), *Ubuntu* (in Zulu, Xhosa and Ndebele languages) or *Botho* (in Sotho or Tswana languages) refers to the humanness of a person which is fundamentally communal in its nature. It is in the community that one becomes a complete person in that he is not only born in the community but is also nurtured and thus morally shaped by it. Metz and Gaie (2010:275) cite Augustine Shutte who sums up the meaning of *Ubuntu* or *Botho* as “entering more and more deeply into community with others” in such a way that “although the goal is personal fulfilment, selfishness is excluded”. The assertion lays out two important things: first, every individual has the obligation to contribute to the wellbeing of the community as a whole by living according to its moral values and norms. Secondly, the one’s moral achievement as well as moral failure is understood in communal rather than individualistic categories.

The strong sense of community in African cultures is expressed through proverbs and sayings. For example, *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, one of the most popular expressions among the Zulus, Xhosa and Ndebeles, expresses explicitly the indispensability of others in the individual’s whole life (Metz & Gaie, 2010:274). The expression therefore underscores the point that a person is a person because of other people both the living and the dead and must thus seek to live accordingly (Metz & Gaie, 2010:274). Another example is the *Chichewa* proverb *Kali kokha mkanyama*, which literally means whoever is alone is an animal. The proverb also stresses the fact that an individual is a real human being (*munthu* or *buntu*) only as he or she relates to the community and lives according to its moral standards and expectations.

Following from this, the individual is a person and has identity as well as rights because he exists in relation to the community as a whole. Consequently, an individual is not a proper human being without others (the community). This conceptualization distinguishes African

community from Western forms of communalism whereby community is basically formed out of the individuals' personal choices and consensus are largely based on individual rights and conscience (Metz and Gaie, 2010:275). Unlike in Western forms of community, in the African community the individual has conscience and rights only in relation to others. This clearly shows that community has priority over the individual, not vice versa.<sup>39</sup>

The understanding of community as understood in Sub-Saharan African cultures means that morality has meaning only in the context of community. As Coetzee (2003:276-277) correctly points out, it is the community that provides the "language" for interaction as well as the "dialogical relation" through which people share, reflect and practice their moral values and traditions. It is important to highlight here that emphasis in African morality is placed on values and traditions based on the experiences of all people as a community. Again, this makes African ethics different from Western models which are essentially based on individual rationality. Using the example of homosexuality, Bujo (2003:37-38) helps us to understand the difference between African communal ethics and western ethical models: in the latter, same sex relationships are morally acceptable on the basis of rationality or natural law while in the former, the practice is abhorrently inhumane because it does not contribute to the life in the community.

The strong sense of community (both the visible and invisible) in the Sub-Saharan African cultures raises an important question relating to how the individual relates to the community and vice versa. How does the individual relate to the community in such a way that the individual remain autonomous without being individualistic as is often the case in liberal Western societies? The importance of answering this question is clear when one considers that one of the major criticisms of African communalism is that it subdues or suppresses the individual's autonomy or personhood (Bujo, 2010:85; 2003:121). This sections briefly explores how the individual (self) relates to the community (others) in the African cultures and goes on to explicate how this shapes morality for both the individual and the community in African ethics.

In the Sub-Saharan cultures, the individual or person is defined in communal categories. According to Bujo (2003:116), "... no one can realize himself as a person all by himself; one

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<sup>39</sup> See the excursus on a brief discussion of Western communalism and its meaning for moral living. The focus on communitarianism and discourse ethics shows that there are more voices even in the Western cultures that emphasize that community and its values and traditions is indispensable for moral reflection and praxis. Such ethical models stress the fact that an individual is a moral agent in a particular context and within the space provided by the community. It is on this basis that theologians like Bujo (2003, 1998) find some similarities with African ethics although they accuse the Western communalism for its individualistic tendencies.

becomes a full person only in relationship to others.” In this way, Bujo stresses that the individual’s autonomy, identity, conscience and freedoms are defined and expressed only in the context of relationship with others in community. The individual is a person so long as he or she relates to the other (the community) and lives accordingly (Bujo, 2003:73; Metz and Gaie, 2010:275). The relationships with other, the individual and moral responsibilities are neatly interlocked. With this understanding, Bujo (2010:85) thus explicates what it means (or does not mean) to be a person when he writes:

Thus, to be called a ‘person’ does not simply require being a member of a community, but actively participating in mutual, interpersonal relations. In other words, individuals only become persons if they do not isolate themselves but act together with the entire community.

What this means is that it is the community that defines and shape the person as he or she continuously relates to it through every aspect of his or her life. The individual has his or her identity in the identity of the community. As Gyeke (2003:304) rightly points out, this understanding of personhood does not mean that the person is erased or absorbed. Rather, it means that while one is a human being in an ontological sense, personhood only finds meaning in relationship with others, the community. Here, one understands that it is only in the community that the individual attains and develops his personhood and this or her moral identity and obligations.

The fact that one becomes a person or proper human being *munthu munthu* (as known in Chichewa language) only in the community has significant bearing on individuals’ moral living. One must always choose to do that which pleases the community including ancestors and contributes to its common good - life and communal solidarity. In this way, it is the community that defines and shapes morality and the individual has the obligation to conduct himself or herself according to the values, norms and aspirations of the community. Bujo (2003:116) succinctly explains this connection between personhood, community and morality when he writes;

Each member must be conscious that his actions contribute either to the growth in life of the entire community or to the loss or reduction of its life, depending on whether they are good or evil. Each one who commits himself to act in solidarity for the construction of the community allows himself to be brought to completion by this same community, so that he can truly become a person.

The assertion above highlights two important things: firstly, the individual becomes a person only by living as morally accepted by the community. Thus, personhood is inseparable from one’s moral obligation towards the community. Secondly, community is not a mere voluntary

association (*gesellschaft*) whereby the individual decides to join or not; rather it exists with the individual simultaneously in such a way that personhood or individuality has meaning only within the context of the community (*gemeinschaft*).<sup>40</sup>

In explicating the difference between the concept of community in African and Western ethical models, Coetzee (2003:281-282) uses the difference between “civil society” (the collective community) and “civic society” (the collective individuals). Unlike in the “civic society” where the emphasis is on the individual, in the “civil society” the point of departure is the community, which of course, is constituted of different individuals. Masolo (2006:489) also makes a similar contrast between African and Western concepts of community when he cites Leopold Senghor who describes the former as “the communion of persons” while the latter as merely “an assembly of individuals”.

Of course, one challenge remains regarding how exactly the individual should relate to the community so as to ensure that both the individual and community are appropriately preserved. While most African scholars are cautious when they insist that the understanding of personhood in communal categories does not mean erasing the individual’s autonomy, the over-emphasis on the communal identity and life in the African thoughts poses a high risk of circumventing the individual’s autonomy. Masolo’s reminder elsewhere that “the values and expectations of the communitarian ethic can be misunderstood or even abused, just as the liberties of the individual under liberalism have been” is very important (2010:249-250). This posits to the need, among other things, to always stress a proper balance between the individual and the community. This is critical to safeguarding alienable individual autonomy which is only given by nature, and not the social context.

Yet, it important to stress that such individual cannot exist without others and this places obligation on the individual to act according to the values and norms of the community. Masolo (2010:174) clearly expresses this thought by arguing that that “although human value is intrinsic in that it does not depend on the active roles that one performs as a member of a society, the realization of that intrinsically valuable status does not occur outside of an existing society; it depends on it for its realization”. This clearly emphasizes that the individual’s autonomy or identity is properly located in the autonomy or identity of the community. Realizing this is key to achieving what Coetzee (2003:282) correctly terms as “moral equilibrium” between the individuals and the community.

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<sup>40</sup> The terms *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft* were first used by Ferdinand Tonnies (cited in Bujo, 2003:88).

### **3.3.2 Religious dimensions of African communal ethics**

As noted already, one key characteristic of the community in the African understanding is that it is deeply religious in nature (Bujo, 2003:123; Mbiti, 1990:200; Magesa, 1997:3). The religious or invisible dimension of communities is based on the strong belief in a Supreme Being or Spirit (God) but most importantly in ancestors (and other spirits). The religious beliefs are closely intertwined with the whole culture in that there is no separation between religion and culture and consequently between religion and morality. Tanye (2010:32) affirms this when he argues that “religion permeates and influences every aspect of African culture”. With regard to morality, it is the religious belief system that, as Mbiti (1990:200) correctly points out, “gives sanctity to the customs and regulations of the community”. This means that moral values, norms and principles in African ethics often have deep religious foundations and meanings although this is often expressed unconsciously.

Following from the relationship between religion and morality as pointed out above, it is important that one explores the key religious beliefs in order to grasp not only the underlying meanings for moral values or norms but also the motivations or purpose for specific moral behaviours or practices. This is also an essential step in effective contextualization of the gospel in African cultures especially in cases where most practices are promoted or defended in the name of culture without understanding their religious meanings or functions. We now turn to what can be regarded as the three key elements of African religious beliefs: God, the ancestors and the unborn.

#### **3.3.2.1 God (Supreme Being) as the source of morality**

One of the common features of African cultures is belief in the existence of God or Supreme Being. The belief in God (Supreme Being) is fundamental such that, as Bujo (2003:19, 1998:25) correctly stresses, one cannot claim to grasp the African worldview as well as its ethical system without understanding the belief in God and how he relates to people. God is believed to be beyond human beings; he has powers to create and to sustain life, among other things. The belief in God’s existence, work as well as his moral attributes, provide a framework of how people ought to live in relationship to him and to each other as well as the universe as a whole.

One of the key attributes of God in most African societies is that God is right or holy by his character (Mbiti, 1990:37-38; 1970:41).<sup>41</sup> Although not explicit in the African belief system, as

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<sup>41</sup> Other attributes of God include kindness, goodness, faithfulness, mercy, love, and justice (Mbiti, 1970:31-41).

Mbiti (1970:41) admits, the belief that God is righteous or holy means that God is without moral fault and can never do anything immoral in his dealing with people. He is perfect beyond any human moral standards. In this way, God is believed to be the ultimate source of or authority on morality (Mbiti, 1989:201). Consequently, the people must relate to God and to each other in a way that expresses God's holy character in their daily life. Magesa (1997:40) affirms this point when he argues: "Ethical commitment is ultimately anchored in the people's conception of God who is the Holy, and in their interpretation of what God demands of them in real life."

In most traditional African communities, the moral attributes of God are expressed through names given to God, among other things.<sup>42</sup> Among the *Chewa* people in Malawi, for example, God is known as *Mulungu*, which literally translates 'the one who is right'.<sup>43</sup> The name *Mulungu*, which according to Mbiti (1970:40) is also used in more than forty different groups of people in eastern and central-southern Africa, therefore, means that God is "the righteous one". He is God of all moral perfection. Among the Sotho-Tswanas, *Modimo*, means that God is holy or righteous, among other things (Setiloane, 1976:25). Although, the attribute stresses the separateness of God from the people, it also expresses the moral attribute of God as one who is morally perfect and he expects the people (*badimo*) to conduct themselves morally.

The emphasis on God's existence as well as his moral attributes reveals significant similarities with the Christian belief in God. For instance, in both African traditional cultures and Christianity, God or the Supreme Being is not only creator, supernatural, or sustainer of the universe but he is also the ultimate source or authority from whom morality derive from. It is in the light of such similarities that most African scholars continue to bemoan the prejudices prevalent in most western theologies against African traditional beliefs which are regarded as heathen (Magesa, 1997:11; Mbiti, 1990:213). But this belief in the existence and moral functions of God is incomprehensible apart from the ancestors. Thus, the next section turns to the belief in ancestors and its bearing on African morality.

### **3.3.2.2 The role(s) of ancestors in African morality**

Central to the African's understanding of community is the belief in ancestors (*azimu* as known among the *Chewa* people). Ancestors are the spirits of the remembered dead

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<sup>42</sup> Ott (2007:334-335) makes the point that the names of God are key in revealing the perception or beliefs that the people have about God.

<sup>43</sup> Other names *Mphambe* which means that God is giver of rain and *Leza* which means that God rules or cares for his people (Ott, 2007:336).

members of the community who although physically dead and live in the spirit world, they are part of the family and have direct influence in the daily life of the living (Mbiti, 1990:82-84; Magesa, 1997:47-50). Not all spirits of the dead become ancestors but only those who had lived respectable and exemplary moral lives in the community. Mbiti (1990:83-84) affirms the differentiation and thus prefers to call ancestors “the living-dead” because the description refers not only to the respected members or moral exemplars but also includes the rest of the dead including children and those who died without any special moral status. However, for the interest of the present research, ancestors refer to the influential spirits who are believed to play a critical role for the continued survival and moral life of the community. It is this authoritative influence or roles of the ancestors or the living dead that Klaus Nurnberger (2007:26) correctly underscores when he prefers to call them “the authoritative dead”.

One of the basic roles of the ancestors is that they are mediators between the Supreme Being and the people so much so that without them there is no communication between the Supreme Being (God) and the living. This role of mediatorship is possible because, as Mbiti (1989:82) helpfully points out, the ancestors are “bilingual” in that they speak the language of both the living which they were part of (hence understand their challenges) and the language of God and the spirits whom they have become part. The role of ancestors is also critical when one also understands the hierarchical nature of relationships in the African understanding among people and between the people and the spirit world and ultimately God (Nurnberger, 2007:25-26).<sup>44</sup> The living, therefore, can only communicate with the spirit world and God through ancestors who have attained a higher spiritual status through death. Magesa (1997:47) understands this well when he argues: “It follows that by right of their primogeniture and proximity to God by death, God has granted the ancestors a qualitatively more powerful life force over their descendants.”

Besides being mediators, the critical role of the ancestors is to police traditions and moral norms or values of the community. It is in this regard that the ancestors are known as “the custodians of moral traditions” (Magesa, 1997:35) or “guardians of moral code” (Tanye, 2010:233). It is the duty of the ancestors to ensure that the moral values or norms of the community are safeguarded and promoted, hence they have the powers to reprimand any acts or behaviour that is against the traditions or ethos of the community (Mbiti, 1990:82, 85). The punishment by the ancestors against any wrong or bad behaviour often come in the form of diseases, pestilences, droughts, barrenness or infertility and other calamities, among

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<sup>44</sup> According to Ott (2007:350), the hierarchical structure of African world begins with God as the primary origin of life following after which come in descending order ancestors, the chiefs, the rest of the people and finally, land.

other things (Mbiti, 1990:83). That the ancestors have powers to punish bad behaviours is a cause of fear among the living. It is not surprising that the ancestors are often “feared, resented or even scolded for their jealousy, their neglect of their offspring, their meddling, their possessiveness and their gullibility” (Nurnberger, 2007:28). It is important to mention that the ancestors not only punish the ‘bad’ but also reward the ‘good’ living through giving of, rain, bumper harvest and good health, among other things.

The fact that the ancestors have powers to punish as well as to reward moral acts or behaviour implies that the living must always act or behave to please the ancestors. With this, it is not surprising that the moral good is defined according to the standards and wishes of the ancestors. In fact, to obey the ancestors is to choose life while to act otherwise is to choose death for the moral agent and consequently the community as a whole. Inevitably, the living have an obligation to remember (anamnesis) the ancestors if they are to appease them in every aspect of their daily life. It is on this understanding that Bujo (2003:56) correctly describes African ethics as a “morality of *memoria*”. To remember one’s ancestors essentially means to live according to their moral standards and expectations revealed through the traditions of the community.

The critical roles of the ancestors points to the critical importance of communication through which not only the ancestors express their expectation but also the living are engaged in moral discourse guided by the ancestors’ demands and expectations. Such moral discourse aims to address the ongoing moral challenges facing the people. Yet, communication or moral discourse in the African understanding is not reduced to rationalistic argumentation but incorporates the voices of all people including the unborn. It is on the basis of the centrality of communication in African ethics that Bujo (2003:184-185) argues for the importance of the palaver in African ecclesiology, which as shall be discussed later, ensures that all people are included in moral reflection and practice regardless of mental capacity, age or gender.

### **3.3.2.3 The unborn (and children) and morality**

According to the African worldview, community is constituted not only of God, the ancestors, and the living but also the unborn. Through the unborn, continued survival of the community is guaranteed. In fact, the more the children, the more the community is assured of its continued existence and flourishing. This implies that the living have the obligation to safeguard and enhance fertility and ensure that the unborn is brought forth into the visible world. In this way, the main purpose of marriage is bearing children such that, as Bujo (1998:95) correctly observes, to be without children is seen as a serious offense against the community. To fail to bear children is to cause death to one’s family name and the

community as a whole. In this regard, “childlessness is not only a personal tragedy but a communal catastrophe” (Nurnberger, 2007:23). The significance of children and the desire to have more children justifies the practice of polygamy (Shorter, 1998:92).

Due to the centrality of children in African communities, people participate in various rituals or ceremonies at various stages of the life cycle for the purpose of both enhancing fertility and safeguarding the life of the unborn. The rituals include sacrifices or libations as well as restrictions in the form of taboos imposed on the individual at various stages of the life cycle aimed to protect life. Such rituals or taboos have moral implications on the child and the community as a whole in that everyone should conduct him/her self accordingly. In this way, it is the rituals that shape or provide the meaning and purpose for moral life. For example, among the *Lomwe* (to which the researcher belongs), a pregnant woman is forbidden from eating eggs for fear that she will give birth to a blind or still baby. In the same manner, the father to be is prohibited from having sex with the wife for a specific duration of time so as not to cause sickness or death to the child.

Another important ritual at the birth of a new child in most Sub-Saharan cultures is child naming. The significance of the ritual lies in the fact that a name given to a particular child symbolizes his or her identity and personality in the context of his or her relation to the community (Bujo, 1998:28). This is what Mbiti (1990:111) asserts when he describes names in African cultures as “the symbol of personality”. In most cases, the child is named after either the respected elders of the family or most importantly after the ancestors. In the latter case, the child is not only connected to the ancestors but also believed to embrace their exemplary moral character. This entails that not only the child but also the community as a whole is obligated to live according to the character and standards of the ancestors.

### **3.4 The motivation for morality: meaning of life and community solidarity**

Based on the centrality of community in African traditional life, everyone’s action or behaviour must serve to preserve and enhance life and solidarity or harmony in the community, which as discussed above, is constituted of the living, the ancestors and the unborn. It is this need to preserve and enhance life and community solidarity that forms the *summum bonum* (the highest good) and consequently the duty and motivation for moral life for all people.

### 3.4.1 Abundant life as the goal of African ethics

Community solidarity is fundamentally aimed at preserving and enhancing life which is critical for the continued existence of the community (Bujo, 2003:15; Magesa, 1997:71-77). In the African worldview, life means continued existence and prosperity or wellbeing of the community as given by the ancestors. The ultimate goal of any community is to achieve abundant or good 'life' which is expressed through more children, good health (no diseases or frequent deaths), abundant harvest, and more important healthy relationships. Inevitably, this understanding posits the obligation upon the people to conduct themselves in a way that seeks to safeguard and enhance life. Thus the moral value of human action or behaviour is located in its potency to enhance life in the community. Magesa (1997:77) aptly explains this when he writes:

...the foundation and purpose of the ethical perspective of African Religion is life, life in its fullness. Everything is perceived with reference to this. It is no wonder, then, Africans quickly draw ethical conclusions about thoughts, words, and action of human beings, or even of "natural" cosmological events, by asking questions such as: Does the particular happening promote life? If so, it is good, just, ethical, desirable, divine. Or, does it diminish life in any way? Then it is wrong, bad, unethical, unjust, detestable.

What Magesa makes clear here is that morality is understood in relation to the life vitality of the people. Morality is a matter of life or death for not only the individual but also the community as a whole. This clearly posits the obligation upon the individuals to live in accordance to the moral values and norms of the community. The assertion by Magesa above also means that moral justification lies in the fundamental goal that a particular action or behaviour seeks to serve, in this case, to safeguard and promote life. Thus, the deontological nature of ethics (the emphasis on duty towards the community) cannot be understood separately from its teleological nature (the goal to safeguard and enhance its life).

It is important to observe that life in the African worldview is understood in a holistic sense in that it is inseparable from its religious dimension whereby things such as rain and children are seen to be given by the ancestors. Consequently, most Africans including professing Christians regard sickness, death and any other calamities as a punishment by the ancestors. The people must seek for forgiveness through prayers and sacrifices or libations. And, the more the ancestors are remembered through various rituals, the more they prosper and sustain the community. One important way that the ancestors maintain and enhance life

is through the giving of more children. With this understanding, one also appreciates why abortion and homosexuality are regarded as abhorrently immoral or evil in African cultures in that they destroy life and thus destroys the community while polygamy is strongly encouraged in case on barrenness on the first spouse.

### **3.4.2 Solidarity as the goal of African ethics**

Besides enhancement of life, morality is also derived from the need to promote community solidarity or harmony in the community (Magesa, 1997:52-53; Tanye, 2010:27-29). According to Bujo (2003:116), solidarity seeks to maintain harmony among all people in the community including the sick, the elderly, the unborn and most importantly the ancestors. It is an inclusive solidarity through which the relationship between the living and the ancestors is made clear. Solidarity has both physical and religious dimensions. It is this solidarity that places upon everyone the obligation to conduct him/herself in such a way that strongly promotes relationships or harmony in the community.

Consequently, one must by all means avoid committing any act or behaviour that offends others including the ancestors. This also means that one is judged immoral not only because he or she commits an action that is deemed damaging to the relationships in the community but also when one fails to do what is expected of him by the community. In fact, to be moral (a proper human being) takes more than just avoiding doing what is considered immoral or bad in order to be moral; what must always act or have so as to enhance solidarity in the community. African morality can in a sense be described as a morality of commission and omission.

Important to point out is that the emphasis on community solidarity as integral to moral decisions in African societies bear implications on how human rights or freedoms are understood. Unlike in the Western thoughts where rights or freedoms are largely based on rationality or natural law, in the African understanding they are deeply rooted in communal relationships. An individual has rights or freedoms because he or she exists in the first place with and for the community. In this sense, rights or freedoms are therefore inseparable from the duty that one has to contribute towards the self realization of the community and its continual search for abundant life. In their argument for *Ubuntu/Botho* ethics, Metz and Gaie (2010:283) affirm this communitarian understanding of rights or freedoms when they state that “an African conception of morality will likely include duties to aid others without correlative rights”.

The individual is therefore motivated to act or behave in a certain way because such action contributes positively to the common good rather for the mere reason that one has the right or freedom to do so. After all, as already discussed, one is a full person when he or she performs his or her moral responsibility without expecting direct benefits in individualistic terms (Bujo, 2003:73; Coetzee, 2003:277). In this sense, community comes first before the individuals. Thus, unlike the western thinking of rights, in the African worldview it is only through fulfilment of obligation towards the community that the individual can begin claiming his or her rights or freedoms.

The emphasis on community solidarity points to an important concept in relation to motivation for moral choices in African traditional ethics: the concept of shame. In his discussion of the difference between Western ethic and African ethics and its bearing on the challenge of HIV/AIDS in Sub-Saharan, Buys (2008:6) views shame as the strong feeling of humiliation and rejection caused by failure to act or behave in accordance to the accepted values and norms of the community. On this basis, African ethics has been described as an ethic of shame rather than guilt as in most Western models.<sup>45</sup> According to Buys (2008:7) shame “leads to a loss of status, low self-image, an emotional feeling of inferiority, little or no confidence, uncertainty and deep depression that may even lead to suicide”. Thus in order to avoid shame, one must therefore not only avoid that which is bad or evil but must strive to do what is accepted as good and according to the moral standards of the community. He who does this is regarded as the ideal “moral/ethical person” (Magesa, 1997:168).

Inevitably, the fear of rejection or humiliation motivates one to conduct him/herself in a way that is considered human and seeks to enhance communal life and relationships. Also, the concept of shame increases the level of accountability on the part of individuals as moral agents in that they conduct themselves in a way that is acceptable by the community. The negative effect of shame is apparent when one understands that sicknesses including HIV/AIDS are believed to be caused by violation of moral values on the part of the sick. It is on this basis that Buys (2008:3-4) attribute stigma against people living with AIDS to shame in African communities. As a result, this poses serious setbacks to the efforts aimed at caring for those already infected as well preventing further spread on the HIV virus in most African communities (Buys, 2008:8). Unfortunately, the response of the church in Africa is not much different because of shame: “Judgment and indifference, rather than compassion, continue

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<sup>45</sup> Magesa (1997:169-170), however, points out that although shame is central to African morality because of its emphasis in community, shame which touches on the being of the personhood cannot be understood exclusively from guilt where the moral agent feels remorse for wrong doing. It is thus correct to contend that both shame and guilt exists in African ethics though in varying degrees. Buys (2008:6) takes a similar position.

to characterise the church's response to HIV/AIDS." (Buys, 2008:4)

### **3.5 The function of the community in ethical reflection and praxis**

Having explored the nature and centrality of community in African cultures, it is critical at this point to explicate how the community both at family and larger community levels functions in moral formations and practice.

In the African traditional cultures, family or home is the basic traditional school of moral formation (Tanye, 2010:16; Bansikiza, 2001:8,71-75). At family level, it is the responsibility of the parents and the senior members of the family to inculcate moral virtues upon the children through various forms of teaching including correction or discipline. The responsibility of the family in moral formation is apparently critical in that the identity and name of the family is inseparable to the moral character of the members. Thus, in most African societies, any misbehaviour by children or individuals is blamed on the entire family and thus causes shame to the whole. Some of the moral values inculcated in the children at the family level include respect for elders, spirit of sharing, and high regard for relationships or solidarity. Moral education also includes teaching on sexual life although in most Sub-Saharan African cultures this is commonly the responsibility of uncles or aunties not the parents themselves. The common means by which the senior members teach morality to the younger ones is through verbal instruction, folklore stories, songs and exemplary moral life.

Very important to the task of moral formation at the family level is the intimate interrelationships that, as argued above, the family provides to all people. It is such relationships that create not only the obligation but also the motivation for moral act or behaviour (Metz and Gaie, 2010:276-277). Obedience of parents and the senior members which is key to moral life is governed by the familial relationships. In this regard, as Metz and Gaie (2010:277) helpfully points out, some moral actions or judgements are deemed wrong because they are "unfriendly" to others in the family. Using friendly relationships as an essential category for morality, one understands how telling the truth, for example, can be regarded as wrong if it hurts or betrays a close family member (Buys, 2008:9). This shows that morality is not merely a matter of right or wrong as understood in Western rationalistic sense but takes seriously the effect that a particular action or behaviour brings on the others.

At the wider community level, there are different ways through which moral values are sought to be cultivated in the members of the community. The elders and traditional leaders particularly chiefs and spirit mediums are critical at this level not only as moral instructors but also as examples *par excellence* of moral living (through their actions and speeches).

Besides the stories, proverbs, and songs which form the fabric of everyday life, moral education is particularly done through various rituals. One most important practice in the African traditional life that serves such purpose is initiation rites commonly conducted among young boys and girls (Bujo, 2003:45-48; Masolo, 2006:492).

Through initiation ceremony, the ethos, values and norms of the community are instilled in the initiates thereby instructing them to live accordingly in relation to others. Actually, the importance of initiation is to “mark the birth of the person as a moral agent” (Masolo, 2006:492). Magesa (1997:94-104) explains the critical significance of initiation in that it gives the young boys and girls their social and moral identity because it is through this rite of passage that one is incorporated as a full member of the community. Bujo (2003:47) also affirms the significance of initiation in moral education in African cultures; hence he states: “The aim in the period of initiation is to attain to a new dynamism to the community and to pass on to the coming generations the virtues acquired through the new birth.” Bujo’s assertion affirms, among other things, the fact that through initiation the initiates not only attain a new status as moral agents (or a full person) but also are entrusted with the rich moral values of the community.

In some cultures, the incorporation of the initiates into adulthood and thus full and responsible members is symbolised by that ritual of circumcision (Masolo, 2010:243) which is sometimes marked by change of name (Bujo, 2003:47). In such contexts, circumcision as well as the new names functions not only as a symbol of new status but also to remind the initiates of their new moral obligation toward the community. One good example of such cultures is the *Xhosa* of South Africa (Ntombana, 2011:635-636). Despite the various abuses associated with the practice which sometimes leads to death, Ntombana (2011: 635-636) acknowledges the moral forming function of the initiation rite for the *Xhosa* boys in that it prepares the boys to be responsible members of the society. The end of initiation period is marked by celebrations in the form of traditional songs and dances. Such rituals also celebrate new status that the initiates have attained and the moral teachings they have received during the initiation period.

The instruction during initiation is done through means such as songs, demonstrations and most importantly through verbal instructions by the official instructors. Examples of such instruction include respect for parents and elders (as well as the disabled) and how to conduct oneself with regard to sexual life. The instructions during initiation also include “lessons in endurance and self control” which are key to “instil in the person the ability to subdue personal impulses and put before them the greater value of the common good” (Masolo, 2010:243). Most importantly, the initiation serves to prepare the initiates for

manhood and womanhood respectively thereby instructing them on marriage life and responsibilities in the community which is strongly religious in nature. Thus Magesa (1997:97) sums up “religion, the mystery of life and death, domestic and social virtues, sex and sexuality, and forms of self-identity” as the key aspects of moral instruction during initiation period.

One needs to emphasize the power of words (verbal and nonverbal) in African traditional moral life. It is for this reason that most moral instruction takes place through folklores or stories, proverbs, songs and various informal conversations of everyday life. Thus narrative communication which entails listening or hearing is critical in the African ethical model. This points to the centrality of elders for they are reservoirs of the traditions of the community and they must therefore be respected and cared for within the community. It is on this basis that Bujo (1998:21) correctly opines that to exclude the elders into an old-age home is alien to the African culture.<sup>46</sup> In a sense, this implies that any ethical model that seeks to be relevant in the African context must take seriously the traditional means of moral education.

One important role of the community which is critical to moral formation of its members in African cultures is correction or punishment (Mbiti, 1990:205-207). Any conduct that is deemed immoral or bad is corrected through various forms of punishments thereby restoring the moral agent to the moral ideals of the community. According to Mbiti (1990:206), examples of such punishment include death (in case of grave crimes such as murder or witchcraft), payment of fines in form of money, cattle or goats (in case of minor moral offences), and curses<sup>47</sup> by the senior members of the community. Besides correcting the moral offenders, the punishment also functions to deter other members of the community from committing similar moral offences. The embarrassment or shame that moral failure and the various forms of punishment bring on the offenders also functions to deter others from conducting themselves immorally.

One of the key elements of the African ethical model which, according to Bujo (2003:56ff; 1998:36-37) makes it different from the western discourse model is the “palaver”. According to Bujo (2003:73), the palaver is a consultative process of the community through which “the viability of the tradition is examined, so that all the ethical norms can be either confirmed or changed”. It is through the palaver that the community engages in moral discourse in the

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<sup>46</sup> It is worth mentioning that while the respect for elders remains one of the rich values of the African culture, in some Malawian communities, the same elders are commonly victimized through accusations of witchcraft and are thus subjected to exorcism rituals.

<sup>47</sup> In the African understanding, a curse is the pronouncement of great misfortune such as sickness and death by the elders of the community on moral offenders (Magesa, 1997:167).

face of the new moral challenges facing the people. This is what Bujo (1998:56) affirms when he further argues that the palaver is “a continuous, uninterrupted interpretation of established norms, which have to be adapted to different situations in order to do justice to the community in its task of promoting life”.

The palaver thus functions to allow the members to interpret and internalize the community’s moral values and norms that are principally aimed to enhance life and community solidarity. It involves questioning or challenging certain practices that are deemed harmful to the life vitality and solidarity in the community. Although he does not use the term ‘palaver’, Coetzee (2003:277) makes a similar argument with Bujo when he contends that despite the fact that the moral values and norms of African ethics are strongly tied to the past traditions rooted through the belief in ancestors, the traditions are continuously reinterpreted in order to address the current and specific moral challenges of the people. Of course, Bujo (2010:83-84) is careful to emphasize that the palaver differs from Western models of discourse ethics where discourse is dependent on rationalist and individualistic thinking.

The other key difference of African ethics from Western models is that it is deeply religious: “God and the world of the ancestors form an integral part of palaver, whereas they are excluded from consideration in discourse ethics.” (Bujo, 2010:84). Bujo (2003:68-76) also mentions three forms of palaver in most African communities: the “healing palaver”, “family palaver” and “administrative palaver”. Through the healing palaver<sup>48</sup> the sick confesses any wrongdoing to the medium or healer as a means to remedying the illness which is often caused by offending the ancestors. Such moral offence disturbs life and relationships in the whole community. Thus through healing process, the community’s moral life is reinvigorated in that not only the sick but also the whole community of the living is warned against committing similar acts for fear of causing of similar calamities. It is often assumed that sickness or calamities are caused by failure according to the moral standards of the community. This then explains the reason sicknesses including HIV/AIDS causes a great sense of shame in most African community (Buys, 2008). This also shows that an illness as well as healing is understood in communal terms rather individualistic terms as in the Western worldview.

In the family palaver, the members both at nucleus and extended levels continuously engage in a moral discourse on various issues that affect them but in consultation with their

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<sup>48</sup> Elsewhere, Bujo (2010:83) calls this the “therapeutic palaver”.

ancestors. The family head is the leader on this palaver. As argued earlier,<sup>49</sup> the name of a particular family is closely associated with its moral character or reputation of its members. This poses an obligation on the part of the family to ensure that its members live the ideal moral life. Moral education also entails corrective punishment against those who act against the moral standards and expectations of the community.

Lastly, is the administrative palaver which is led by the chief and other community leaders. As Bujo points out, the administrative palaver is concerned with the wider community constituted of several families. Significantly, through this palaver, the traditions of the wider community are revisited in the light of the new ethical challenges facing the community as a whole. Key to underscore is that even at this level, all members including the ancestors, the unborn, the elders and other voiceless groups of people are included in the process of the palaver (Bujo, 1998:48-49).

In this way, Bujo (1998:48-49) is right to point out that the African ethical model differs from the Western discourse model in which “mutual understanding” on moral matters is sought on the basis of individual equality and ability to argue. In their example of the *Akan* people, Coetzee (2003:278-279) as well as Wiredu (2003:295) help us to understand this when they emphasize that moral decisions are achieved through “consensus” motivated by traditional values of life and communal solidarity rather than mere rationalistic argumentation. This means that individual rationality or argumentation has a place in African moral discourse only as it is used within the framework of moral identity and common good of the community.<sup>50</sup>

But the basis of the palaver process is the understanding that the cultural traditions and the demands of the ancestors as well as the whole community is the source of abundant life and prosperity. Thus, the extent to which the traditions can be changed is significantly limited by the community. Inevitably, this shows a clash between the African ethical and the western models including communitarian theory whose ethics is largely premised on natural law or rational reflection. It is on the basis of such differences between African ethics and western ethics that Bujo (2003:12) argues for the need for a meaningful dialogue between the two models but in a way that takes Africa seriously. Such dialogue is obviously critical especially on the way to formulating an ethics that seeks to address the moral challenges of the people

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<sup>49</sup> See paragraph 2 of section 3.5.

<sup>50</sup> Coetzee (2003:279) defines consensus as “a willingness to suspend disagreement, making possible common (political) action”. He further argues that “Any agreement which denies moral identity thereby also denying social identity, is in conflict with established social meanings and for that reason cannot become a consensus”. This understanding shows the need to ‘contextualise’ elements of western democracy which is largely based on rationalistic ‘majority-rule’ principle.

both at contextual and universal levels.<sup>51</sup> But the critical importance of such dialogue lies in the need to formulate a gospel-centred ethical model which has community as a redeemed people of God who are called to a life of obedience and holiness in Christ through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit.

### **3.6 Key features of an African ethics: a preliminary assessment**

As assessment of the key distinctive features of Sub-Saharan African ethics as discussed above can be done under three main categories: communal, religious and perspectival. But only a preliminary assessment suffices at this point for a detailed assessment of African ethics is presented in chapter four.

#### **3.6.1 Communal**

As already discussed, morality in traditional African life is organized around the concept of community that is anthropological, religious, and philosophical in nature. Community is constituted of the living, the ancestors and the unborn. The strong emphasis on communal life, expressed excellently through concept such as *Ubuntu* or *Botho* and many proverbs or sayings, is clearly fundamental in underscoring that the individual's self-realization is strongly tied to that of the community as whole.

One significant advantage of the African communal ethical model is that it key to checking against individualistic or selfish tendencies which often lead to a privatized morality. The fact that every aspect of life has meaning only in the context of the community means that moral choices as well as rights or freedoms are communal in nature. This presupposes that what the individual does even in private affects as well as reflects the community in one way or the other (Maina, 2008:195). Consequently, this implies that one's action or behaviour is justifiable on the basis of how it contributes towards building relationships and thus avoids damaging the same. Also, this implies that one can only claim to have rights or freedom only in relation to others, not separate from them.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Bujo (1998:41) clearly argues for such dialogue when he writes: "On one hand, the procedure of palaver could work towards a more reflected reasoning, without abandoning its sage-oriented basis and its priority of humanness. On the other hand, the ethics of discourse will reduce its overemphasis on rationality in favour of humanness, in order to give the person as a person a privileged position."

<sup>52</sup> On this basis, Bujo (2010:87) insightfully highlights the difference between Western and African culture in how the right to property, for example, is understood: in the former, it means private ownership of property while in the latter it means community ownership. As Bujo (2010:87-88) further points, the communal understanding of right to property has implication on how poverty is defined in African contexts: "true poverty consists in having no human relations" rather than just lack of material

The African traditional ethic also reduces the risk of abstraction from the concrete life of the people thereby showing not only the communal dimension but also the humanness of ethical choices. In this, the individual moral choices are justified so long as they contribute to the common good rather on the basis of mere individual rationality. Life and community solidarity or healthy relationships is what defines the common good and is thus the main motivation for moral actions. In this sense, as Bujo (2003:29) posits, rationality as understood in Western categories is not rejected but is recognised to be limited in accounting for every aspect of morality. Bujo (2003:29) asserts: “Black African rationality is much inclusive. In the process of establishing norms for ethical moral conduct, it admits the contribution of that which cannot be justified in terms of reason. This is because it wishes to consider the human being holistically – and the mystery that surrounds the human person cannot be grasped by reason alone.” This emphasises that in the African worldview, reason is not merely a scientific capacity for individualistic thinking but includes, and most importantly, a sapiential capacity for abundant life in relationship with others. It is on this basis that the community rather than reason becomes “the highest authority” for moral decisions (Mbiti, 1998:201).

The few positive elements outlined above show how African morality, if well appropriated, is enriching to Christian ecclesial ethics. Although this will be discussed at length in the next chapter, these elements justify the great need to recover the lost sense of communal life and relationships that continue to face serious threats in the modern African communities, the church inclusive. Tanye (2010:88) attributes this problem to Western Christianity which promulgates conversion that not only forces change of one’s traditional culture but is also understood in individualistic terms.<sup>53</sup> Inadvertently, this lack of a strong sense of community and sodality has implications on how various groups of people are treated in the church. It is in this light that Mercy Oduyoye (2001:27-28), one of the prominent African feminist theologians, laments against oppression of women in the church, which as she contends, is majorly caused not by individualism tendencies of Western Christianity and the patriarchal cultures of the Bible but also the patriarchal cultures of African societies. Although the problem of gender inequality is not solely caused by these factors, Oduyoye’s lament cannot

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wealth as understood in the western context. Clearly, this points to the need for comprehensive approaches to poverty eradication in Africa.

<sup>53</sup> According to Tanye (2010:82-83), other factors that have negative influence on African communalism include modern forms of education through which the individual is separated from family for a long time thereby losing their communal interconnectedness, the challenge of urbanisation which forces people to move from their indigenous communities to urban areas, economic pressures which encourage selfishness through private ownership of property at the expense of the community, and the impact of globalization and western media which promote individualism rather than communalism. Maina (2008:193) concurs with Tanye when he attributes the problem of individualism among Africans to the influence of “western education and culture”.

be dismissed.

It is against challenges as above that Bujo (2003:190), for example, proposes what he calls an “ecclesial palaver” - a model through which everyone participate fully in the life of the church and most importantly in ethical deliberation. This underpins that all believers in the community of the church are regarded as equal by virtue of their one faith in Christ and as they all live under the guidance of the Holy Spirit (cf. Bujo, 1998:80-81). The palaver also extends to include dialogue between local churches and between the African church and the western and other non-African churches.

Similarly, Tanye (2010:3) argues for “church-as-family of God” model as a critical way of contextualising the Christian faith in the African context where familial community is seen as the paradigm for moral life. According to Tanye (2010:7), using the imagery of community is key to “evolving an authentic Christianity in which Africans would not only be at home in their Christian faith, but would also use it effectively to build all-encompassing human solidarity and communion, where peace and peaceful coexistence are not only a dream, but also a reality.” With this, the cultural or ethnic identities are not necessarily erased but are radically transformed in the light of the new identity in Christ and the ethical obligation that redemption brings on the people.

Oduyoye (2001:79-80) also makes a similar proposal for communal ecclesiology whereby all people including women are treated equally in all aspects of church life including moral reflection and praxis. “In the community of the Church, women should take part in defining and cultivating the ethos in which all will thrive as God wills us to do” (Oduyoye, 2001:87). As Oduyoye (2001:11) proposes, a key step in achieving such an ecclesiology is by using “cultural hermeneutic”; this “enables women to view the Bible through African eyes and distinguish and extract from it what is liberating”. Within from a South African Pentecostal context, another feminist scholar Madipoane Masenya (2005:51-55) expresses similar view when she strongly contends that the Bible should be used as tool of liberation rather than oppression for women. This way of reading the Bible fosters a good understanding of women’s struggles which leads to their total acceptance in the church and the wider society.

Evidently, Bujo, Tanye and Oduyoye are correct in pointing out that Sub-Saharan Africa greatly needs not only a soteriology but also an ecclesial ethic that is strongly and genuinely communal. However, the above proposals should not be accepted uncritically to avoid the error of underplaying the transformation that the gospel brings on African concept of community and solidarity and the African culture in general. Tanye (2010:254), for instance, makes this error when he insists on the centrality of ancestral veneration in his “ancestral ecclesiology”. Also, Oduyoye’s “cultural hermeneutic”, as mentioned above, risks the danger

of downplaying the authority and corrective nature of the scriptures in its attempt to make the gospel relevant to a particular group of people. In some respects, the approach places authority in the people (and thus the community) rather than the Bible itself. Also, the approach often tends to downgrade fruitful engagement with broader theological perspectives often deemed as oppressive.

Further to this, one need to point out also that the overemphasis on community in African worldview stills poses negative impact relating to the question of identity. As Bujo (2003:63) admits, there are continued forms of abuses against individuals or the minority in African cultures in the name of community. For instance, to define personhood as something that is attained or given by the community underplays the basic inalienable nature of the individual. Thus, while it is correct to stress that one realizes full personhood only in relation with others (the community), it is important to also maintain that the individual has autonomy that should be safeguarded if he is to remain a moral agent in the community. Maina (2008:201) makes a similar argument when he asserts that “it is imperative for any ethical theory to emphasise the inviolability of individual freedom and thereby individual human dignity” because no community “exist in the abstract, but through the individual persons who are constituent members”. As shall be discussed later in section 4:3:1, this is particularly true for a Christian community where corporate identity is possible when personal identities or diversities are properly safeguarded.

Also, to define morality only in relation to the end goal of serving the common good as is the case in traditional African ethics, risks reducing morality to mere duty towards the community rather than the conviction that a particular action or behaviour is right. It is not surprising therefore that Bujo (1998:49) strongly denies “a morality of virtues” for the reason that it leads to “particularism and relativism”. Mbiti (1990:208) makes a similar argument when he asserts that African ethics is an ethics of “conduct” and not “being” because it is concerned with the person’s acts so long as they contribute positively to community relationships and solidarity rather than mere personal virtues which tend to be individualistic. “It is not the act in itself which would be 'wrong' as such, but the relationships involved in the act: if relationships are not hurt or damaged, and if there is no discovery of breach of custom or regulation, then the act is not 'evil' or 'wicked' or 'bad'” (Mbiti, 1990:208).<sup>54</sup>

Here, one notices that both Bujo and Mbiti regard virtues to be incompatible with community

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<sup>54</sup> Of course, the emphasis on obligation towards the community does not mean that African ethics has no regard for character on the individuals as moral agents. Character is as important as the obligation itself, in fact, this is what makes the individual a person (*bunthu*) (Moyo, 2001:139-140).

ethics. But an ethical model that negates the place of individual virtues risks reducing morality to mere duty or laws thereby discarding importance of internalizing the meaning, value and motivations of any moral decision or behaviour and thus forming the virtuous character in the individuals as moral agents. Internalization of moral values or norms in people as moral agents demands a deliberate emphasis that while the individual cannot exist without community; the community exists because it is constituted of the individuals. In this way, the individual's autonomy and thus his identity is properly recognized even though this is done inseparably from the identity of the community. It is with a gospel-centred communal ethic that the importance of virtues on the part of the individuals is emphasized without losing its communal dimension.

Lastly, African concept of community is largely understood in tribal or ethnic categories although inclusion of the outsiders is presupposed on the basis of people's common humanness that has its origin in God. As discussed above, community is primarily defined kinship relationships before it is a "world community". One is expected to put his or her family or tribal relationships first before the rest of the people (Metz & Gaie, 2010:276). This stresses that one has duty to act or behave in a way that seeks to contribute first to the wellbeing of his or her immediate family or particular ethnic group before considering those from outside. If this is true, the claim by Bujo (2010:84) that "African communitarians know how to avoid ethnocentric isolation" is more an idealistic than the reality. Here, one is forced to concede with Tanye (2010:2-6), for example, that the problem of ethnicity is the cause of many divisions, rivalries, conflicts and violence that often lead to bloodletting in most African societies despite the celebrated strong emphasis on communal life.

Unfortunately, the church in most African communities is not spared from the problem of ethnic rivalries. It is in this light that Tanye is convinced that his "church-as-family" model of ecclesiology is central in addressing this problem. This ecclesiology not only fits well in the African context with its emphasis on communal relationships but also breaks down ethnic boundaries and creates new and intercultural relationships rooted in Christ (Tanye, 2010:3; 67). But one major weakness of Tanye's ecclesiology as well as other scholars including Bujo lies in the deficiency in the understanding of the religious dimension of community. As outlined in the next section, this compromises on the Christological thrust of Christian moral life.

### 3.6.2 Religious

As discussed above, relationships in the African community extends to the ancestors, the unborn and as well as God. In this way, every aspect of life has a strong religious dimension so that one acts or behaves in order to contribute to the life and solidarity of the community, both in its visible and invisible senses. Also, as highlighted already, central to the religious dimension of African cultures is the belief in ancestors who have powers to punish or reward moral behaviour; hence they are regarded as the custodians of the values and traditions of community. This means that the norms, values and motivations for moral decisions are inseparably embedded in the people religious beliefs.

This religious understanding of community has significant bearing on moral life in African cultures. Firstly, morality is understood holistically in that it touches on every aspect of life (physical and spiritual human life). Here actions are judged morally on the basis of how they either contribute or damage life and relationships in the community not only among the living but also in relation with the ancestors and ultimately God (the Supreme Being). Morality also touches on nature and this demands that people must live in harmony with nature. In fact, in some communities, natural places and sometimes natural objects are regarded as abodes of spirits which must never be destroyed (Mbiti, 1990:79). This, as Bujo (1998:21-22) points out, provides a rich basis for the need to care for the environment. Here, one observes that the African ethics is markedly different from liberal western ethics based on secularist philosophies that have minimal or no regard for religious meaning.

Secondly, the belief in ancestors shows the significance of traditions (the past) as source for moral values and principles. The people learn from the lessons and examples given by the senior members of the community including the ancestors. And it is when the people live according to the traditions of the community that the ancestors become benevolent towards them. This implies that one cannot engage in moral deliberation on contemporary issues without taking into consideration the past experiences of the people.

Lastly, the fact that religion forms the bedrock of morality provides a necessary stepping stone for contextualizing Christian ethics. And, as Mbiti (1990:267-268) insightfully argues, this demands that the church make deliberate and appropriate responses to daily moral needs of the African people thereby becoming contextually meaningful. Such an ecclesial ethic is characterized by a strong sense of “corporate identity, solidarity and mutual support” (Tanye, 2010:82). In this sense, the church not only provides a sense of belonging for the people but also ensures that its morality is not privatized as people seek to truly serve the community as the body of God.

However, the religious understanding of African traditional life is not without negative elements especially as it touches on moral life. Firstly, too much emphasis on the functions of the ancestors as mediators and moral guardians in African ethics obscures its theocentricity. Although God's existence and his general sovereign control remains unquestionable in the African belief system, his power and influence is strongly tied to the roles of the ancestors who police the daily moral life of the people. It is no wonder that the reference point for African ethics is the ancestors and the community rather than God (Bujo, 2010:80; Buys, 2008:9). Using an example of suicide as a moral act, Bujo (1998:74) affirms this centrality of ancestors in moral life when he states: "It is, therefore, not the thought of God which may prevent one from committing suicide, but rather the thought of the community which also includes the departed members of the family."

This understanding raises obvious difficulties when it comes to Christian ethics which is Christ-centred. Although Bujo (2003:132) contends that Jesus is "proto-ancestor"<sup>55</sup> thereby asserting his superiority over other ancestors; his ecclesial ethic undervalues the Christological thrust of Christian ethic. It is therefore less surprising that Bujo (2003:163-170) criticises certain practices in African cultures such as female circumcision, abusive forms of polygamy and any "an exaggerated understanding of community" not primarily on the basis of gospel convictions but rather because such practices "contradict the ideal of the ancestors, who aimed (and aim) by means of their statutes and traditions at the fullness of life". It is also on the same basis that Bujo (1998:34-35) argues against the church's stance on divorce on the basis that it is influenced by western thinking rather than the gospel itself which, as he contends, seeks to promote life and wider communal relationships.

The problem of overstating the importance of ancestors is apparent when what the demands of the community, as in most cases, means acting against one's moral choices based not only on careful conscientious and rational reflection but most importantly on gospel convictions. This sometimes involves questioning certain traditional practices or taboos that are not biblically justifiable. It is at this point that the African ethics clashes with Christian ethics whose communal dimension is Christ-centred. One good example through which such a clash surfaces frequently is on the meaning and purpose of sex and marriage. In most cases, sex before marriage is promoted among young boys and girls as a mark of manhood or womanhood. In fact, in some cultures, sexual intercourse is used as test for fertility before

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<sup>55</sup> The understanding of Jesus as "proto-ancestor" expresses two aspects of Jesus' identity and relevance to African believers: that Jesus is close to the people like the ancestors achieved through the incarnation (Ott, 2007:447-455) and that through his death and resurrection, Jesus supersedes the rest of the ancestors in that he redefines the traditional ethical framework of the people without necessarily changing it (Bujo, 2003:132).

entering into marriage (Bujo, 1998:100).

Although this is discussed in further detail in the next chapter, it suffices at this point to mention that with practices such as these in mind, one should accept with theological caution the suggestion by Bujo (1998:103) that the church must accept the traditional forms of marriage. Although this is critical in making the Christian faith meaningful and authentic in the African context, one must be careful to avoid the danger of underplaying the biblical teaching on sex and marriage and the whole gospel message.

Another point to raise is that the knowledge of God's existence as well as the power of the ancestors is primarily centred on the narratives or myths of the people rather than the teaching of the Bible. It is no wonder therefore that scholars such as Bujo argue for an African ecclesiology without any serious engagement with scripture (Bowers, 2012:4-5). The strong emphasis on cultural traditions and therefore ancestors in such constructions waters down the centrality of scripture and consequently its Christological thrust in the life and practice of the church. This points to the fact that, despite the similarities between African religious beliefs and the Christian faith especially in the emphasis on community, there exist significant dissimilarities or discontinuity between the two. And the danger of overemphasizing the similarities between the two is the risk to underplay the unique and transforming nature of the gospel and its ethical implications on African believers.

This stance does not, of course, mean rejecting that African cultures should be used also as source for morality in Christian ethics besides the Bible, a position that Moyo (2001) discusses at length to defend. As Moyo (2001:iv) contends, "ethical decision making in an African context can only be authentic if, among other things, African cultural values are taken seriously". This underscores that "the Protestant slogan *sola Scriptura* does not imply an exclusive interpretation and application of Scripture" in such a way that rejects values from other sources including African cultures (Moyo, 2001:3). Yet, it is important to insist that such an ethics can only be said to be Christian if it takes seriously the Bible as the primary source for its moral life and allow the gospel to transform culture. As already mentioned, this entails questioning cultural values in the light of the scriptures. Moyo's argument lacks this emphasis when he insists that African cultures must be regarded as authoritative as the Bible (2001:71).

Lastly, one observes that African religious belief and its ethical system has no eschatology; or if it has one, it is markedly different from the biblical teaching. As already pointed out, in the African worldview, morality springs from the obligation to attain full personhood which is achieved when one acts or behaves to enhance communal life and solidarity. Such acts are defined as good or moral and are rewarded by the community through means such as

respect, fertility or good health. And any behaviour or conduct that fails to achieve such goal is regarded as immoral or bad and is corrected through various forms of punishment by the community. But the punishments as well as rewards are remitted in the now or present life rather than any time in future. Mbiti (1990:205) expresses this though explicitly when he asserts: "...there is no belief that a person is punished in the hereafter for what he does wrong in this life. When punishment comes, it comes in the present life."

Of course, one should not misunderstand this to mean that African religious thought has no idea of life after death. Through death, the people join the spiritual world which exists simultaneously with the present world. This explains why the ancestors are integrally part of the community of the living. Yet, the very fact that life after death is understood to exist simultaneously with the present life means that life and consequently morality is futuristic only in a limited sense. In Christian teaching, it is the hope of life after death which provides the paradigm for moral life as believers awaits its ultimate perfection to be revealed at the return of Christ. In this sense, morality or holiness is progressive, yet to be consummated in the next life.

### **3.6.3. 'Perspectival'<sup>56</sup>**

Another key distinctive feature of the African ethics apparent from our discussion above is largely context-based. This "perspectival model", as Coetzee (2003:274) calls it, is premised on the understanding that although moral values and norms are only universal from a particular context in which moral values and norms are formulated, reflected and practised. Thus, for Coetzee (2003:174), the key elements of this model are "culture", "community", "tradition" and "self identity".<sup>57</sup> The fact that all the elements are dynamic and context-based stresses the particularity of African ethics.

The perspectival model also assumes that it is particular context or community which provides not only the language and meaning of moral ethos but also the space or avenues for the moral formation for the people. This begs that any universalistic approach to ethics that has no regard for the context risks the danger of creating an ethics that is abstract from the specific needs of the people thereby disparaging its universal validity – the very same premise that such a theory. Coetzee (2003:284) aptly states this fact when he writes "Non-

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<sup>56</sup> The term "perspectival" is borrowed from Coetzee (2003) and Ukpong (2002).

<sup>57</sup> The particularity of African ethics is clear when Coetzee (2003:275), for example, defines "traditions" as "historically extended socially embedded narrative about the systems of thought (moral, political, epistemological, etc.) and social practices of a specific community". This explains the differences between various communities not only in their traditions but also their culture.

contextualized accounts of moral agency alienate agents from their autonomy because it alienates them from the conditions that enable them to claim their lives as their own and to comprehend moral situations through their own self-understandings". African ethics seeks to redress this. And as Justin Ukpong (2002:20-21) insists, although on a different score, this implies that a meaningful way of interpreting the Bible is that which is done from the standpoint of the readers context; hence "readings that claim to be universal remain suspect, and are seen as attempt to universalise the particular".

With this, one can justifiably speak of Christian African ethic thereby emphasising Africa as the context for such a Christian moral life. This underscores the urgent need to draw from the rich values or traditions of particular cultures in order to contextualise the gospel thereby making it relevant and meaningful to the people. In the context of the Roman Catholic, as Bujo (2003:54) rightly contends, this means that the African church as a whole, not just the papacy, should engage in moral discourse, among other things. It is on the basis of the particularity of African ethics that African scholars such as Bujo, Magesa and Coetzee demand that there should be an appropriate dialogue between the African and western ethical models thereby allowing Africa to meaningfully contribute to the moral discourse globally. Although not writing specifically of biblical ethics, Ronald Nicholson (2008:4-5) takes a similar stance when he argues that the Africa ethical tradition needs to be taken seriously in the quest for a global ethic although not without careful scrutiny. As Nicholson (2008:6-7) observes, this takes into consideration the fact African cultures, just like any other cultures, are dynamic and that not all African cultural ethos or moral values can be accepted as ethical.

Yet, one is forced to concede that most African scholars including Bujo overstate the particularity of African ethics at the expense of its universality. This is particularly so in Christian ethics whereby morality is based on the countercultural nature of the gospel which reveals God's moral standards. Thus the argument, for instance, by Bujo (2003:52) that "Truth per se, independent of context, does not exist" risks the danger of denying the transcultural nature of Christian morality. While it remains unobjectionable that moral values and principles as well as moral choices in Christian ethics have meaning within a particular context or the community, one should not push this to imply that it is solely the context that determines the specific values and norms. If one is to take seriously Bujo's own claim of a "world community" (2003:114), one appreciates the critical importance of dialogue among various cultural groups globally thereby ensuring that morality is both contextual and universal.

Although Bujo (1998:52) admits that overemphasizing on cultural context leads to the

problem of “ethnocentric fallacy”, he goes further to commit the same fallacy when he denies that truth only exists in particular contexts.<sup>58</sup> Here Bujo risks underplaying the uniqueness or countercultural nature of the Christian faith. It is on this basis that in most African cultures, certain sexual practices are justified so long as such practices are deemed as serving the good of the particular community. Among the *Sena* in southern Malawi, for example, *kulowa kufa* is practised whereby a widow has sexual intercourse with another man for the purpose of cleansing death from the house. But one legitimate question begs to be answered: To what extent can one understand the contextual relevance of Christian morality without underplaying the uniqueness of the gospel? Answering this question is critical when one considers that it is the same gospel that demands that cultural identity and traditions, without being discarded, be transformed in the light of the new identity and life wrought through faith in Christ.

As explicated further in the next chapter, it when the question above is answered adequately in the light of the transforming and absolute nature of gospel that the dialogue that Bujo and other scholars demand between African and western ethical models is put in proper perspective. With this, the dialogue between African and western cultures is possible because both cultures, and any other cultures for that matter, seek to be transformed by the gospel and be obedience to it. The negative elements of both cultures are condemned or transformed while the positive elements are affirmed by the gospel. Using the gospel as the benchmark of such dialogue is also critical to avoid any tendencies to equate any culture with Christian faith. In sum, it is when any dialogue is governed by the gospel that cultures are transformed and are able to enrich each other thereby allowing formulation of an ethical model that is Christ-centeredness yet without being insensitive to the contextual differences of the people concerned.

### **3.7 Preliminary conclusion**

The African ethics as espoused in this chapter is clearly centred on communal life and solidarity understood anthropologically and religiously. In this, actions or behaviours are judged good or bad depending on whether or not they contribute to the life and relationships in the community which constitutes the living, the unborn, the ancestors as well as God. For African ethics, this means that the people ought to act or behave to maintain and enhance life and solidarity in the community both in its horizontal and vertical sense. In this regard,

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<sup>58</sup> Coetzee (2003:280) is also careful to avoid the same error when he points out that overemphasizing on the context would lead to what he describes as “cultural relativism of moral standards”.

the community both at the family and wider levels has an integral responsibility to provide values and norms as well as formation to its members through various forms of moral instructions.

The key positives and negative elements of such an ethic are outlined under the three major categories: communal, religious or holistic; and perspectival. It is here that Western ethical models must seek dialogue with African ethical model in search for an ethic that is both contextual and universal. Most importantly, the church as an ethical community must seek to be enriched by such rich values if it is to be meaningful and relevant to believers in Africa and beyond. Yet the African ethic is not without negative elements particularly when assessed from vantage point of the gospel. The next chapter explicates how the gospel engages African morality and proceeds to espouse a Christian theological ethic that benefits from the rich values of community and solidarity thereby making it meaningful for African Christians yet without compromising on its distinctive nature.

## Chapter 4

# A BIBLICAL-THEOLOGICAL ENGAGEMENT WITH THE AFRICAN ETHICS: A PROPOSAL FOR A BIBLICAL AFRICAN CHRISTIAN ETHIC

### Introduction

Having discussed at length the biblical-theological basis and distinctive features of ecclesial ethics in chapter 2 and the key features of Sub-Saharan black African ethics in chapter 3, this chapter presents a critical engagement of the two. This engagement aims at identifying key points which are then used in formulating a habitable biblical evangelical ethic relevant in the context of Sub-Sahara Africa. The chapter, firstly, explores in further detail how ecclesial Christian ethic find fertile grounds in African cultures and is thus enriched by the values of community and solidarity. Secondly, it examines how the gospel critically challenges the negative elements of the cultural values under the rubric of community and solidarity. Thirdly, the chapter espouses a Christian theological ethic that benefits from the rich values of community and solidarity but without compromising its distinctiveness. Lastly, the chapter draws a conclusion. The chapter, however, begins with a brief discussion on various approaches of how the gospel relates to culture thereby justifying the approach used herein to formulate an ethic which is not just African but is genuinely Christian, biblical, and evangelical.

### 4.1 The “Christ-Culture” relationship for Christian ethics

#### 4.1.1 A methodological problem

For any discussion that touches on culture, one is forced to spell out how one understands how Christ or the gospel relates to culture in a specific context. In the case of Africa, the question is intertwined with the question of identity necessitated by what is mostly regarded a colonization of indigenous cultures by the Western cultures and theologies (Bujo, 1992:10-11; Magesa; 1997, 11-13). As a result, according to Kwame Bediako (1992:xvii), this “not only prevented sufficient understanding of African religious tradition, but also led to a theological misapprehension of the nature of the Christian Gospel itself”. It is for this reason that scholars continue to make calls for the need to contextualize the gospel or what

Maluleke (2010:372) describes as the “Africanisation of Christianity”.<sup>59</sup> The leading questions governing this discussion are: How much continuity or similarities and discontinuity or differences ought to be allowed between the gospel and cultures particularly with regard to moral values and norms? How does the gospel effectively engage specific cultures but without underplaying the universality of the gospel and, more specifically for our purpose, the nature of Christian morality? Answering these questions is critical in ensuring a well guided contribution to the ongoing discourse on the subject which has witnessed use of different approaches by different scholars.

Leading the discussion in the last half a century is H. Richard Niebuhr. In his landmark book *Christ and culture*, Niebuhr insightfully analyses five “typical Christian answers” to the question of how Christ or the gospel relates to culture or civilization - a problem he describes as “an enduring one through all the Christian centuries” (1951:2). For Niebuhr, this is the case because this problem lies at the centre of the tension between Jesus and the Jewish culture, Paul and the Judaizers and Hellenistic cultures and the tension during the major epochs of the Christian faith including the reformation. It is the same problem that causes tension today between the church and societies and among Christians both at communal and individual levels (1951:2-11). As Niebuhr (1951:2) correctly notes, the tension is particularly evident when it comes to making moral decisions for believers.<sup>60</sup>

The first approach is “Christ against culture”. This stresses Christ’s radical transformative stance in establishing an alternative culture for Christians. As Niebuhr (1951:45) states clearly, this approach “uncompromisingly affirms the sole authority of Christ over the Christian and resolutely rejects culture’s claims of loyalty”. The second approach is “Christ of culture”. This emphasizes that Christ does not condemn culture but rather affirms it through his redemptive mission in the world (1951:83-84). The third approach is “Christ above culture”. In this, while Christ does not condemn culture he demands that all cultures be subjected to his authority, hence “Christ is discontinuous as well as continuous with social life and its culture” (1951:42-43). The fourth approach is “Christ and culture - a paradox”. This accepts both the “*polarity* and *tension* of Christ and culture” in Christian life and in

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<sup>59</sup> According to Maluleke (2010:372-373), this is what leads to “African Christianity” which must be differentiated from “Christianity in Africa”: the latter refers to “the impact of Christianity on African and maybe of Africa on Christianity also” while the former “go further and suggests that a peculiarly African form of Christianity has emerged and that such a form is both observable and describe-ble as such”.

<sup>60</sup> Elsewhere, Niebuhr (1951:29) explains the tension as arising out of the paradox of what it means to be a Christian in any given cultural contexts in that Christians “are forever being challenged to abandon all things for the sake of God; and forever being sent back into the world to teach and practice all the things that have been commanded them”.

anticipation of the final transformation at the end of the age (1951:43). The last approach is “Christ as transformer of cultures”. This underscores that while Christ affirms cultures as evident through the incarnation, he seeks to transform them to the glory of God. “Christ is seen as the converter of man in his culture and society, not apart from these, for there is no nature without culture and no turning of men from self and idols to God save in society.” (Niebuhr, 1951:43)

Following from the above analysis, Niebuhr (1951:234-255) argues that a good approach is that which is not dogmatic but acknowledges three key facts: first, that the faith and moral values for believers are “relative” because they are shaped by the people and historical contexts they are in; second, they are “existential” in that it is the believers who make concrete decisions as they practice their faith, understanding and values in their contexts; third (and lastly), they are rationalistic because faith in Christ, understanding of cultures and moral practice rely on “reason”. But as Carson (2008:37-43) observes, Niebuhr’s proposal is problematic not only because it fails to adequately account for “the great turning points of redemptive history”, which includes acknowledging the effect of the fall on all cultures, but also because the proposal advocates for a postmodernistic approach which underplays the absoluteness of the scriptures. The net effect of this understanding on ethics is that morality is largely shaped by culture rather than the gospel. It is against this backdrop that Carson (2008:43) proposes the urgent need for “a more comprehensive, a canon-stipulated vision” of how the gospel should relate to cultures. This aims to safeguard both the authority and universality of the gospel regardless of cultural differences.

#### **4.1.2 Towards a methodological alternative**

Thus while the emphasizing positive relationship between Christ and culture based on the fact that God’s redemption can only be revealed and expressed culturally, Carson (2008:55-63) adopts a modified “Christ against culture” approach which insists that the gospel stands in continuous tension against cultures which it seeks to redeem and transform in anticipation for the perfect eschatological world. This is what Carson (2008:143) means when he states:

This means that Christian communities honestly seeking to live under the Word of God will inevitably generate cultures that, to say the least, will in some sense counter or confront the values of the dominant culture.

For Christian African ethics, a good approach is therefore that which is premised in the redeeming work of Christ and God’s overall plan for the world. With this, the positive moral values of culture are affirmed while its negative values are questioned, transformed or condemned totally. In his argument for a multi-disciplined inculturation of Christian ethics,

Catholic ethicist Simon K. Appiah (2012:256-257) makes this point clear when he states: “The culture concerned is challenged and renewed by the values of the gospel, while the proclamation of the gospel translates into and is enhanced by the cultural values of the people concerned.” Building on Wolfhart Pannenberg’s work, Appiah (2012:255-256) argues that such process demands use of “anthropology and other social and human sciences” in order to make Christian ethics relevant to Christians in their specific context. It is from the same point as Appiah that Bujo (1990:43-45) argues that not only is Christian morality expressed relevantly as a result of anthropological studies but also its relevance is tested by such studies which, just like Christian morality, aim to promote “human dignity”.<sup>61</sup>

Advantageously, this understanding prevents the danger of placing a wedge between the gospel and cultures thereby hampering meaningful inculturation of Christian ethics. The gospel is never lived in a cultural vacuum hence the need to seek ways that make it meaningful to the people. To this end, Appiah’s concluding warning cannot be ignored: “In the study of African Christian ethics, one is likely to build on sand if one applies a method that is not in touch with concrete expressions of African world-views.” (2012:277). Similarly, Paul Fiddes (2012:14) shows the close relationship between ecclesiology and human sciences, ethnography in particular, and contends that any serious understanding of the former demands a good engagement with the latter. For Fiddes (2012:18-20), the resources from such studies are important in order to make the Christian faith meaningful to people in different cultural contexts; hence the plea that “we must take the contextualization of theology more seriously”.

However, it remains important to stress that the standard for this exercise is not culture (whether African or not) or “the traditions of Christianity” but rather the gospel itself as revealed in the scriptures and through the transforming work of the Holy Spirit (Odozor, 2008:601). As Webster (2012:200-201) convincingly stresses, although church shares similarities with other non-Christian communities, church is a unique society grounded in the

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<sup>61</sup> According to Bujo (1990:43-45), the guiding principle for Christian moral life is human dignity which is rooted in the fact that all people are created in the image of God. This means that in order to comprehensively understand man and the complexity of his moral problems, it is critical that one uses a multi-disciplined studies which also include not only anthropology but also other disciplines including psychology, politics and economics (1990:106-107). Yet, even with this, one should be careful to pinpoint the limitations in understanding human dignity as defined by these studies. For instance, as Nico Vorster (2007:320) correctly argues in the case of South Africa where abortion is legalized, human dignity has unique characteristics when defined from “a Reformed-Christian perspective” and not just a socio or political point of view which “relies mainly on the classical, liberal view of human dignity”. The unique characteristics of the Christian or scripture-based understanding of human dignity spring from the redemptive story of creation and salvation in Christ (Vorster, 2007:326). It is from the same perspective that, for example, right to life is understood thereby making abortion unethical (Vorster, 2007:336-337).

unique redemptive revelation acts of God. Webster (2012:204) makes this explicit when he asserts: “The historical actuality of the church is determined by its being as the *coetus electorum et vocatorum*, that is, as that society by the election and summons of the triune God.” This shows that church cannot be explained exhaustively by anthropological studies because they are only concerned with the social aspect of church rather than its spiritual nature. Although the two aspects are inseparable; yet, they are distinct. This is the point that Bonhoeffer (1998:127) makes when he asserts that “the church is conceivable only in the sphere of reality established by God”.

Based on the above understanding, one can critique Appiah’s assertion, for example, that the gospel has impact on African Christians only when expressed in forms that are “culturally recognizable for them” (2012:268). This is only true in so far as the uniqueness of the gospel is not underplayed in attempt to make it suitable. The same criticism can justifiably be levelled against Bujo (1992:11-120) whose guiding question in formulating African theology is problematic: “In which way can Jesus Christ be an African among the Africans according to their own religious experience?” The question wrongly presupposes that culture, rather than the transforming gospel of Christ, is the starting point for theologizing in the African context. As moral theologian Paulinus Odozor (2008:607-609) argues, there is need to safeguard the uniqueness and universality of gospel-centered moral standards based not only on “natural law” but also on the “searchlight of divine revelation” if one is to formulate an ethics that is truly African and Christian. This is key in ensuring that such theologies are not only sensitive to the cultures but also, and above everything else, are sensitive to the gospel itself. This also ensures that the social or anthropological insights mentioned above are not used to hinder the gospel.

An appropriate approach or model on Christ-culture relation relevant for ethical reflection and practice is therefore that which is centrally premised on God’s redemption revealed through Christ and the Holy Spirit. This approach (influenced by Carson’s approach as above)<sup>62</sup> presupposes five key underpinnings grounded within the matrix of God’s acts of redemption for people. Firstly, that culture which is a human product is corrupted by sin and stands in dire need for God’s redemption. Secondly, that the gospel of Christ is powerful to

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<sup>62</sup> Thus for Carson (2008:49): “Christians cannot long think about Christ and culture without reflecting on the fact that this is God’s world, but that this side of the fall this world is simultaneously resplendent with glory and awash in shame, and that every expression of human culture simultaneously discloses that we were made in God’s image and shows itself to be mis-shaped and corroded by human rebellion against God.” It is with this that all cultures therefore need God’s redemption as revealed in Christ. This is similar to the emphasis made by David VanDruden (2010:12) when he states: “A faithful biblical theology of Christianity and culture depends upon a proper view of creation, providence, the image of God, sin, the work of Christ, salvation, the church, and eschatology.”

judge, redeem and transform culture for the obedience of God. Thirdly, that the transcendent gospel is revealed and finds concrete expression in human cultures but without losing its efficacy and distinctiveness. Fourthly, that some cultural elements, only when sieved through the gospel, are essential to enrich the Christian faith thereby enabling believers to practice their faith meaningfully and relevantly. Lastly, that the Christ as revealed in scriptures is the final authority in defining morality and guiding believers to live accordingly regardless of cultures.

Such an approach clearly promulgates an engagement which begins with and is shaped by the story of God's action of redemption in Christ without confusing the two. Even as Bujo (1990:29-30) admits – though not adequately – it is through this unique event that all moral values or norms of natural law “receives new orientation and new meaning”. But more than this, as Oliver O'Donovan puts it correctly, Christian morality is radically new because it is “the morality of rebirth” (2007:172). While there is some continuity between the gospel and cultural values, Christian morality has a totally new grounding rooted in God's distinctive acts of redemption. Any stance, therefore, that tends to equate culture and the gospel, prioritize culture over the gospel or confuse the two insulates the gospel from touching the core of African cultural beliefs and values. Unfortunately, this amounts to what Byang Kato (1975:174) describes correctly as “idolatry”.

## **4.2 A Christian ethic in an African context: an appraisal of African ethical values**

Using the model espoused above demands that one not only appreciates the positive values but also critiques the negative elements of Sub-Saharan African cultures as they relate specifically to moral practice. As this research propounds, this is critical in formulating an ethic that is not only African (important as it is) but is also evangelically biblical and therefore applicable to other cultural contexts. The discussion falls into three major categories: communal, religious and perspectival. These categories (as used at the end of the last chapter) provide key points of engagement between biblical Christian ethics and that of traditional African cultures.

Thus each category begins by showing how the Christian morality is compatible with elements of traditional African cultures before turning to show how such compatibility breaks down when the distinctiveness of the gospel is understood appropriately. In this way, due emphasis is given to the countercultural and transformative nature of any ethic that claims to be Christian and biblical. Just as in the preceding sections, the ensuing discussion makes reference to the Sub-Saharan African black cultures in general but, wherever necessary,

specific examples are given to ascertain a point. In the last section, marriage is used as an example in some detail in order to show how its meaning and purpose changes when understood within the new framework of communal ethics.

### **4.3 Communal: the ecclesiality of a biblical Christian ethic**

As most scholars have laboured to argue, the central feature of Sub-Saharan African cultures is the strong sense of communal life and solidarity (Bujo, 2003:22; Mbiti, 1990: 106; Tanye, 2010:15; Coetzee, 2003:276-277). Expressed strongly in the philosophical and anthropological concept of *ubuntu*, every dimension of life is communitarian in nature. This underscores that life has meaning and purpose only as it is lived in relation with others. It is this communality that inevitably forms and shapes the people's identity both at individual and group levels. To this end, morality is strongly tied to the question of identity and meaning and purpose of life but within the context of community. Bound with family or kinship ties, the people in African cultures are not mere individuals but people with shared beliefs, moral ethos, values and norms.

From the above brief recap, one observes several points of contact between the gospel and African cultures that must be considered in order to espouse a biblical Christian 'African' ethic. This is particularly apparent when one understands that biblical Christian ethic which springs from the reality of church as a covenant people of God is also strongly communal in its orientation. This is what scholars such as Horton (2008:160-170, 2007:6-7), Volf (1998:7) and Grenz (1994:23-24), among others, have correctly stressed. But one must beyond just looking at the similarities between Christian ethics and African ethic to analysing the deep meaning and functions of their values and practices. This is driven by the strong conviction that a meaningful and biblical model of engaging culture demands moving beyond the surface similarities of cultural value of community to their underlying meanings and functions. It is this distinction that most African scholars tend to underplay in their quest for authentic contextual Christianity.

But, as Paul Bowers (2013:7-8) has observed recently, the problem in many African theologies is that the quest for authenticity is defined primarily in terms of cultural relevance rather than its distinctiveness rooted in the gospel message. It is no wonder that such reflections have only been concerned to answer what he considers as "only half of its foundational question on African Christian identity" which is: "[H]ow may African Christianity become ever more authentically Christian?" (2013:8). It is here that Bowers (2013:8) makes an important point when he suggests the urgent need to change this question and instead ask the most important part of the question: "[H]ow may African Christianity become ever

more authentically Christian?” The latter question is critical in underscoring the priority of the gospel and maintaining its distinctiveness of the Christian faith and its ethical imperatives as it comes into contact with any cultures. In fact, the very need for inculturation presupposes rightly this fundamental distinction of the gospel from cultures. Thus we ask: What are the fundamental differences between African cultures and theological understanding on the concept of community and its connection to ethics? Most importantly, how do such differences serve in making Christian ethics ‘authentic’ biblically or theologically and not just culturally? These questions are answered with a special focus on key aspects of ethical reflection and praxis: identity, meaning and goal of morality, source of moral ethos, values and norms, and dimension of the nature of community.

### **4.3.1 The basis of personal and corporate identity**

The question of Christian identity both at the personal and corporate levels is increasingly acknowledged as foundational to modern theological discourses in every cultural context. For example, Bediako (1992:xv) asserts that “the development of theological concern and the formulation of theological questions are closely linked as an inevitable by-product of a process of Christian self-definition”. Thus for Bediako (1992:426), “the question of identity constitutes a ‘hermeneutical key’” which shapes the form of Christian theology within a given particular cultural context, modern Africa inclusive. Similarly, Bujo (1992:11) regards the question of identity as the guiding question for African theology; hence he states: “It is still pertinent today to ask ourselves who Christ is and what impact he has on the African who does not need to change culture in order to be called a child of God.”

But only to the extent that this question is answered biblically or to use Bediako’s words, “without injury to the integrity of the Gospel” (1992:xi),<sup>63</sup> one is forced to realise and explicate how identity relates to theology or vice versa. And most importantly, as this research underscores, one must explicate the meaning of identity as it relates to ethics. As van der Watt (2006:630) affirms, “Christian ethics can never be separated from Christian identity it aims to be authentically Christian”. Based on this, it is expedient to answer a twofold question: What does it mean to be a Christian and how does this shape one’s moral life?

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<sup>63</sup> Although Bediako (1992:436-437) is correct in pointing out that most African theologies overlook the negative elements of the traditional past, he needs to be critiqued for arguing that “the African religious heritage” is important in an “ontological” way in the formation of what he calls the “African Christian identity”. This understanding underplays the distinctive nature of Christian identity supremely rooted in Christ and not in past cultural heritage. This is what Keith Ferdinando (2007:139) stresses when he points out that for the believers “finding their identity in Christ in fact moves the orientation of their identity away from the past toward the future”.

Here it is asserted that a sound biblical teaching of creation and, more particularly, the story of redemption in Christ reveals that personal identity is strongly tied to the communal relationships with God (vertically) and with fellow man (horizontally); hence Christian morality is a way of living as a community.

Though creation, man (both male and female) is made in God's image and is placed into an intimate relationship not only with God but also with fellow man and the rest of creation (Gen 1:26-27; 2:18-24). Here *imago Dei*, which is from two closely related Hebrew words *selem* and *demut* meaning "image" and "likeness" respectively (Smail, 2005:45), becomes an integral concept in explicating theologically and anthropologically the nature and moral life of human beings. But the meaning and implications of the *Imago Dei* on ethics remains debatable among different scholars and the debate touches considerably on the effect that sin has on human nature (Sands, 2010:28; Vorster, 2011:3).

Paul Sands (2010:28-32) helpfully summarizes what he considers as three major views on the meaning and implications of *imago Dei*: "substantialist," "relational," and "functionalist" or "vocational". As Sands (2010:31-37) understands, the first view sees *imago Dei* as an ontological or inherent reality based on rationality given by God to all human beings. The second view stresses that human beings are in God's image in that they are created to be in relation with God and one another. The last view, which Sands himself propounds, locates the meaning of *imago Dei* in the "divine call to a task that confers dignity and imposes obligation" on human beings thereby emphasizing their moral responsibility towards God.

But without the need to entirely reject one view over the other as Sands does with the first two<sup>64</sup> and Vorster largely with the first view,<sup>65</sup> a comprehensive theological understanding of *imago Dei* needs to have elements of all the three views *mutatis mutandis*. Thus, in the first place, this means that each person has intrinsic and ontological dignity that is divinely given regardless of any differences such as gender, ethnicity or any social status. In fact, as Volf (1998:184-185) affirms, creation *Imago Dei* signifies the very ontological essence of what it

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<sup>64</sup> Sands (2010:32-36), for example, critiques the "substantialist" views mainly for failing to adequately account for the effect of sin on all human beings although the *Imago Dei* cannot be said to have been entirely damaged. He also critiques the "relational" view because, among other things, it assumes too much relationality with regard to the nature of God and between man and female as presented in what is commonly called the 'Priestly narratives' in Genesis and therefore not biblically warranted.

<sup>65</sup> Hence Vorster (2011:4) asserts: "If the *imago Dei* is essentially understood as description of the inherent characteristics of the human being, as postulated by Irenaeus, Philo and Gregorius, the concept is not of central importance in the old Testament. If it is a relational concept that indicates the nature of the human being's relationship with God, or if it indicates the way in which human beings represents God on earth, it can be stated with confidence that the *imago Dei* is of crucial importance for a theological anthropology." Vorster's understanding that *imago Dei* refers primarily to the communal relationship between God and the people and among the people and its consequent

means to be human beings anthropologically whether one is a Christian or not. This is even so although the image of God in all human beings is unquestionably distorted by sin (Vorster, 2011:13-16).

Yet, at the same time, the very nature of human autonomy presupposes an inextricable relationship not only with God but also with other human beings who are equally created in his image. With this, the individual can only claim autonomy or freedoms and consequently to be proper persons within the context of a community as it relates appropriately to the triune God (Vorster, 2011:11-12; 2007:325-326; Schwöbel, 2006:46-51; Smail, 2005:56). Nico Vorster (2007:325) expresses succinctly this communal understanding when he defines *Imago Dei* fundamentally as “a relational concept that expresses the human’s creational status in relation to God, his fellow man, and the nonhuman creation”. This pointedly shows that personal identity, at least in the case of believers, is inseparably related to the identity of the group to which the individual belongs, the church.

But as Sands contends, *Imago Dei* underscores the “task” and “obligation” that human beings have as they relate to God and each other. In this way, relationality and way of life are weaved together so that the one does not exist without the other. Thus as Sands (2010:37-41) posits, the principal task for man lies in having dominion or rule over all creation while the principal obligation is to be steward of the same. For Sands, and persuasively so, this is what provides the nexus for appropriating the rich ethical as well as missional implications of *imago Dei* such as equality between men and women, social justice towards the needy, nonviolence, and preservation of human life and the environment. Vorster (2011:12-13) makes a similar emphasis when he attaches “duty” on the part of human beings to God-man-creation communal relationship. The very nature of man’s relationship with God and other people places a divine mandated obligation on the people to live in a specific way ethically. But the appropriate framework to understand the meaning and ethical implications of *Imago Dei* is God’s acts of redemption revealed in Christ and the Spirit. This is key to accounting for the limitation of human abilities to attain what Sands (2010:39) terms “the actualization of human” due to the distortion on *imago Dei* caused by sin. Such ‘actualization’ is possible only through the salvific revelation and empowerment of God in whose image man seeks and longs to attain.

Thus, climactically, it is through Christ who is the perfect image of God (Col. 1:5; 2 Cor. 4:4; Jn. 1:18) that people are, to use the words of Wright (2010:12) “restored as genuine image-bearers” thereby becoming a new creation that truly reflects God in identity and moral responsibility. Through his representative perfect relationship God, obedience, and sacrificial death and resurrection, Christ not only achieves what man fail to but also deals with the

problem of sin thereby restoring the distortion on *imago Dei*. Here, through Christ, God reverses the problem of the fall in that he re-creates people in a new image and re-establishes them into a proper community. Stressing the functional meaning of *Imago Dei*, Sands (2010:38-39) explains the Christological as well as the eschatological basis for restored image in all believers in that “Christ imaged God by fulfilling the human vocation” and thus, as he explains further: “Christians image God as they are progressively conformed to the image of Christ.”

But here again, the question of identity understood within the framework of God’s redemption is communal rather than individualistic. In his discussion which focuses on how *imago Dei* relates to human dignity, Christoph Schwöbel (2006:46) describes this redemptive framework as “the Christian understanding of reality”. As Schwöbel (2006:49-56) argues, in this ‘reality’, a relational God creates human beings in his image and redeems them into a renewed communal relationship with him and the rest of creation. More directly, and convincingly so, Shutte (1999:48-59) affirms that church is a community that can be expressed well through the African concept of *Ubuntu*. While God is concerned with salvation of man individually (hence the need for personal responses through faith), his primary program is to establish a community of his special people who are recreated and transformed to live accordingly. It is for this reason that Horton (2007:6-7) and Volf (1998:2-6), as already cited, reject the individualistic understanding of salvation prevalent in many Western evangelical theologies and thus make a case for a communal or ecclesiology. But as Shutte (1999:43-50) emphasizes, here *Ubuntu* does not only expresses the relationship among believers but also, and most importantly, the salvific relationship of believers with God in Christ. This emphasizes that it is only within the space provided by others through faith in Christ that personal identities and human dignity flourish.

And even with his strong emphasis on ethics as a virtue most developed as part of personal character, Wright (2010:125) insists that Christian ethics is a communal rather than an individualistic venture; hence he regards community as “the primary context” for expressing all values including love and forgiveness. Therefore through salvation achieved through faith in Christ, personal identity is radically reconfigured so that one is not only a new creation but is also a new creation with others. In this way, not only does the believer belong to a community of God’s people but also he or she is called to act ethically towards its common good as revealed in the scriptures. As Volf (1998:186) suggests, this three-level relationship between God-man-environment provides a helpful category in explicating the meaning of Christian morality:

... if we assume that God's relation to human beings makes possible their capacity to engage in face-to-face encounter with God and with their environment, then salvation must consist in human beings living in such a way that this encounter is not one of opposition to God, their fellow human beings, and the rest of creation, but rather one of standing in an affirming communion with them.

Here one observes clearly that the core of identity in both the Christian teaching and Sub-Saharan culture is strongly tied to the concept of community and solidarity. This is to say that the individual finds his or her personal identity only in relation to others hence the identity of the group to which he or she belongs.

At the heart of Christian identity both at individual and communal levels, as Horton (2007:129-130) and Webster (2005a:94-95) correctly argue, is God's act of redemption revealed in the atoning work of Christ (the Word) and the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. Thus the communal relationship and life within the Trinity is the basis for the believer's communal relationship with God and with one another (Volf, 1998:191). And as emphasized already, the former is determinative of the latter in the sense that church mirrors the Trinity only because it has life given by and lived for God. In fact, as Horton (2007:181-185) asserts, this is the basis for what it means to call church *koinonia* which is possible only through "union with Christ. The individual Christian finds his or her personal identity in Christ but without being individualistic because he or she does so in the company of others, the church. It is only when understood from these vintage points that Christian identity can truly be said to be communal.

The understanding of church as *koinonia* differs significantly from the traditional African understanding of community. In the latter, among other things, identity is primarily understood in cultural categories and personal identity is often usurped by group identity. This requires a comprehensive and biblical understanding of identity whereby the believer is a Christian, a child of God or an heir but together with other believers rather than individually (Jn. 1:12; Rm. 8:15-18). And with this, the Christian identity is fundamentally understood from the paradigmatic category of salvation in Christ rather than culture. In this light, John Mbiti (cited in Bediako, 1992:441) makes an insightful comment towards the attempt to answer the question of how cultural identity relates to Christian identity in the context of Africa:

Cultural identities are temporary, serving to yield us as Christians to the fullness of our identity with Christ. Paradoxically, culture snatches us away from Christ, it denies that we are His; yet when it is best understood, at its meeting with Christianity, culture drives us to Christ and surrenders us to Him, affirming us to be permanently, totally

and unconditionally His own.

Although it is not always the case that our cultures help us live more Christianly, depending of course on what the phrase “best understood” may itself be best understood, an important point that Mbiti makes here is the fact that our identities in Christ are not conditioned by culture or any other factors. In fact, the latter stands under the authority of the former. And if Christian identity is defined primarily on the basis of God’s act of redemption as argued above, it correctly follows that all moral actions ought to be judged on the same basis. This takes us to our next point in which we explicate how salvation in Christ provides the appropriate framework for ethical life within the context of church as an ethical community.

#### **4.3.2 Meaning and goal of morality**

Second, is the meaning and goal of morality. In Christian ecclesial ethics, community is not only a platform for moral self-realization but also provides the referential framework for moral decisions. Actions are judged moral or immoral, right or wrong based on how such actions contribute towards enhancing relationships and solidarity in the community. As Paul explains, the believers ought to conduct themselves in ways that aim at “building up the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:12-14). This entails that the believers always act “with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love,” and thereby “eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:2-3). Thus for Paul there is no room for divisions in a true Christian community which is led by the Spirit; hence he asks the Corinthian community: “For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way?” (1 Cor. 3:3).

In this regard, the believers ought to act in a way that not only aim to maintain the unity of the community but also demonstrates concretely its self-constituting ethical character. Thus, as W.C. Reuschling (2008:10-12) argues, Christian morality is comprehensive in its nature and shape to be explicated exclusively using the classical ethical models of “deontology,” (focusing on duty), “teleological,” (focusing on common good) and “virtue” (focusing on personal character). This is because Christian morality is centred on living in an obedient relationship with God uniquely revealed in Christ and the scripture (Reuschling, 2008:11-12).

Understood with the rich values of community and solidarity of African cultures in mind, the above emphasis on what true morality is provides a fresh challenge to most Christian communities today. Christian morality is living a life characterized by love for neighbour humility and forgiveness in obedience to God. Thus as Paul further asserts, anyone who loves others ought not to speak lies, steal, talk carelessly, slander but rather should always speak truth, forgive others quickly and help the needy (Eph. 4:25-31). Similarly, Paul

considers eating meat offered to idols not only as immoral but as “sin against Christ” if it is a stumbling block to the weaker brother, although the practice itself maybe amoral (1 Cor. 8:1ff).

Addressing a similar problem in Christian communities in Rome, Paul urges “the strong” believers not to be judgmental with regard to food choices; rather they should be considerate to “the weak” believers out of love (Rom. 14:1-19). In v19, he explains why this is important: “So then let us pursue what makes for peace (εἰρήνης) and for mutual upbringing (οἰκοδομῆς).” The emphasis here is that the believers should live in harmony with one another and should seek to build or edify each other regardless of any differences including food choices (Schreiner, 1998:735-737). This is the essence of a true *koinonia* in which God welcomes everyone (v3) and therefore ought to live a life pleasing to the Lord God (v6-7).

This understanding of ethics also affirms that ethics flows from the new identity of being a Christian and that one should work out the character that befits this new identity within the context of the community. According to Wright (2010:51-56), this balances well the divine or forensic and human or participative aspects of Christian life – the former being the responsibility of God and the latter the responsibility of the believers. It is at this point that Wright bemoans tendencies in most protestant theological proposals to neglect the role of human responsibility for fear of jeopardizing the fundamental doctrine of salvation through faith by grace alone. But this does not nullify the place of work in the life of a Christian but rather gives it impetus. Thus, Wright makes an important point in insisting that moral life requires deliberate, thoughtful and constant effort or training in order to attain the maturity in our Christ-likeness. In fact, the two aspects are inseparable hence Paul is able to speak of salvation as purely “a gift of God, not a result of works” while at the same ascertaining that as believers “we are his workmanship (ἐσμεν ποίημα), created in Jesus Christ for good works (ἐπὶ ἔργοις), which God prepared before hand, that we should walk (περιπατήσωμεν) in them” (Eph. 2:8-10). The latter underscores the centrality of human responsibility in the Christian life.

Yet, one should highlight that the responsibility of man in moral transformation can only be said to be genuinely Christian when they flow from a new and transformed heart, motivated by true faith in Christ and is empowered by the Holy Spirit. Christian fundamentally means living by the Spirit as given by God in obedience to God (Gal. 5:16-26; Horton, 2007:123). For believers, the human efforts are properly located within the matrix of God’s definitive saving acts so that, as Thomas Schreiner (2008:372-376) affirms, the latter is fundamentally determinative of the former although the two are not separable. Here, Schreiner (2008:371) insightfully insists that believers are sanctified or are made holy primarily because they

belong to “the realm of the holy” from which their efforts flow from. Similarly, David Peterson (1995:24) argues: “Everything that is said about moral change and personal transformation in the New Testament is to be related to God’s sanctifying initiative in Christ.” This underscores that human efforts are not only initiated by God through his acts of redemption in Christ but are also a necessary consequence of God working to transform the believers through the Spirit in hope for the life to come (Peterson, 1995:136-137, Schreiner, 2008:372-376).

Clearly, one must be careful to avoid divorcing the fact that Christian life is primarily about living in obedience to God by the enabling power of the Holy Spirit. Here, one suspects that Wright (2010:214) risks overstressing the place of human effort and practice in order to achieve what he calls “second nature” virtue through which the Christians are able to act in a natural way when faced with moral dilemmas. Also, one should be reminded that such life can only be achieved partially in this life for we live in continuous struggle against sin. And, although such struggle may vary from person to person, one must not assume that one can reach moral perfection in the present fallen world is over-realized eschatology or what Verhey (2002:69) calls “utopian idealism”. In this way, our call for efforts for holiness or moral perfection is given proper theological framework.

Another point that needs emphasis is that the church functions as a moral community because it has authority only as it listens and lives in total obedience to Jesus Christ as revealed in the scriptures (Horton, 2008:37-56; Webster, 2005a:75-76). Clearly, this is key to avoiding the danger of giving undue authority to the church institution or leadership at the expense of its *extra nos* nature and the importance that this places on all members.<sup>66</sup> Very importantly, the primary goal of moral life as stated explicitly in the Westminster Confession of faith is “the glory of God” in that man ought to act in ways that springs from a new heart given by God and is motivated to please him (16:7). In this regard, God’s revelation as known through creation and, most importantly, in redemption is the basis in defining morality.

With regard to creation, the *Imago Dei* has ethical implications in that all human beings have the capacity to act morally thereby obeying God’s natural laws which reveals (though implicitly) his meaning and purpose for life. But the meaning and *teleos* of God’s purpose and character are explicit in redemption when God deals with the problem of sin in the heart

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<sup>66</sup> In this regard, Bujo (2003:190-191) is correct specifically in critiquing the usurping authority of magisterium in the Catholic Church over its ordinary members and local churches in matters of ethics. Nevertheless, as already argued, Bujo’s overemphasis on the community in his ‘palaver’ ecclesiology compromises the Christological thrust of the nature of church as a community of God’s redeemed people.

of man and demands that the people should be holy because God himself is holy (Lev. 19:2 cf. 1 Pet. 1:16). It is on the basis of God's character of holiness and his will that the redeemed community ought to be holy or pure in all its life. Similarly, the people ought to be loving, other-centred and just because God is love, other-centred and just and he wills so for his people. To be moral is, therefore, to act in ways that seek to please God by doing his will and to reflect his character according to his eternal purposes as revealed in the scriptures. This clearly means that God and not the community or the individual is the final authority in determining the meaning and goal of morality. This also means that only a church that is God-centred can be said to have a significant role in moral formation for its members.

One last point to emphasize here is that true morality is fundamentally concerned with virtues. According to Hauerwas (1981:113), virtues are the inner dispositions that shape the life and behavior of the believers as moral agents within the context of community. This underscores that true Christian morality is primarily concerned with the inner character of the people and thus goes beyond mere keeping of rules or principles (although the two cannot be separated). As Wright (2010:25-33) correctly reminds us, this is the ethic taught by Jesus and the NT as a whole. In this sense, to be moral means living out what Wright (2010:98) describes as "the kingdom in-advance-life". Of course one needs to maintain that the emphasis of virtues as above does not necessarily invalidate the importance of rules or principles for moral living for they are not only biblical but they are also useful in guiding specific moral decisions (De Villiers, 2012:6). It is when the believers grow to be Christ-like that the rules or principles are embedded into their character.

### **4.3.3 Source of moral ethos, values and norms**

Third, and lastly, is source of moral ethos, values and norms. One of the central functions of a Christian community with regard to moral formation is to provide its members with the necessary recourses for moral reflection and practice. This happens as the church wrestles on a daily basis to interpret and practice the teaching of the scriptures undergirded by her faith in Christ within a given context with its particular problems. Thus, as Verhey (2002:7-8) argues correctly, the churches as "communities of moral discourse and discernment" play a profound role in shaping the individual members to act according to the scriptures and guidance of the Holy Spirit. According to Verhey (2002:8-9), the church fulfills this role through the various aspects of its life and mission, which as in the case of the early church in Acts 2:42, are centred on "attentiveness to the apostles' teaching, sharing a common life, breaking bread together, and prayer".

It is these practices which form the story and therefore habits of the community. The

members of a Christian community therefore strive, whether consciously or subconsciously, to behave according to the common habits as well as expectations and beliefs of the group. As already pointed out, it is from this that the individual ought to act in ways that contribute positively to the self-preserving image of the group. Metz (2007:339) expresses this thought forcefully when he writes: "Upholding traditions and participating in rituals is one important way to identify with others, in other words, to think of oneself as a member of a group and to engage in joint projects." This is key in explaining the motivation and obligation for acting in accordance to the moral demands and expectation of the specific community. Conversely, it is expected of the individual members to avoid acting in ways that damage the moral identity of the group for doing so would amount to damaging one's own identity. But central to the church's role in moral formation is the commitment to obey God's will as revealed in the scriptures.

Here again, the story of redemption which is at the centre of the message of the Bible is paradigmatic in establishing the ethos, values and norms for ethical reflection and practice. It is this story that, for example, guides us to define as well as to practice what it means to love others in and outside the church. Thus the apostle Paul regards love as the fundamental principle of Christian life and hope (1 Cor. 13:4-7):

Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Just as in Paul's world, this way of understanding challenges the common understanding of love in many societies. True love is not selfish or abusive but other-people centred including the "the enemy". This is what motivates and sustain the believer's conduct on a daily basis.

One must emphasize the centrality of the scripture in every aspect of the church's life including the way one understands what it means to love. Other important aspects are preaching, teaching, worship, sacraments, discipline. In this regard, Verhey (2002:10) is correct to emphasize that the scripture is "a resource for nurturing, sustaining, renewing, and reforming the church as a community of moral discourse and discernment". But having pointed out the importance of the scripture in moral life, it is worthy asking with O'Donovan (2007:190) a crucial question: "How, then, the church submits itself to the authority of the Scripture?" O'Donovan offers three key suggestions of what the church should do: first, it should develop the habit of reading the scriptures; second, it should engage in "a process of interpretative reflection" and, lastly, that the church should put the scripture into the practice (2007:190-191).

What O'Donovan suggests above demand that due priority should be given to committed and careful reading, teaching, listening and, most importantly, to the practicing of the scripture in any community that is truly Christian. As Verhey (2002:70-71) emphasizes correctly, it is not enough to read or listen to the scripture, the church must strive to put into practice its moral teachings and therefore be the people that God wants them to be both at individual and communal levels. This is true remembrance. Similarly, writing about the use of the NT texts in Christian ethics, Richard Hays (2006:16) makes explicit this point when he states: "Right understanding of the texts is possible only when we act in obedience to them." Unfortunately, this is deficient in many churches today (Africa inclusive) where emphasis is often given to activities and programs that seek to make people feel at home but without challenging them into a way of holiness.

The same applies to worship. As Wright (2010:191-192) puts it succinctly, "Christian worship is all about the church celebrating God's mighty acts, the acts of creation and covenant followed by the acts of the new creation and new covenant". True worship is therefore when the community of God's people reminds itself of God's great story of salvation revealed climactically in Christ. The ethical consequence of worship is that it extols and transforms the people to a life worthy of the gospel. The church must therefore ensure that worship, which includes singing and sacraments, is saturated with the faithful teachings and moral injunctions of the scripture. This is also critical in ensuring that only God (and nothing else) is the primal centre of our worship. As G. K. Beale (2008:284) phrases correctly: "[I]f people are committed to God, they will become like him; if they are committed to soothing other than God, they will become like that thing". Although Beale (2008:284-303) focuses specifically on the consequence that this brings with regard to judgment, one cannot fail to notice the fact that true worship bears significantly on the ethical life of the worshippers in that it transforms them to live in accordance with God's character who they worship.

The connection of worship, scripture and morality shows that true Christian morality springs from genuine worship of the true living and holy God. This affirms Paul's assertion when he implores the Christians in Roman communities to present (*παραστήσαι*) their bodies as living, holy and acceptable sacrificial worship (*λατρείαν*) to God (Romans 8:1ff). As Schreiner (2008:643) notes, *παραστήσαι* is "an imperative and should be construed as a command" although this should be understood within the context of their salvations "because of the mercies of God" (v1). In a sense, it is only after this that Paul summons the believers (v2): "And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect."

(NASB)<sup>67</sup> This idea of sacrificial worship, which is from the OT cult, refers to surrendering every aspect of our life (both spiritually and outwardly) for service of God and one another as community (Schriener, 2008:644-647, cf. Dunn, 1988:709-710). As Paul further mentions, true worship of a true God revealed in Christ is not abstract but brings forth humility, sincere unity and abundance in serving one another, genuine love, peaceableness, hospitality and mercy for the needy, among other things (Rm. 12:3-21). This is the essence of true worship that many churches today in Africa and elsewhere ought to revert to.

It worth pointing out at this point that traditions have an important place in moral formation for any community. In the case of the church, traditions refer to practices formed from the experiences of the past generations in their struggle to interpret the scripture and practice its teachings. Undeniably, these offer the church today rich practical lessons whether positive or negative in matters of faith and moral practice. The same can be said of “other variety of sources” which Verhey (2002:73) insists that they be used in the “community’s deliberative conversation” in order to achieve meaningful moral consensus. This affirms the important role that the church community plays in making moral decisions.

However, it is important to insist that the traditions of the past believers or any other sources are used as a source of morality only if they stand in accordance with the teaching of the scriptures and its ultimate story of redemption. In fact, this means that the scripture is not like any other sources as Verhey intimates (cited above) but is the standard of all sources. This understanding provides the legitimacy to question the ecclesiological proposals that emphasize the importance of ancestral traditions in the moral practices of the church. Of course one needs to take seriously the positive contributions of African morality. Bujo (1998:31-33), for example, condemns the practice of homes for the elderly common in western cultures thereby insisting that the elderly should be kept in the community as reservoirs of wisdom. This also, as he puts it, “prevents the young generations from putting aside their responsibility towards the elderly” because “anamnestic gratitude and solidarity demand that the old people should not be thrown away like garbage”.

But as already stated, the ancestors have no any direct communication with the living or have no any authority over their moral lives except that act as examples in faith and moral practice. Here one must be careful to avoid not only over-emphasising the good values in his or her culture but also paying a blind eye to its dark spots. It is on these grounds that Odozor (2008:594) is correct in critiquing Bujo for “idealizing Africa’s past and giving insufficient

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<sup>67</sup> New America Standard Bible.

attention to the current structurally negative and damaging elements in those traditions”.

#### **4.4 Religious: the bedrock of a biblical Christian ethics**

Another central characteristic of the Sub-Sahara African traditional culture, besides community, is the strong religious beliefs system. As already discussed, the African concept of community extends to include the dead, the unborn as well as God (the Supreme Being) so that the visible and physical sphere of life is inseparable from the invisible and spiritual sphere of life. This means that African cultures are holistic in that every aspect of social life has a strong religious dimension to it. This is particularly so for moral practice. A preliminary attempt has already been made in chapter 3 to analyse both the anthropological and religious dimensions of African traditional worldviews. In this way, one heeds a warning by Bujo (2003:123) that one cannot appreciate African morality without fully understanding the two together. This highlighted the positive and negative elements of the religious dimension of African ethics. But it remains for us to explicate how such elements should be used in the formulation of an ethic that is authentically Christian, evangelical and biblical. We focus on three aspects: ethics as holistic, the role of ancestors and the doctrine of God as it relates to morality.

##### **4.4.1 Christian morality as ‘holistic’**

From a biblical or theological perspective, to be moral is to live according to the purposes of God expressed through his revelatory acts of creation and redemption. The *Imago Dei* creation and God’s ultimate redemption for man in Christ forms the fundamental basis for defining the meaning and purpose or goal of life and all its moral implications. As pointed out already, God’s design and purpose for man to live in proper communion with God, fellow man and the rest of creation. It is from this angle that one understands that Christian morality is holistic in the sense that the way people (for both Christians and non-Christians) ought to live is strongly tied to their religious beliefs. In this sense, one can assert that, theologically speaking, the so called secular life is inseparable from the religious or spiritual life.

As most scholars have laboured to argue, the above holistic worldview is not alien to the traditional cultures of the Sub-Saharan Africa whereby the secular is never dichotomised from the religious. For example, Bujo (2003:123) expresses this point clearly in explaining what it means to be human:

As Africans see it, it is impossible to define the human person in purely secular or purely religious terms, since he is both at once. Where one of these two dimensions is lacking, one cannot speak of human person qua human person.

The same applies to morality in that moral actions are judged good/right or bad/wrong on the basis of how they either contribute to or damage life and relationships in the community in relation to the ancestors and ultimately the Supreme Being. This also touches on the people's relationship with the cosmos and this demands that people live in harmony with the environment. In fact, in some communities natural objects and places such as forests, rivers and mountains are commonly regarded as sacred for nature spirits resides in them therefore must not be destroyed (Mbiti, 1990:79).

The similarity above has implications with regard to Christian moral reflection and practice. One significant implication is that morality can no longer be perceived using secular or religious categories exclusively. This means that the meaning, motivations and goal of ethical actions must be understood within the larger theological framework centred on God's ultimate purposes for man and the world as a whole. For example, abortion is unethical not merely because it violates the inherent natural right to life of the unborn but also, and most importantly, because it is prohibited by God who creates and gives life. The fifth commandment "You shall not murder" applies equally to the unborn (Ex. 20.6). This holistic understanding redresses the limitations of the common legalistic, rationalistic or political explanations of the right to life and other human rights. It is with the same understanding that Bujo (1998:21-22) is correct to argue, for instance, that an environmental ethic appropriate for societies not only in the Africa but also globally is that which underscores the religious dimension of the cosmos thereby making the environment sacred.

Understood this way, Christian ethics implies that the church both at individual and community levels should strive to live out its faith in ways that are equally concerned with the social life in the wider society. We shall return to this point at a later stage in section 4.5.3. But it suffices to point out here briefly that instead of burying its head in the sand often on the false pretext that social life is secular and not spiritual; the church ought to seriously engage the moral problems facing the societies if it is to remain true to its identity and mission. This calls upon the church to proclaim and practice its faith in ways that seek to witness as well as to engage the outside communities thereby challenging them to live in accordance with God's universal moral standards.

However, besides the similarities between Christian ethics and African traditional ethics in that both are strongly tied to the religious beliefs of the people, there are fundamental differences between the two. This is particularly so with regard to what exactly constitute such beliefs. It is never too much to repeat that at the heart of the Christian theological framework are God's acts of redemption in Christ and by the Holy Spirit. With this, Christian ethics is not only theological in a general sense (because of a belief in some god) but is also

christological and pneumatological in that to be moral is to be in Christ and live a life of the Spirit. Precisely, this is what makes Christian theological framework distinct from the African religious system which, as the next two sections discuss in some detail, is centred on the belief in 'ancestral spirits' who acts as guardians of moral traditions and intermediaries of an overly transcendent Supreme Being.

Clearly, this underpins the fact that the church's engagement with the African traditional ethics should be from its scripture-based and Christ-centred theological conviction of God's purpose for the world. This ensures that the church does not compromise on its distinct identity and moral life in its attempt to be relevant in any given context. It is certainly not enough just to be religious, something which is rightly cherished in the African worldview, it matters most what the people believe in and how this impacts their everyday moral life.

#### **4.4.2 Christian morality as 'Christocentric'**

By this stage, it is almost repetitive to state that biblical Christian ethics is Christocentric in its grounding, nature and orientation. But due to the prominence given to the ancestors (the living dead) in the context of Sub-Saharan African cultures and theologies, it is critical to explicate what we mean by this assertion and show how this shapes a biblical Christian ethic. (Of course, as shall be discussed in the next section, this is intertwined with the belief in a supreme and transcendent God who, although the ultimate source of morality, he has delegated authority to the ancestral spirits.) As already discussed, the ancestors are regarded as the custodians or policemen of moral traditions and thus they have powers not only to reward those who act according to traditions of the community but also to punish those fail to act accordingly (Mbiti, 1990; Bujo, 2003). This has implications on moral practice in that people should live according to such traditions and the demands of ancestors often known through dreams, calamities and consultation by spirit mediums. Based on this, one is correct to describe African ethics as principally ancestor-based.

One of key elements of African cultures strongly tied to the belief in ancestors is the importance given to the traditions of the community commonly preserved through proverbs, stories, songs, arts, among other things. The traditions, which are formed through the experiences and practices of the past generations, form the bedrock of the moral values and norms for those living today. Traditions provide the sources of knowledge and wisdom for the community and thus they reveal the aspirations and, most importantly, the highest moral good (*summum bonum*) vital for realising full humaneness in the community. It is when the people repeatedly make effort to remember and retell these stories safeguarded by the ancestors that they are challenged to conduct themselves accordingly. It is for this reason

that scholars such as Bujo (2003:190) and Tanye (2010:254) have argued for the need to incorporate the belief in ancestors in any serious theological or ethical formulations for the church in Africa.

In a similar way, traditions have an important place in forming the moral life of the church. Here traditions refer mainly to the practices established over a long period of time from the experiences of past generations of believers in their endeavours to make sense of their faith and live it out accordingly. This is the basis for the liturgical formulae in the church today including creeds, catechisms, prayers and hymns, which if completely forgotten, the church risks losing not only its historical but also its rich theological heritage. In this case, traditions provide resources including practical wisdom and moral examples especially in the face of difficult moral challenges today. Thus a church in any context would be authentic both biblically and culturally if it deliberately makes effort to appropriate its practice to the traditions of the people rather than condemning them wholesale.

In the case of sub-Sahara African context, a good example is the practice of initiation. This is a rite of passage in which the initiates (mostly at puberty stage) are instructed in the traditions and moral values of the community. As Magesa (1997:97) emphasizes, the instructions during initiation rituals focuses on “five areas of ethical concern in the life of the individual and society: religion, the mystery of life and death, domestic and social virtues, sex and sexuality, and forms of self-identity”. Initiation therefore is key in shaping the moral identity of the individuals and the community as a whole. Thus, instead of condemning the practice wholesale because of its negatives, it is proper for the church to consider appropriating its significance by, for example, adopting some of its positive elements such as moral aptitude and sexual education. In this way, the church as a community can provide alternative forms of moral education for its young people without losing much of the practical significance attached to it by culture.

But one cannot overemphasize that any elements of the traditions that are incompatible with the gospel of Jesus Christ should be transformed or totally condemned. This involves a careful analysis of functions and deep meanings of those traditions held dearly by the people. Thus, in the case of the example given above, practices such as sacrifices to ancestors and all physical abuses or cruelty involved in teaching the initiates as well as forms of circumcision that result into death must be strongly condemned. Most importantly, the instruction given to the initiates needs to be evaluated and be aligned accordingly in the light of the scriptures. In the same way, sexuality in general should be understood primarily within the biblical framework of God’s creational and redemptive purpose for male and female and the purpose of sex and marriage. With this, masculinity or femininity as well as

the meaning and purpose of sex is defined by God himself, not by any ceremonial rituals.

It is clear, therefore, that although the traditions may provide necessary resources for moral decisions and actions in the context of the church, yet, they are not the final authority but the scripture is. After all, as Horton (2008:44, 56) affirms, it is the word that not only “creates faith in Christ” in the church but also “is a canon that defines and norms”. At the heart of the Scripture is God’s ultimate revelation in Christ through whom the believers find their moral identity and motivation for moral life. With his understanding of salvation as “participation” of God with man and vice versa, Torrance (2006:168) affirms this point when he argues that “God self-identification in Christ constitutes the essential critical control on ethical claims concerning the nature, presence and purposes of God as also on related claims concerning the nature of epistemic access to God’s moral purposes and the nature of participation within them”. This is particularly important when accounts adequately for the damage caused by sin on all cultures. This problem needs a soteriological solution provided by Christ thereby opening up new horizons form moral life. It is here that we assert in the strongest sense possible the Christocentricity of true biblical communal ethics.

Thus any traditional practices that compromises or rejects the central story of God’s redemption as revealed in Christ should be strongly condemned while others needs to be transformed in the light of the teaching of the scriptures. This applies equally to church traditions such as creeds, hymns and liturgical practices which are sometimes elevated at the expense of the authority of the scripture thereby eclipsing the centrality of Christ. Second, the church’s life ought to be shaped totally by a biblical teaching of the unique identity of Christ. This demands, for example, stressing that Christ is more than a “Proto-Ancestor” or ancestor *par excellence* as emphasized by scholars like Bujo. Christ is God himself; through him mankind and all things are recreated anew in a radical and perfect way. This understanding creates an ecclesiology and, most importantly, an ethic that is primarily located in God’s distinctive work of redemption in Christ. Lastly, given this, culture and all its values (good or bad) must be totally subjected to the Lordship of Christ. In fact, this is what makes a Christian distinctive in any cultural contexts.

But as Webster (2012:209-211) asserts, to affirm the Christological nature of any ecclesiology and consequently that of morality demands emphasizing not only the incarnation (as most scholars do) but also his identity as eternal Son God and his exalted status as Christ and Lord. Webster (2012:209) thus asserts: “Keeping each of these three moments in mind serves to ensure the relativity of ecclesiology to Christology and to prevent the ecclesiological functionalization of Christological doctrine.” The Christocentric nature of ethics can be correctly understood if set within a comprehensive biblical-theological

understanding of the Trinity. It is to this that the next section turns.

#### **4.4.3 Christian morality as 'Trinitarian'**

In addition to the belief in ancestors or the living-dead in most Sub-Saharan Africa cultures, the religious worldview assumes the existence a God (the Supreme Spirit) who in some ways has interest in the affairs of the people particularly their moral life. Most names of God reveal the moral attributes of God and the obligation that this poses on the people as they live in the world he created. One example already cited in chapter 2 is the name *Mulungu* among the Chewa which means that God is 'the straight one' or the righteous one in his dealings with the people and they must consequently shape their characters accordingly. Paradoxically, this connection between ethics and the belief in God not only provides a launching pad in formulating a Christian ethic that is richly African and biblical but also poses serious challenges in formulating an ethic that is grounded on a correct biblical doctrine of God, in this case the triune God.

The connection between the belief in God and morality implies, in the first place, that one cannot make sense of morality and live appropriately without apprehending in some ways the nature and purposes of God from whom such ethics springs from. This is because morality is fundamentally shaped by the people's knowledge of God and their relationship with him; hence it is these two aspects that provide the basic framework for right living. One must be quick to point out that this is not to suggest a separation between ethics and the doctrine (of God) (Torrance and Banner, 2006:4-5) or, as O'Donovan (2006:34-35) argues, to deny that ethics can help to grasp doctrine.<sup>68</sup> Rather, this serves to underscore that the latter is essentially determinative of the latter. This is particularly so for Christian morality in the African context although, as we shall discuss shortly, there are differences regarding the nature of God and how this bears on people's moral life.

Although it sounds like a straightforward point to make, it is important that the church continues to remind itself that God is the ultimate source and authority of morality. In this way, the people are challenged to conduct themselves in ways that acknowledge and therefore seek to please God as revealed in the Scriptures. As Verhey (2002:67-68) insists, this happens when people place Christ at the centre of every aspect of life through correct "remembrance". This echoes the story of the Israelites who needed to be constantly

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<sup>68</sup> It is here that O'Donovan (2006:35) gives an example of the moral argument for the existence of God "in which the experience of obligation forms the basis for the conclusion that God exists".

reminded of their relationship with God and its consequence ethical obligations. It is for no reason that before they entered the Promised Land, Moses poses this stern challenge (Ex. 6:10-12):

And when the Lord your God brings you into the land that he swore to you fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you – with great and good cities that you did not build, and houses full of all good things that you did not fill, and cisterns that you did not dig, and vineyards and olive trees that you did not plant – and when you eat and are full, then take care lest you forget the LORD, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery .

The warning is against the temptation to forget God in times of plenty in the promise land. But, as Verhey (2002:68) the call to remember God is not “an intellectual process or recollection” or “a disinterested reconstruction of some historical facts”. Rather, it is a challenge to true worship and right living. When people forget God, they turn to idols in one form or another. Thus, Moses goes further to warn the people not to “go after others” (6:14) because this has serious implications on the ethics in that people will live according to the kind of gods they worship. Therefore, it is when the people worship the true God that they shall keep his commandments and in this way “they shall do what is right and good in the sight of the LORD” (v16-18). Therefore true worship of a true God leads to true morality.

Following from the above discussion, one can assert that true biblical Christian morality is that which is grounded in correct understanding and appropriation of the triune God. God’s purpose for creation, his daily dealings with the people and, most importantly, his acts of redemption climaxed in Christ and the Holy Spirit become the source and power that define and shape the nature and moral life of church as a community. It is here that scholars are increasingly arguing for a communal ecclesiology that derives its nature and life from the ontological perichoretic and self-giving interpersonal relations of the Trinity (see Volf, 1998:2, 205; Torrance, 2006:168).

But as already pointed out, church is Trinitarian not only because it ought to reflect the triune God in her relationships and general moral life but also, and most importantly, because church is primarily established and continues to exist by the redeeming and sustaining work involving the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Thus as Webster (2005a:76) states profoundly: “The church is because God is and acts *thus*.” More importantly, Christian ethics is Trinitarian because it is a life of transformation empowered by God himself through the transforming work of the Holy Spirit. With this understanding, to be a community that images God (as Volf argues) is to live a life of new creation in Christ enabled by the work of the Spirit. Paul repeatedly shows that communal life and its moral implications are located within

the work of the Triune God. Hence, in Ephesians 4:3-6 Paul charges the community to be “diligent to maintain the unity of the Spirit” because they share in “the one hope” of “one Lord” as well as “one God and Father of all”. Also, he calls upon the believers in Galatia to “walk by the Spirit” (5:16ff) because they believed in the true “gospel of Christ” (1:7) by which they have received true “freedom” from the bondage of sin (5:1ff). In this sense, to be moral is living the life given, sustained by the triune God and is directed towards him.

The above understanding of God needs to be stressed particularly in the context of the church in a sub-Saharan Africa whereby the God is deficient. As already pointed out, God in the traditional belief system is not only impersonal but he is also too transcendent to be involved directly in the life of the people except, of course, through ancestors. As James Kombo (2001:232-235) points out, with this understanding Christ as well as the Holy Spirit is reduced to the level of ancestors in most African theologies thereby denying his full divinity and the ramifications that this has on daily life. In this regard, Kombo is correct when he challenges the church to seriously and urgently to inculturate a biblical doctrine of the triune God that challenges the traditional understanding of God. It is here that he argues for the “God *Muntu*” as a model to inculturate the Trinity (2001:242) through use of indigenous names of God (2001:232). With this, Christ and the Holy Spirit are known as full divine persons through whom African people can related directly to God.

But as Kombo (2001:235) stresses, this must be done with all theological care to avoid reducing Christ to mere ancestors and the Holy Spirit to a mere “force” as common in most African independent churches and Pentecostal/Charismatic theologies respectively. Hence, as he further points out, the model demands that acknowledgment of Christ must go beyond the ancestral Christology prevalent in most African theologies in order to “achieve some degree of complete otherness of Christ” (Kombo, 2001:252). Here, the Trinity provides the fundamental framework for apprehending ethics because not only does this underscore the communal nature of the Christian faith rooted in the communion of God but also reconfigures morality to reflect this communion. Christian morality becomes a way of life for a new community of people belonging and imaging God. This connects properly with the three-level understanding of salvation as renewed relationship of man with the triune God, fellowman and the rest of creation.

#### **4.5 Perspectival: the interface between universal and context dimensions of ethics**

The last important aspect which provides points of engagement in formulating a true biblical Christian ethics is the relationship that this has with the cultural contexts in which such an

ethic find concrete expression. Undeniably, Christian ethics is not a mere philosophical or abstract idea but rather it is a way of life for people in particular contexts with historical and geographical differences. On one hand, one must affirm that the Christian ethical values and principles are universal in the sense that they apply to all peoples irrespective of any such cultural differences. But on the other hand, one must admit that such universal values can only be expressed in a local context. This means that one does not need to reject the diversity and importance of specific cultural contexts in order to affirm the universality of Christian ethics. In a broader sense, this touches significantly on the relationship between the contextuality and intercontextuality of ethics. An important question to ask is: how do the two dimensions – universal and contextual – interface in a true biblical Christian ethics? In the case of Sub-Saharan Africa, the question may be extended further: how does a biblical Christian ethics maintains its universal significance in relation to the global society without losing its relevance to its immediate context?

#### **4.5.1 The contextuality (locality) of Christian morality**

As already highlighted, one of the central features of biblical ecclesial ethics is the significance placed on a local context. The basis for this emphasis is the understanding that a church, in its biblical primary sense, refers to a local assembly of God's redeemed people who meet to worship God, hear God's word and exhort one another towards living a life worthy of the gospel. The definitions by Horton and Volf already discussed in chapter 2, for example, stress the fact that church is a community which gathers at a specific place. Of course, the church as a local assembly exists simultaneously with the church as a broader and universal assembly; but this is a topic for the next section. Here it is important to underscore the reality that God's acts of redemption which give birth to the church are expressed within particular cultural and historical contexts. It is in these contexts that the people express their faith and all its moral implications.

In the NT, especially in the writings of Paul, the locality of church is explicit in that to be a Christian simultaneously means to belong to a particular community, or group of communities, in a particular place. It is not surprising therefore that Paul's moral instructions, though with wider and universalistic application, are addressed to specific Christian communities in specific contexts. Paul, for example, urges the believers of Thessalonica ( "to walk in a manner worthy of God" (περιπατεῖν ὑμᾶς ἀξίως τοῦ θεοῦ) (1 Thess. 2:12). This is the way of holiness which, among other things, ought to be characterized by abstinence from sexual immorality, self-control, and genuine love for others (4:3-4). Paul also addresses believers in other communities as saints or holy (1 Cor. 1:1; Rm. 1:7; Eph. 1:1) More

importantly, Paul (assuming he authored all these letters) addresses specific needs facing these specific communities thus he seeks to build them up to live out the gospel life within their respective contexts.

It is from the above standpoint that, as most scholars have stressed, one can begin to speak of the contextuality of Christian ethics both in reflection and practice. The emphasis on local contexts is highlighted against the backdrop of the pressures of western ethical theories which overemphasize the universality of morality at the expense of the value of cultural differences. Resultantly, as Appiah (2012:261-262) correctly puts it: "Because of their desire for universal applicability, traditional theories tend to be overly rational, abstract and only minimally relational and concrete." In this regard, it is legitimate to insist that the Christian faith can only be said to have meaning for African Christians if it takes their cultural contexts seriously. In this way, the cultural diversity is respected and celebrated rather than discarded often in the disguise of universalism. This is also key in ensuring that the gospel is not abstract but it resonates with the people it seeks to transform (Coetzee, 2010:284). In this sense, culture provides not only the language and meaning of moral ethos but also the space or avenues for the moral development of the people.

In terms of morality, this entails appropriating the Christian faith in forms that are not only sensitive to the cultures or seek to be enriched by the traditional values of the people but also primarily concerned with the specific needs of the people. It is here that the outcry by most African scholars such as Bujo, Mbiti, Coetzee for contextualisation or inculturation of the Christian faith cannot be totally ignored in theological discourses if the gospel is to be meaningful to the people it encounters. In fact, as Fiddes (2012:15) observes, similar outcries are heard from other contexts in the global south which have suffered domination from global north cultures.

The above understanding demands admitting, for instance, that the principle of unity or solidarity with others can be practically expressed differently in different contexts but without changing its meaning. True solidarity among most African communities is demonstrated during times of bereavement. Those that are with the bereaved family and attend all funeral rites as well as other celebrations are regarded as true members of the community. Another example, although trivial, is eye contact. While direct eye contact when speaking is regarded as respect in other contexts, the same practice is regarded as rudeness especially when speaking to the elders in most African cultures. It is here that, although writing from a missiological perspective, Pau Hiebert (1985:9-10) is persuasive when insists that effective gospel inculturation requires that people not only learn the indigenous language but also

learn the meaning of functions of cultural symbols and practices of the people.<sup>69</sup>

But having said all this, it remains critical to emphasize that Christian morality, at least in its true biblical sense, does not depend primarily on cultural contexts for its sources and shape; rather it takes God's redemptive revelation in Christ as the starting point. Thus although the gospel does not exist purely outside cultures, the latter only functions as an embodiment through which the former can be fully expressed. This clearly means that the Christian faith is intercultural or is global in its relevance and implications and this transcends beyond any cultural differences without undermining its diversity. It is to this universalistic nature of Christian morality that the next section turns.

#### **4.5.2 The intercontextuality of Christian morality**

At the heart of the Christian faith, and indeed of Christian ethics, is the reality of God's act of redemption for the world. This establishes a community which is not only local (as stressed above) but is also universal or catholic in nature in that it is comprised of all believers in all cultures. It is in this broader sense that church, as O'Donovan (2007:184) puts it, is a "universal community" which "in its life and message represents to us our human destiny as a community directly under the reign of God". This explains the fact that while local congregation is a church in a full sense of the word, it remains a true church only if its stands in relation to other local churches in other cultural contexts on the basis of the one faith in Christ (Volf, 1998:158; Horton, 2008:200-218).

The universalistic understanding of church provides rich resources for building true Christian communities that break down any cultural, ethnic, gender or geographical barriers. As Paul explains, it is on the basis of faith in Christ and the relationship that this creates with the triune God that relationships in the Christian community is all inclusive so that it doesn't matter anymore whether one is Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female (Gal. 3:28). Thus, as Richard Longenecker (1990:157) asserts, the new relationships through one faith in Christ, is two-dimensional: "spiritual relations" in that all believers are equal with one another before God; and, "relationship of humanity" in that the believers are united into one broader community in which any cultural or social differences "have come to an end". Clearly, this is the basis of the unity of church at both local and international levels. Thus, church is also intercontextual in its identity and, most importantly, in its ethical life without, of course,

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<sup>69</sup> Here Hiebert (1985:15-17) strongly argues for the need to use anthropological insights in order to apprehend the meaning of cultures and use such insights for gospel proclamation and discipleship making.

erasing completely such differences.

The above understanding shows the appropriate significance of Christ's incarnation which is often used as the basis for contextualization of the gospel. Clearly, the emphasis in this important event is the coming of God into contact with the world for redemption. Indeed, as the apostle John explains, "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth" (Jn. 1:14). What John stresses here is that it is through the incarnation of God through the person of Jesus Christ that the world receives "the full grace" of salvation. Yet, it is explicit that the incarnation has the whole world as its context rather than a single culture when understood particularly from its salvific stand point. This means that the incarnation has a universal significance in the sense that it offers salvation to all nations of the world. Strongly tied with Christ's life, death and resurrection, the incarnation provides essential basis for the universality of the Christian faith as well as ethics (Webster, 2012:209-211).

In terms of ethics, this implies that there is need for a proper emphasis on the intercontextuality of Christian Christianity. This is particularly the need for the church in Africa which, as already indicated, has tended to overemphasize the importance of local contexts at the expense of its wider and universalistic contexts. This is evidenced, among other things, by the fact that most reflections or debates have narrowly focused on the question of how to make African Christian ethics more African instead of making it more Christian (for example, Bujo, 1998, 2003; Bediako, 1992). Consequently, as Paul Bowers (2013:9) argues, such reflections have not adequately engaged and therefore contributed toward building up the wider global church. The challenge that Bowers poses is legitimate: the church in Africa should rise take its biblical missional mandate in order to make a meaningful contribution to the building up of the wider church into Christ-like maturity. Of course, this should be done without neglecting the importance of immediate contexts within which such maturity is concretely expressed. This is helpful in ensuring that the contribution by the church in Africa to the wider church is both biblical and practical for it also involves the experiences of the people in their everyday encounter with the gospel.

But the intercontextuality of Christian ethics goes beyond the theoretical level of ethical discourse. Here one must acknowledge the strides made in this direction. The works of B. Bujo (1998; 2003) which intensively interact with western ethicist including Thomas Aquinas, Jürgen Habermas and Alasdair MacIntyre attest to this fact. The intercontextuality of Christian ethics is also, and most importantly, concerned with guiding all believers into maturity regardless of difference, cultural contexts inclusive. For instance, the church in Africa must return to the witness of the scripture to redefine its concepts of 'community' and

'kinship' so that it does not exclude those normally regarded as the outsiders. It is in Christ that a new community of new kinship and new family relations is established. This is what guides the church's everyday life.

The universality allows for the possibility of one's moral framework to be critiqued by those from outside cultures. The same applies to church at community level. This is particularly important in cases whereby the people's understanding of certain moral practices is shaped largely by culture rather than the gospel truth (the scriptures) - thereby blinding them from the evils of their own culture. In this case, an outside "etic" perspective is required to challenge the inside "emic" perspective. This is key to ensuring that the gospel is not held captive by any culture or traditions but always remain alien to it. This means that the outcry by African scholars which often overstate the need to make the gospel sensitive or even relevant to the African cultures must be heard but with caution to avoid underplaying the distinctiveness of the gospel. In fact, it is only when the gospel remains alien or distinctive that it can transform the cultures to submit to the lordship of Christ.

This understanding of church as an international community also radically defines and shapes the Christian moral responsibilities and practices both at individual and communal levels. This applies not only to the relationship between congregations in different contexts but also to the relationship among believers in any given congregation which is multicultural or multiethnic in nature. As Eddy Van der Borght (2008:7) observes, there are many multicultural congregations that are increasingly faced with the problems of "[R]acism and inhospitality". As Van der Borght (2008:7) suggests, it is on the basis of the believer's new identity in Christ that local churches "become a place of reconciliation, and a place of embrace and recognition".

Although writing particularly about the Western context, Van der Borght's observation is true of churches in Africa whereby people are also from different ethnic or kinship groups. By virtue of one faith in Christ, the believers from different ethnic or cultural backgrounds belong to one new community or family of God. This means that the believers ought to accept one another guided by true love and forgiveness regardless of any differences. This makes the church a place where everyone feels secure enough to be able "to tell their stories and share their personal vulnerability" (Van der Borght, 2008:7). But as Van der Borght (2008:5-7) insightfully reckons, this begins to happen when the members are willing to take the risks involved in living in such a community; one of which is the need to help the poor or the destitute.

This is critical more particularly in the context of Sub-Saharan Africa with its high levels of social problems including poverty and number of orphans mostly due to the problem of

HIV/AIDS. This calls upon the church to seriously be compassionate and thus be involved in assisting those in need or suffering. In this way, church communities function as places of healing and hope both spiritually and physically. This is an integral part of the identity and mission of the church both at local and inter-congregational as well as ecumenical levels. It is with similar reason that, writing particularly about the problem of HIV/AIDS affecting the church in the Sub-Saharan Africa, Adriaan van Klinken (2010:446ff) joins other voices in calling upon the church in the west to be involved in dealing with the problems caused by the pandemic in Africa. As van Klinken (2010:450) argues, the justification for this is a glorious reality of church as the one body of Christ and this implies that when some members are infected by the HIV/AIDS, then the whole body suffers.

So far, we have focused our discussion on the nature of Christian morality as it relates centrally to church at both contextual and intercontextual levels. By this, we have asserted the fact that Christian ethics is first and foremost for the community of God's people. Christian ethics is a way of life or 'the life of the spirit' for those that have come to believe in the saving gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ and are transformed to live accordingly as empowered by the Holy Spirit. But we have stressed that the starting point for such an ethic is God's acts of redemption revealed in Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit rather than mere human moralization. And, the motivation and the goal for such an ethic is to live according to God's revealed character and ultimate purpose for life and the world. With this, man's relationship with God and man and the rest of creation becomes the definitive category for true communal and moral life. But, as the next section discusses, the universality of Christian morality extends beyond the walls of the church to touch on the wider non-Christian society.

### **4.5.3 The universality of Christian morality**

As spelled out above, Christian morality is universal primarily because it breaks down any cultural or contextual boundaries of the church as a new community of God. But the universality of Christian morality also concerns, in some important ways, how the church (both at individual and corporate levels) relates to the wider society. This provides the basis for church's involvement in bringing moral and social transformation in the wider society. But our understanding of Christian's engagement with the wider society or what René Padilla (2004:20) describes as "integral mission", is set within the framework of God's redemptive revelation in Christ and its eschatological thrust which is definitive to the church's moral life

and mission.<sup>70</sup> The clarification is expedient against the backdrop of a continued debate in most ecclesiological reflections with regard to the specific role and the extent to which can the church be involved in affairs of the society without compromising on its primary nature and mission.

There are different positions in this debate but three should suffice for this discussion. The first position is that the church should not be involved in the affairs of the society because the church has its hope in things to come rather than this world. Stanley Hauerwas, with his proposal of church as “a political alternative” community represents this view well (1981:12).<sup>71</sup> The second position is that that the church should be involved in making the society better so long as this is clearly understood as temporal thus not affecting God’s new and heavenly kingdom. One proponent of this view is David VanDruden (2010:13-15) who makes a strong case for separate “two-kingdoms” – the earthly and the heavenly – which are radically discontinuous from each other. The third position is that the church must be actively involved in bringing moral and social transformation in the wider society today. One proponent of this view is N.T. Wright who argues, for example, that God is recreating the whole world through the one (not two) kingdom established by Christ and awaits its consummation at the *parousia* (2010:98-99).

But a correct approach is that which does not reject the church’s involvement in the society or fail to affirm both the continuity and discontinuity between the present and future aspects of God’s kingdom. Rather, set within the framework of redemption and eschatology as stated above, such approach views such an involvement as essentially living out a gospel mandated life and fulfilling its missional task to the wider broken society. In this regard, the approach taken by Wright is favourable for it balances the other two extreme approaches. Using the resurrection of Jesus Christ as paradigmatic to the new life that the church extends to the wider society, O’Donovan (2007:181) makes this point explicitly: “Founded on

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<sup>70</sup> In some ways, this is similar to what René Padilla (2004:20), writing from the context of Latin America, lays out as the “characteristics” of a church involved in integral mission. Two of them are particularly relevant here: “commitment to Jesus as Lord of everything and everyone” and “the vision of the church as the community that confesses Jesus Christ as Lord and lives in the light of that confession in a such a way that in it can be seen the inauguration of a new humanity”. This, among other things, avoids the danger to turn church either into a mere social organization which has lost its distinctive theological convictions or a mere spiritual entity which is not concerned with the social problems of the people in the society.

<sup>71</sup> Thus Hauerwas (1981:10) can argue: “The first task of Christian social ethics, therefore, is not to make the 'world' better or more just, but to help Christian people form their community consistent with their conviction that the story of Christ is a truthful account of our existence.” Of course, it is fair to mention that to some extent Hauerwas does not totally reject any church’s involvement in the society but he strongly insists that such engagement is only possible when the church stands distinctly from the society.

God's disclosure of himself to mankind, the church is committed to a comprehensive account of, and pursuit of, the human good, not just on its behalf, but on behalf of the human race as a whole." This means that although Christian morality is primarily for the church as strongly emphasized by Hauerwas, it is relevant for the wider community.<sup>72</sup>

Of course, one should be careful so as not to have too much expectation in terms of the impact this influence can have on the society. After all, the church is able to live a different life fundamentally because of its encounter with the true light of the world Jesus Christ. So, unless the society comes to the same salvific and transforming conviction in Christ as the church, one cannot expect the former to live exactly in every aspect as the latter. This is key to avoid moralizing and imposing the Christian faith on non-Christians. This, of course, is not to argue that non-Christians cannot be moral but rather to underpin that such life ought to spring from the convictions of the gospel. The involvement of the church in this regard is twofold: practice and proclamation.

First is practice. The church, as a unique community of God's people, is called upon to practice its faith in a way that shines light into the world. Since the church knows true morally as revealed in the scriptures, it ought to be exemplary to the non-Christian communities. This charge is clear in 1 Peter 2:11-12:

Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct (ἀναστροφὴν) among the Gentiles honourable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see (ἐποπτεύοντες) which also means 'watch') your good deeds and glorify (δοξάσωσιν) God and the day of visitation.

And according to Jesus, this is what true discipleship entails (Matt. 5:14-16):

You are the light (φῶς) of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others (λαμψάτω τὸ φῶς ὑμῶν ἔμπροσθεν τῶν ἀνθρώπων), so that they may see your good works and give glory (δοξάσωσιν) to your Father who is in heaven.

But from the emphasis that the two texts make, the influence happens primarily as the church lives out its identity and call as God's people. It is when the church genuinely

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<sup>72</sup> Here De Villiers (2012:1-2) is correct in observing that this is the key question that continues to feature in most reflections on Christian ethics with scholars divided between theories of shared morality and distinctiveness of Christian ethics. But as he argues, those who often argue against the distinctiveness of Christian ethics fail to grasp the reality and implications of the gospel which makes Christian ethics distinctive from other non-Christian ethical theories.

practices obedience to God which is the basis of “the good works” that the society is drawn to see that there is an alternative better way of life. Schwöbel (2006:58) makes the emphasis on practice when he asserts that a true biblical church is that which “does not uphold human dignity as an ideal principle” but rather is committed “to relate its message in those situations where human dignity is abused and violated”. The church should therefore put into practice its faith and its moral implications. Thus for example, in a society characterized by corruption, unjust policies, violence, economic disparities and various forms of abuses including suppression of women, the church ought to practice love, fairness, justice, peace and genuine concern for the poor and other needy people within and without the walls of its community.

But in addition to practice, the church has the obligation to speak out against the moral or social ills in the society. The church ought to speak out against moral evils such as corruption, social injustices, rape and other gender-related abuses, among other things. Also, the church should speak out against practices, for example, that undermine the biblical teaching, about life, marriage and human rights such as abortion and same sex marriages and homosexuality. It is here that Schwöbel (2006:57), again with his focus on human dignity, challenges the church not only to practice but also “to create the public spaces in which the foundations of the understanding of human dignity are debated”. Through such engagement, the church is able to make an impact in the society where the concept of human dignity is defined “on the basis of observable attributes based on the capacities of human nature that humans may possess to a greater or lesser degree” rather as divinely given through God’s creative and redemptive acts (Schwöbel, 2006:57). As Schwöbel intimates, the former is inadequate to address the many ethical problems facing people in our societies.

Thus, although church is “an alternative community” based on its unique faith in Christ, it is problematic to take any position that rejects constructive engagement with the society. In fact, it is through its life and mission that the church becomes a paradigm community which influences and models other communities towards genuine good life. But it needs to be emphasized that the church’s missional role plays out from the point of difference grounded in the unique story redemption in Christ. A proper engagement should therefore be undergirded by what Thomas Johnson (2008:3) describes as “a set of evangelical theological beliefs” in order to be effective in bringing transformation in the society. Central to this is a commitment to listening and obeying the scripture. Here again, the centrality of the scriptures is not an extra option for the church in this task and this ensures that what the church speaks is actually the voice of God rather than its own.

And as Johnson (2008:4-5) points out, this also demands that church “should learn how to articulate our central moral beliefs more effectively within the public square so that we consciously contribute to and influence public action, policy and attitudes”. The church (both at individual and communal levels), among other things, should have a clear understanding of its distinctive ethical convictions, be familiar with the moral opinions and systems in the society, establish and maximize on the similarities between her moral values and norms with that of the society, and should take the responsibility to speak out at all times (Johnson, 2008:5-23). This role of church is critical particularly in the context of modern Sub-Saharan Africa where issues such as abortion and homosexuality continue to feature in the public arena.<sup>73</sup>

#### **4.6 A Christian ethic of marriage in an African context: an example**

Having discussed in detail the key features of a biblical, evangelical Christian ethics, it is only proper to illustrate briefly how such an ethic shapes our understanding of the meaning and function of marriage. Three reasons justify why this subject demands a particular attention in this discussion. Firstly, marriage (a family) is one of the most important institutions in the teaching of both the scriptures and therefore the church and the sub-Saharan African traditional communities and society in general. Secondly, despite such similarities, there are sharp differences between the two worldviews regarding the meaning and function of marriage. Thirdly, marriage touches on other critical ethical themes such as sexuality or homosexuality, divorce and polygamy. These reasons explain, among other things, why marriage or family features prominently in most proposals for an African Christian ethic (for example, Bujo, 1992; 2003; Tanye, 2010). What then is the biblical, evangelical and Christian ethical teaching about marriage? But first is a brief overview of the traditional understanding of marriage and its moral implications.

##### **4.6.1 The meaning and function of marriage and its implications on moral practice in traditional African culture: a brief overview**

In most African traditional cultures, marriage is regarded as a sacred obligation ordained by the ancestors for every man and woman. Among other things, marriage functions as a source of status in that the married individuals are regarded as fully adults and therefore

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<sup>73</sup> This comes at a time when countries where such practices are regarded as illegal, are increasingly facing enormous pressure from human rights groups often with western influences to legalise abortion and same sex marriages. Malawi, where the author comes from, serves as a good example.

receive respect in the community. In this sense, marriage is integral to one's identity as an adult in the community. Marriage also provides social security especially for women because it is the husband who has the obligation to provide for the family and functions as a covenanting factor between two (or more) families involved. This brings social cohesion between different family groups and communities therefore enhancing solidarity at the wider level. This is what Shorter (1998:89 cf. Bujo, 1998:94) affirms when he writes: "Marriage is not merely a contract between two individuals; it is an alliance between two family communities."

But, as Shorter (1998:94) points out, the primary function and purpose of marriage is procreation through which continued existence of the clan community is guaranteed. Therefore, as Magesa (1997:115) states: "All forms of marriage and its rituals, therefore, are intended to assure that procreation occurs according to the wishes of God and ancestors, and as abundantly as possible." In this sense, as Magesa (1997:127) further argues, "the marriage is not complete until a child has been born". Thus a valid marriage is that which is able to produce as many children as possible. In this sense, not to have children is regarded not only as "a personal tragedy" but also as "a communal catastrophe" for it endangers the continued existence of the family and community as a whole (Nurnberger, 2007:23). It is based on this understanding that, as Magesa (1997:127) intimates, any couples without children would be regarded as committing a grave moral offence against the community.

Due to the strong emphasis placed on children in the traditional meaning or function of marriage, there are several practices around marriage that have serious moral implications. For example, polygamy is culturally encouraged in cases where the first wife is unable to give the man the desired children (Shorter, 1998:91-92). Here we refer to the common practice of polygyny which, as Shorter (1998:91) explains, is "a marriage of one man to several women" rather than polyandry which is "the marriage of one woman to several husbands". But in instances where polygamy may not be preferable, divorce is encouraged in order to allow for remarriage (Bujo, 1992:116). In this case, the decision to divorce finds moral justification because of the demand to have children. After all, morality is that which serves the common good and hence the aspirations of the community which, as repeatedly stated, extends to include the ancestors. Of course, the problem of divorce is not exceptional to African societies although for different reasons. Vorster (2008:463-464), for example, notes that the western societies are also faced with "growing rates of divorce" largely caused by the pressures of "globalisation" and "same sex marriages", among other factors.

In African cultures, people also participate in various rituals aimed at enhancing fertility. For example, most cultures practice initiation rites aimed at preparing the boys and girls for

marriage. In some cases, this involves sexual activities as a way of practicing the teaching received. A good example is *kusasa fumbi* (which literary means 'to remove dust') practiced among the Lomwe people of southern Malawi. The initiates are encouraged to engage in sex as soon as the initiation ceremony is over as a way of cleaning themselves for the new life in the society. In some cultures, rituals involving sex are performed as a way testing fertility for the yet-to-married individuals. It is here that, while highlighting the indispensability of children in an African marriage, Bujo (1992:116) affirms the necessity for rituals that involve sexual activities when he writes:

Childlessness is a personal disgrace. It is also felt as a kind of slur on the community, a social fault, and it often leads to divorce and polygamy. It is therefore understandable that many tribes expect their members to enter marriage on a provisional basis until the wife's ability to bear children has been established.

Although Bujo is careful in pointing out that such rituals or practices need to be challenged by the gospel of Jesus, he fails to condemn the practice strongly. Thus Bujo (1992:116-121) seems to argue for the need to recognize these forms of marriage in the church as a way of preventing the high rate of divorce and polygamy among the African Christians. Here again, pre-marital sexual practices are morally justified so long as they serve the good of the community. It is against this backdrop that any serious engagement African cultures must attempt to answer this question: What is the biblical, evangelical and Christian ethical teaching about marriage? Although not comprehensive, such an attempt allows one to participate in an on-going reflection on the meaning and purpose of marriage within a broader sphere of African Christianity.

#### **4.6.2 A biblical-theological ethic of marriage**

Just like in the African traditional cultures, marriage or family holds a central place in the teaching of the Christian church. But the meaning and purpose of marriage in the Christian understanding differ in very fundamental respects with African worldview. This needs to be highlighted in order to formulate an understanding of marriage that is faithful to the teaching of the scripture and thus honouring to God. It is this ethic that, when embraced, has the potential to help in dealing effectively with the problems of marriage in the church and wider society in African communities. Thus writing from a reformed theological standpoint against a backdrop of problems in Western societies, Vorster (2008:465) can state with confidence: "The biblical perspectives not only offer a clear indication of healthy marriage and family life, but also entail that Christian attitude in marriage and family life can be a remedy to the damage caused by the new patterns."

The primary assertion to make is that marriage is an institution ordained by God. From the beginning, God creates man and woman in his own image and then brings them into a love union or companionship of marriage. The primary reason for this union is that man should not be alone; hence the Lord brought the woman to the man as “a helper fit for him” and the two became “one flesh” (Gen 2:18-25). Thus by “the creational order” which is “prescriptive” in nature, marriage is explicitly “monogamous” and “heterosexual” in that it is an intimate union between one physical man and one physical woman (Vorster, 2008:466). It is no wonder that, as Verhey (2011:508) points out, anchoring marriage relationship are principles of “mutuality, equality and fidelity”. This shows that any relationship that involves more than one<sup>74</sup> or same-sex partners or leads to any forms of abuse or unwarranted divorce contravenes God’s original design and purpose for marriage. The understanding also gives an appropriate framework in which procreation, for example, is to be understood.

Although procreation can be understood as an obligation given through the mandate “to be fruitful and multiply” (Gen. 1:28), it must be emphasized that children, just as marriage itself (1 Cor. 7:7), are God given gift to people. As Psalms 127:3 states: “...children are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb a reward.” It is God who gives children. In this regard, marriage remains legitimate even if, for some reasons, the couple is unable to bear their own children. Here, Vorster (2008:466-467) has a point when he insists for the need to view procreation as “of secondary importance” to avoid circumventing the primary purpose of marriage which, as he contends, is three-fold: “mutual help and guidance”, “physical and spiritual fulfillment” and “prevention of immorality”. According to Vorster (2008:467), this avoids the danger which “reduces marriage to the sphere of biological and inhibits the Christian to fulfill a responsible calling in a society”. But without the need to totally reduce childbearing to individualistic voluntary choices, one needs to maintain that children are ultimately given by God in order for man to fill the procreation mandate. In this sense, procreation is understood as a biblical mandate but only alongside companionship and intimacy within the overall creational meaning and purpose of marriage.

With regard to divorce, the scripture abhors this practice. In the OT, for example, divorce is in principle forbidden (Deut, 22:13-19, 28-29; Mal. 2:16) except in instances when the wife commits acts of “indecent” (Deut. 24:1ff). In the NT, Jesus teaches strongly against the practice in answering the question by the Pharisees “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” and he does so by appealing to the creational order of marriage (Mk 10:7-9):

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<sup>74</sup> Here Vorster is helpful when he insists the fact that the practices of polygamy especially in the OT are only “descriptive” rather than “prescriptive” for they reveal the effects of the fall on the institution of marriage (2012:466).

“Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.”

But Jesus goes further to explain explicitly why divorce is morally wrong: “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.” (Mk. 10:11-12 cf. Matt. 5:30-32). Therefore, whoever divorces, whether the man or the woman, breaks God’s commands which includes prohibition against adultery (Vorster, 2008:470; Verhey, 2011:509). Here, as Verhey (2011:509) observes, the fact that divorce as defined by Jesus renders both the man and the woman as adulterers presents a significant reversal of the OT patriarchal culture in which only a wife, not the husband, was socially liable to the sin of adultery. This understanding is particularly significant to transform the African cultural worldview whereby women are often left on the margins when it comes to making decisions in the marriage or family.

Thus, when Jesus mentions “adultery” as an exceptional reason for divorce, he does so while explaining that the fundamental problem in all this is “hardness of hearts” caused by the fall rather than God’s original purpose (Matt. 19:1-12). Even with such an exemption, childlessness is not mentioned as a legitimate reason for divorce. Marriage, in this case, pictures profoundly the redemptive covenant union between Christ and the church characterised by genuine love, faithfulness and commitment (Verhey, 2011:509; Eph. 5:25ff. cf. Mal. 2:14; Hos. 4:1ff). The same explanation applies in the case of polygamy though not in explicit terms. As already stated, marriage is a love union between one man and one woman who are then joined into one flesh. Also, contrary to Bujo (1998:106-107) who favours premarital sex as a way of testing fertility in order to legitimize marriage, the scripture condemns fornication and any such practices as immoral because it is against God’s original design and purpose for sex and marriage itself (1 Cor. 7:1; 11:6-9; Heb. 13:4).

But the Christian understanding on marriage needs to be placed within the wider but important question of Christian identity wrought by the story of salvation in Christ and the work of the Spirit. Thus, as Verhey (2011:510) argues, with the “new identity” marriage is eschatological in its ontological nature because it becomes “a token of God’s future, a sign that the curse is being lifted, an indication of a future in which there is ‘no longer male and female’”. This radically transforms the quest for identity or status as defined by marriage and procreation in most cultures. Therefore any church committed to live by this story needs to relearn how to practice marriage according to the teaching of the scriptures. This, as Vorster (2008:464) insightfully suggests, demands a proper realization that marriage and family is “a sphere of love, stewardship, self-denial and obedience” towards one another and ultimately

towards God. Unfortunately, divorce damages all these elements.

Of course, one must admit that the view on the sanctity of marriage raises serious pastoral implications in the occurrence of divorce today especially that we continue to live in a fallen world. It is here that Verhey (2011:511-512) makes an important point when he warns against the tendency in many churches to treat such teaching “as a timeless code to settle directly and immediately contemporary questions about particular choices concerning marriage and divorce”. To this end, Verhey is correct to suggest that not only divorce but also “remarriage of divorced persons” could be allowed if performed with a careful discernment within particular Christian communities (cf. Hays, 1996:372-273). With his social historical approach to scriptures, Istone-Brewer (2002:308-310) shares this sentiment when he argues that while the Bible teaches against divorce and thus “a believer should go on striving to maintain the marriage as long as possible”, divorce and remarriage are inevitable when vows are broken. Here the church as an ethical community becomes an interpretive paradigm in determining how to respond on case by case basis.

Nonetheless, one suspects that Verhey (2012:512), for example, goes too far when he extends this concession to include same sex marriages. Thus Verhey (2012:512) can state that a church “we should also consider blessing homosexual unions for the sake of nurturing fidelity and mutuality and protecting the homosexual partners”. While this view seeks to maintain the main principles of marriage, it fails to appropriate the strong biblical teaching of marriage as a union between man and woman (Gen, 2:18-25). Also, the view tends to overemphasize the function of the community in moral decisions at the expense of God’s intended design and purpose for marriage as revealed in the scripture.

Following from the above discussion, it is imperative to draw several practical implications that are important in addressing the problem of divorce as it relates to the place of children particularly in the context of Africa. Firstly, the church needs to provide regular and serious biblical teaching and counseling of what marriage really is to both the married and young unmarried members. Making a similar emphasis, Hays (1996:372) stresses that the teaching should underscore the understanding that marriage is a lifelong relationship that symbolises the salvific relationship between God and the church. Such teaching should also include the rightful place for singleness to avoid unnecessary pressures often exerted on the unmarried members, a problem which leads to rushed decisions about marriage and consequently unstable marriage life. Secondly, the church as a new moral community needs to learn to provide love, support and encouragement to childless couples particularly in the face of the heavy ridicule and sense of shame that often lead to divorce. The same applies to the divorced (Hays, 1996:373).

And at a more practical level, thirdly, the believers are to view children as belonging to the community as a whole. This means that the couples that are childless should regard the children in the church as their own and therefore have the privilege and responsibility to offer parental care to them. Fourthly, wherever necessary, the church should encourage adoption for those who desire to take particular responsibilities over children especially those who are orphans and therefore lack parental personal love and care. As the church practice all this, the wider non-Christian community is able to learn the true meaning and purpose of marriage and what it means to be the family of God. And, lastly and only as a last resort, the church should practice discipline on those who violate the biblical understanding of marriage. Yet, even this, should be exercised with much love with the goal to restore the people to the church.

#### **4.7 Preliminary conclusion**

Having highlighted the continuing problem of how the gospel relates to culture and its net effect on moral life, this chapter has attempted an engagement which takes the distinctive nature of the gospel and Christian ethics seriously. In this way, it has been asserted that true biblical Christian ethics is that which is formed and shaped by the unique reality of God's story of redemption revealed decisively through the saving work of Christ and empowered by the transforming work of the Holy Spirit. Here, ethics is not only theocentric but is also Christological and pneumatological and thus Trinitarian in nature. It is this gospel-centred story that provides the interpretive lens for appropriating the communal, religious and universal dimensions of Christian morality in a way that is not only relevant to cultures but is also transformative to its moral values and practices including marriage. This is particularly imperative for the sub-Saharan Africa.

Thus, as asserted, biblical Christian ethic is that which, firstly, is strongly tied to the believer's new identity in Christ at both individual and communal levels; secondly, it regards God's will and glory as the *telos* for moral conduct; thirdly, it regards scripture read within the context of community as the source of moral ethos, values and norms; fourthly, it takes a non-dualistic stance to life in that the secular and religious dimensions of life are inseparable; fifthly, it places Christ the Lord at the centre of its life; sixthly, it is Trinitarian in that it is a life given by and lived for God; seventhly, it takes seriously the local context of the believers as moral agents; eighthly, it is inter-contextual in that it extends to include other cultural settings in both engagement and praxis; and lastly, it is universal because it engages the moral life of the wider society. For many believers in the Sub-Saharan Africa, this ethic ought to be practiced and proclaimed if our quest to be true disciples of Christ is genuine.

## Chapter 5

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

#### Introduction

Set in relation to the main objectives and central theoretical argument of this research, this chapter summarises and synthesizes the key arguments raised in chapters 2 and 3 and their consequence in formulating a theological ethic that, as expounded in chapter 4, is not only African but is also genuinely Christian, evangelical and biblical. Thereafter, the chapter draws specific implications of how this formulation is paradigmatic in shaping the moral life and mission of church as an ethical community. Before conclusion, the chapter suggests two areas for further research.

#### 5.1 Summary

##### 5.1.1 Chapter 2: Biblical-theological foundations of Christian-community ethics

The chapter explored the biblical-theological foundations of communal ecclesiology and explicated in detail how such an ecclesiology is paradigmatic for moral formation in the life of the believers. This answered the question: What are the biblical-theological foundations of Christian community ethics? Understood biblically and theologically, church is fundamentally a community (*koinonia*) of a people who uniquely belongs to God revealed uniquely through his acts of covenant redemption. This renders both Christian identity and morality communal in that the people ought to conduct themselves accordingly, hence the assertion that church is an ethical community. In the OT, God chooses and establishes Israel to be his covenant people and thus he calls upon them to ethically relate to him, each other and the rest of creation accordingly (Gen. 15:18; Ex. 19:1ff; Lev. 26:12; Wright, 1983; Brueggemann, 1999).

But it is the NT that God's redemptive act, climatically revealed in Christ and the Holy Spirit, is the fundamental grounding for communal ecclesiology (Hays, 1996; Volf, 1998; Horton, 2007). In this sense, church is a community established by and reflects the life of the triune God revealed through the salvific work of Christ (his life, death and resurrection) and the transforming and bonding work of the Holy Spirit. And following the lead of Horton (2007) and Volf (1998), it is stressed that church refers primarily to local congregations in particular

contexts but stand in inextricable organic relationship with other congregations thereby affirming its catholicity. This allows us to speak of church as an ethical community within a particular location and context.

As an ethical community, church has a two-fold function: ethical reflection and praxis. In ethical reflection, the church provides the framework and space for all the people to engage in a deliberation or dialogue on critical issues affecting their lives in order to formulate moral values or ethos that are biblical-centred and practically meaningful to the people. This is key in ensuring that the moral values and norms established are not individualistic or abstract but are truly communal both vertically (in relation to God) and horizontally (in relation to others and the rest of creation) (Verhey, 2002; O'Donovan, 2006). But the church is not only a dialogical community; it is also, and most importantly, a practicing community (Verhey, 2002; Wright, 1983). It is only when the church puts into practice its beliefs and moral values governed by the story of redemption in Christ guided by the scripture that believers are able, for example, to exercise self control against theft, sexual immorality, and above all to practice genuine and sacrificial love for one another (Eph. 4:25-5:1ff; Gal. 5:15ff).

More importantly, it has been stressed throughout the chapter that church is a distinct ethical community fundamentally because it is God's redeemed people. As such, church is not only divine-initiated because it is established by God's acts of redemption but is also holy, diverse, word-centred and eschatological in its identity and moral life. This implies that genuine Christian morality is that which springs from and is shaped by the unique story of salvation by which such a community can rightly be said to be 'Christian' in the first place. This underscores the centrality of scripture in shaping the believers to live genuinely transformed lives in reflection of God's image and obedience to his revealed will. This applies to believers in every context including the sub-Saharan Africa.

### **5.1.2 Chapter 3: Community and solidarity in African cultures and ethics**

In order to explicate how the above espoused ethic looks like in the context of sub-Saharan Africa, it was expedient to examine the key features of traditional African ethic, thereby answering the question: How do the concepts of community and solidarity provide the basis and framework for African ethics? As scholars have laboured to argue, the traditional Africa ethic is centred on communal life and solidarity or *ubuntu* (Bujo, 2003, 1998, Magesa, 1997; Coetzee, 2003). In this, actions or behaviours are judged good or bad depending on whether or not they contribute to enhancing life vitality and relationships in the community which is "four –dimensional" because it constitutes the living, the unborn, the ancestors and ultimately God. This means that the individual is motivated and obligated to act so as to maintain and

enhance life and solidarity in the community both in its horizontal and vertical sense. In this regard, the sense of community is the guiding principle and motivation for moral living. Inevitably, such a community has an integral responsibility to provide values and norms as well as to nurture and mature its members through various forms of moral instructions and traditions.

Thus, there are three major features that form the framework of the traditional African ethics: first, it is communal because it is centred on relationships (among the people and with God) thereby reducing the risks of abstract and privatized morality common in other non-African ethical models; second, it is holistic for it touches on every aspect of life thereby avoiding dichotomy between secular and religious spheres; lastly, it is 'perspectival' in that it emphasises cultural contexts of the people as moral agents. This justifies the call by African scholars including Bujo that Western ethical models must seek serious dialogue with the African ethical model in search for comprehensive and universal morality that promotes better human life for all. Most importantly, these scholars have legitimately insisted that the church in Africa and beyond should seek to be enriched by such rich values of African ethics if it is to be true to its identity and therefore meaningful to the people. The strong emphasis, for instance, of ethics as communal life continually challenges the modern church with its individualistic tendencies to return to its biblical grounding whereby morality is shaped by self-realization of being a community.

Yet the emphasis on group identity and solidarity in African ethical model is not without negative elements that are made apparent as traditional cultures encounter the gospel. Such elements include: suppression of the individuals (including disadvantaged groups such as women and the elderly); reduction of moral choices to mere duty towards the community at the expense of virtues; overemphasis of the cultural relativity and overemphasis on the authority of ancestors and traditions. These elements not only promulgate an ethic that is often inhumane but also, most importantly, underplays the Christological thrust of Christian ethics. This, therefore, points to the need for a critical engagement between the two ethical frameworks in order to formulate an ethic which is not only African but is clearly Christian biblically and evangelically.

### **5.1.3 Chapter 4: A biblical-theological engagement with the African ethics: a proposal for a biblical African ethic**

Following from the above analysis, it is apparent that formulating an appropriate biblical-theological ethic demands moving beyond the similarities between Christian ethics and traditional African ethics or overemphasis on how the latter is key in making the former

relevant. Contrary to formulations by Bujo (1998, 2008), Magesa (1997) and Tanye (2010), this demands appropriating its distinctiveness rooted in and guided by the unique story of God's redemption. Admittedly, it is this story, revealed christologically and pneumatologically, that forms and shapes both the identity and the moral life of the church as an ethical community. It is in light of this that, following the leading of Carson (2008) and Appiah (2012), a new model for gospel inculturation which stresses the distinctiveness of the gospel is adopted. As argued in chapter four, the emphasis on the distinctiveness of the gospel is critical in formulating an ethic that is clearly biblical and thus has the potential to critically transform cultural values and norms thereby building up believers to become Christ-like and therefore "true image bearers" of God.

Thus a biblical and evangelical Christian ethic is that which springs from the believer's new identity in Christ rather than mere cultural identity, regards God's character, will and glory as the ultimate *teleos* and motivations for moral conduct or behaviour. This is also an ethic which regards the scripture as the primary source and standard by which cultural moral values or traditions are evaluated and transformed. Most importantly, such an ethic is Christocentric because Christ the Lord, not ancestors, is centrally the new grounding and motivation for morality; and it is Trinitarian in that it is a life given by and lived for God - the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and not a mere abstract idea of God. Also, this is an ethic which takes seriously the local context of the believers as moral agents yet without eclipsing its inter-contextuality rooted in the universality of the gospel. Lastly, this is an ethic which is concerned with the moral and social life of the wider society but from the standpoint of its distinctiveness. This is an ethic, for example, which when well appropriated in every aspect of Christian life provides a new framework for understanding the meaning and purpose of marriage.

## **5.2 Implications for moral reflection and praxis**

Following from the above summary, some implications are drawn for the church's effective moral reflection and praxis:

- a) There is great and urgent need to recover the important biblical understanding of church as a living and concrete community (*koinonia*) of believers. The strong need for community is critical in restoring the true meaning and purpose of what it means to be human beings ('true image-bearers of God') in modern societies facing various forms of disintegration. This happens when the church continually reminds itself of the gospel story which creates new identity and moral framework on the basis of renewed relationships or solidarity with God and each other (and the rest of creation).

This is achievable through continuous retelling and rehearing of the gospel story revealed in the scriptures in every aspect of the church's life. Though in progressive way, this results into new community where cultural or social differences including gender, ethnicity and social status are radically transformed so that all people are both equal and one.

- b) The church should appropriate the rich ethical ramifications of what it means to be and live as an ethical community uniquely belonging to God. It is not enough to speak of church as a community but one must stress how this transforms and shapes behaviour within particular concrete situations on a daily basis. Church is thus not only a confessing community but is also a practising community – a practice that reflects the will of God revealed through his character and moral demands. It is a community that, for instance, ought to practice genuine and sacrificial love for one another, true forgiveness, reconciliation and acceptance without any form of discrimination or abuse.
- c) As an ethical community, the church must take seriously its moral-forming function for believers both at individual and communal levels. This demands that the church, among other things, should empower people and provide them with necessary space and the capacity for open, continuous, and reflective (not closed and monologue) deliberation on moral issues affecting them on a daily basis. Such an engagement, guided by a correct communal reading of the scripture, ensures that moral reflection as well as moral practice is not reduced to individualism and rationalism whether at leadership or membership levels. Also, the church must provide encouragement and support to ensure openness and accountability between and among the individual members.
- d) The church can only be called a true biblical ethical community from the stand point of the distinctiveness rooted in the unique story of redemption. Without the need to reject the similarities with other non-Christian communities or to underplay the need for contextualising the gospel, the church in sub-Saharan Africa (and beyond) should therefore maintain this distinctiveness. This demands that the church must be more sensitive to the gospel and not just to cultures. Again, this demands that the church must make a renewed commitment to living the transformed life guided by the scriptures thereby subjecting cultural values or norms to the authority of the scriptures. Additionally, this demands that the church must give due priority to essential tenets particularly word-centred preaching, teaching, worship and discipline through which the believers are imparted with essential resources (or disciplines) to

grow into the likeness of Christ.

- e) It is from the same stand-point of distinctiveness or difference that the church has the mandate to engage the wider society by its moral lifestyle and proclamation in word and deed. Thus, the church must not pay a blind eye to the social and ethical challenges facing the wider society but must set herself as an example in actions as well as speaking out in order to contribute in addressing such challenges. Paradoxically, the church has influence in the society because it is a distinct community. And, while some churches have made noticeable progress in this regard (i.e. the Roman Catholic Church), admittedly the evangelical churches have unfortunately lagged behind and therefore need to do more in engaging the society but without compromising the gospel. In this way, the church is able to shine as light into the world thereby functioning as a paradigm for true morality to non-Christian societies in any cultural context.
- f) Lastly, the local churches should seek an honest engagement with other local churches within and outside sub-Saharan Africa. Any church is a true community when it stands in healthy biblical relationship with others which together form the universal community of God's people.

### **5.3 Recommendations for further research**

Following from the conclusions of this study; a few areas can be pointed out for further research especially from a reformed evangelical perspective in order to help the church correctly conceptualize a biblical-theological framework for Christian ethics and maximize its net effect on how this transforms believers into Christ likeness:

- a) Explore further the relationship between Christian ethics and other key themes within the wider spectrum of African theological discourse such as reconciliation, gender and poverty. Important also is the exploration of how biblical hermeneutics in Africa impacts ethical formulations and life. Such explorations have the potential to provide rich resources for effective moral formation for the believers.
- b) Conduct an empirical multi-disciplinary research using a sample of one or two selected congregations/communities in order to explore how the theological-ethical framework espoused herein impacts the moral transformation within specific communities and varied cultural contexts. This also takes into consideration the fact that cultures are not static and therefore must be engaged continually.

## 5.4 Conclusion

The research has therefore argued that an ethical formulation which takes seriously the key and distinctive underpinnings of the gospel is pivotal in ensuring a fruitful and sustained moral formation within Christian communities today in sub-Saharan Africa and beyond. Grounded in the redemptive and transforming work of the triune God revealed in the scriptures, it is asserted that church is a distinctive ethical community with a distinctive moral life. It is in this community that all believers are continuously challenged to grow and mature into Christ-like character thereby reflecting the light of the gospel in the wider society. This is a life which believers live in reflection of God's character and in total obedience to his moral injunctions in hope for the great glory characterized by moral perfection yet to be revealed at the *parousia* (Eph. 4:12-16; Rm. 18:25; Col. 3:1-3; Rev. 19:22-27).

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