

THOUGHTS ON A METHODOLOGY FOR CHURCH HISTORY

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Abstract

In this article on a methodology for church history I would like to express some thoughts on the following questions: (a) What do we mean when we speak of methodology, in this case a methodology for church history? (b) Why is a methodology for church history necessary? and (c) What are some of the basic theological concepts we should include in a methodology for church history? This means that the article does not intend to offer a complete methodology for church history, and will not consider all the questions and viewpoints regarding periodisation, historiography, different sources for church history, etc. Instead the article presents thoughts on some aspects of a methodology for church history.

1 WHAT DO WE MEAN BY METHODOLOGY?

Over the years, reflection on scientific method in general, and on history, methodology and method of history, has been on the agenda of theology and philosophy. Some relevant publications include 1960, De Vleeschauwer, *Handleiding by die wetenskaplike tegniek: Ten behoewe van die historiese en geesteswetenskappe in die algemeen*; 1965, Ogletree, T W, *Christian faith and history: A critical comparison of Ernst Troeltsch and Karl Barth*; 1972, Popma, K J, *Evangelie en gesiedenis: Christeljk perspektief*; and 1977, Van't Spijker, W A, *Reformatie en gesiedenis*. A work currently consulted in many institutions in South Africa and neighbouring countries, and one valued by colleagues in Europe is the work of James E Bradley and Richard Muller, 1995, *Church history: An introduction to research, reference works and methods*. In 1995 Timothy J Wengert and Charles W Brockwell published their work *Telling churches' stories: Ecumenical perspectives on writing Christian history*. We find an interesting viewpoint regarding the Roman Catholic Church in the work of Marcel Chappin, 1996, *Introduction to church history*. In 2006 Steven Paas published his work *Digging out the ancestral church: Researching and communicating church history*. In a sense it can be said that there is a rich harvest of reflection on the methodology and method of church history. It is however necessary to consider what we mean when we speak of a methodology and method of church history.

In 1961 the Potchefstroom philosopher H G Stoker wrote his book *Beginnels en metodes in die wetenskap (Principles and methods in science)*. He defines principles as fundamental and directional determinations for a certain area (Stoker 1961:33). He writes that a method is a way of acting, a way of working (Stoker 1961:49). In 1992 a third revised edition of Mouton and Marais' (1992)

book *Basiese begrippe: Metodologie van die geesteswetenskappe (Basic concepts in the methodology of the social sciences)* was printed. This publication is part of a series of 18 publications on methodology that the HSRC brought out at the time. They wrote the book because of the necessity to reflect on general methodological principles (Mauer, Introduction). The other books in the series cover a wide variety of themes in the social sciences. Mouton and Marais distinguish between methods and methodology. Methods refer to specific methods and techniques which are used in the research process whereas methodology, in their view, refers to the fundamental concepts underlying the research process (Mouton & Marais 1992:Foreword). The task of research methodology is to ensure that a research design and the research conducted attain valid results. This requires objectivity not in a positivistic or objectivistic sense of the word but objectivity, even in a subjective or involved sense of the word, which will bring about valid research results (Mouton & Marais 1992:17).

This implies that with the term “methodology for church history” we mean the concepts underlying the practice of church history as a scientific endeavour. This must be distinguished from the methods and techniques used in the research process.

2 REFLECTIONS ON A METHODOLOGY FOR CHURCH HISTORY

There are various reasons that reflections on a methodology for church history are necessary.

2.1 Lack of a careful methodology for church history

An obvious reason for reflection, according to Bradley and Muller (1995), is that there is no careful methodology for church history. Although we can challenge this statement by citing a number of works that are attentive to a methodology for church history, it is also true that frequently very little is done concerning such a methodology. By contrast the cases for the history of doctrine and the history of dogma usually contain prologues which describe the methodology. Be that as it may, it is interesting that the two authors do not make a clear distinction between methodology and method. According to them, general discussions of the proper subject matter of church history can be found in the classic encyclopaedias of theology such as that of Philip Schaff, *Theological propaedeutic: A general introduction to the study of theology exegetical, historical, systematic and practical including encyclopaedia, methodology, and bibliography* (New York: Scribner 1894) and George R Crooks and John F Hurst, *Theological Encyclopaedia and methodology: On the basis of Hagenbach* (New York: Hunt and Eaton, 1894) (Bradley & Muller 1995:9, footnote 8). It clearly cannot be said that there isn't any reflection on a methodology for church history. All the above works, and many more, profess to the contrary. It is however true that there is a need for a “careful methodology”. In particular this will, to my mind, entail careful and meticulous thinking about the theological concepts underlying the practice of church history. In the third part of this article, thoughts on some of these theological concepts are presented.

2.2 New needs within the field of historical research

New needs within the field of historical research and research in general also make reflection on methodology necessary for the church historian. On the one hand there is the interaction with other social sciences that have brought forward new methods of research; and from this interaction new themes have emerged that the church historian also needs to address. Themes include the role of women in society and the place of ethnic and religious minorities. From these themes has also risen the need to take account of the impact of different aspects of life on historical research. This means, for instance, that the history of the Huguenots should not be examined only as something religious but that the social, economic, racial, ethnic, and minority aspects of their history should also be taken into account. This is an approach that Bertrand van Ruymbeke takes in his research on the Huguenots. He writes: "I study the Huguenot migration to South Carolina in a comparative Atlantic context with the methods used by demographic and social historians. I also emphasize the socioeconomic and religious aspects of the migration and privilege the group over individuals and families" (Van Ruymbeke 2006:xviii; see also Van Ruymbeke & Sparks 2003:1ff). Together with this, there is a call for a complete rethinking of the impact of Christianity on history: a restructuring of the past so to say. Because Christianity is a religion of historians which has impacted on the history of the human race it is seen as the task of church history and the church historian to place the great drama of fall, redemption and judgement on the canvas of world history. Obviously this will have great methodological implications (Bradley & Muller 1995:3-4).

2.3 Abundance of terms

The fact that many terms are used in the field of church history also calls for clear and precise methodological thinking. Within the field one comes across terms such as "history of religion" and even "a school for the history of religions". The debate about the history of Christianity vis-à-vis church history continues. Then there are also terms such as "the history of Christian thought", "the history of dogma" and "historical theology" which all call for precise definitions vis-à-vis church history which is seen as the broadest discipline that deals with the church's past (Bradley & Muller 1995:5-10). With regard to church history as such, clear distinctions need to be made between the thought and the practice of the church; the history of dogma and the history of church law; Old Testament research and New Testament research; Biblical archaeology; the history of missions, homiletics and liturgy; the sacraments in church history; historiography; the history of art in the church (iconography, the art of painting, sculpture in churches, church architecture, music in the history of the church); the relationship between church and state throughout history; the church and society; the history of denominations; revivals; schisms in history; spirituality; the role of church leaders, the church fathers and popes; church counsels; monasticism; Reformers, church members, etc. (Paas 2006:18; Bradley & Muller 1995:5-60). To all of this can be added the history of the training of ministers and other office bearers in the church, which forms a very important part of church history. All of this calls for clear methodological thinking.

2.4 Issue of objectivity

The issue of objectivity in the writing of church history also calls for methodological reflection. Some see objectivity as a necessary element of research in any social science – which includes church history. For them objectivity implies critical, balanced, non-side choosing, systematic and controllable research (Mouton & Marais 1992:7). The Dutch church historian H Berkhof in his work *Geschiedenis der Kerk* (1947) deliberately chooses what he calls a “beoordelende” (judging/measuring - one can also call it critical) practice of church history. He is of the opinion that some church historians hide their lack of critical historical judgement behind a veil of so-called objectivity. He believes that the church historian must deliberately declare his/her methodological points of departure in his/her practice of church history (Berkhof 1947:12). Also in later editions of this work which he published together with Dr Otto de Jong, Berkhof and eventually only De Jong maintain this position although not as broadly expressed as in the 1947 edition. In the 1975 edition they write:

Church history is the story about what the Spirit and the Word has brought about amongst people ... Church history is also the story about a lot of failures and disloyalty to the instructions of the Gospel. The community of the church must make their obedience to the Gospel visible ... (translation of Berkhof & De Jong 1975:7-8).

These are the convictions from which the authors wrote their book. The authors are aware of their presuppositions. The work makes no secret of the fact that it understands the Gospel from a reformed point of view. It also makes no secret of the fact that it wants to serve the calling for the unity of the church. In 1980, in the foreword to the tenth edition of the book, De Jong writes, quoting Berkhof,

A theological, critical church history, but understandable for non-theologians' Berkhof wrote at Lemele in the autumn of 1941. Then his critique showed from his theology. Now, in practically a new book the theology of the undersigned shows most from his critique. The goal remains the same (translation of De Jong 1980:7).

In another paragraph De Jong describes church history as “the history of the interpretation of the Holy Scripture ... and the church is alive if she can answer to the question of Zwingli ‘what is Christ’s church?’ - ‘those who hear the Word’” (translation of De Jong 1980:10). Bradley and Muller argue that although the church historian must always strive for the highest possible degree of objectivity, this is hardly attainable due to the selective nature of the traces of history as well as the historian’s own reconstruction of the past. The answer is not “no” to any personal involvement at all or the total absence of presuppositions and opinions, but the honest and methodologically lucid recognition and use of resident bias for approaching and analysing differences between one’s own situation and the situation of the given document or

concept. It must be a methodologically controlled objectivity (Bradley & Muller 1995:48-50), which obviously calls for clear methodological thinking.

2.5 Addressing the question of what is church history

The question “What is church history?” also raises many questions and answers which obviously necessitate methodological reflection. T N Hanekom in his description of the methodology of C Spoelstra has sympathy for the view of Spoelstra that church history must be seen from the viewpoint of the church itself; which means the uniqueness of the church as an institute, which is not similar to any other institute that can be thought of, in terms of its origin, development and continuance in history (Hanekom 1965:37). In his introduction to the book of G S Wegener *Die lewende kerk* Hanekom lays great emphasis on the role of ordinary members – the people of God – in the history of the church. He sees their role as additional or fundamental to the role of great church leaders in big movements and reformations of the church (Wegener 1965: Woord vooraf). According to Hanekom the methodology or “metode-leer” (the teaching about method) is very important for the progress of church history as such in South Africa (Hanekom 1965:37). For Hofmeyr and Pillay church history is “the history of the contextualisation of Christian understanding” (Hofmeyr & Pillay 1991:Foreword). According to them, the study of church history is “fundamentally dialogue with others who at different times in diverse contexts sought to understand the Christian message in a relevant and meaningful way” (Hofmeyr & Pillay 1991:Foreword). Contextualisation is seen as the meaningful and mutual encounter of the Gospel and its context. Berkhof was wary of defining church history only in terms of contextualisation and wants instead to see church history in terms of the critical questions relating to how the church fulfilled its calling within a particular time. For instance, how was the church in that time true to being a community of Christ? How did the world of a certain time advance or hinder the church to be a true church? How did the church fulfil its calling to preach the Word of God to the world? (Berkhof 1947:12; 1975:7-8; De Jong 1980:9-10). All of these questions of course imply a certain methodology. Steven Paas on the other hand is of the opinion that it is not the context in which we live that determines what we take from history: “Church History is not a description of past events adapted to the present taste” (Paas 2006:12). Perhaps it is more correct to say that it is not the present context that must shape history but history that must help us shape our present context. For Paas (2006:15)

Church history is the human activity of researched, comprehensive and intelligible description of past deployments of the Church of God, in the midst of this world, in which men were involved through Jesus Christ by the power of the Word and the Spirits (sic).

In the activity of church history, Paas sees research and communication as being very important. “For the events of the past are not automatically ready for consumption by readers or listeners. They need to be dug out, to be written, to be told” (Paas 2006:11). For Bradley and Muller a methodology for church history is important because the term “history” in itself is ambiguous. There are at least two histories that need to be considered – the past event in

itself and the written contemporary account of the past event. Both of these histories carry certain perspectives – the contemporary account of past events carry the perspective of the present into the past whereas the historical evidence of the past is

scattered traces left by what happened or people who were involved in 'what happened' and as such also carries certain perspectives of a particular time. All of this must be observed in the practice of church history while also taking into account that past conceptualizations will continue to be challenged because they bear directly on the self understanding of human beings – including their individual, social and ecclesiastical identity (Bradley & Muller 1996:2, 33-38).

The above are some of the most important reasons that reflections on a methodology for church history are important.

3 THOUGHTS ON SOME BASIC THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS FOR A METHODOLOGY FOR CHURCH HISTORY

3.1 The Bible

Methodologically speaking it is very important to realise that church history as a theological discipline is connected to the Bible in an undeniable and special way (Paas 2006:18). The Bible contains history which as such is important for church history. But apart from this, theologically speaking, the Bible is also the norm that church history must use in its scholarly endeavour to critically assess the history of the church through time. The Bible ought to be accepted and confessed by the church historian as the trustworthy and infallible Word of God, inspired by the Holy Spirit. In an article in *Kerkbode* 8 December 2006, Professor Adrio König asks the question "Which is more dangerous Fundamentalism or Liberalism?"

- *Fundamentalism* drives a wedge between faith and science, regards the idea of evolution as contradicting the Bible, and cannot accept the findings of the biblical sciences on the origin of the Bible; fundamentalism alienates the critical thinking person from the church (König 2006:7).
- *Liberalism* has its origins in the historical-critical thinking of the nineteenth century. In a contemporary example of liberalism the Jesus Seminar has driven the historical-critical method to such extremes that just about nothing remains of the Bible - it contains not much more than a few ethical guidelines; the Gospel of Jesus Christ is denuded of all meaning regarding miracles, the virgin birth, the resurrection of Christ, His ascension and His second coming. Christ is no longer the Saviour of the world. The closed world view of certain natural scientists has become the norm according to which also theology and church history must be practised (König 2006:7). It is in the light of this development that the contemporary context has become the norm for certain church historians.

- König argues that if he had to choose between fundamentalism and liberalism he would in the end choose fundamentalism; not that it is to his mind a good choice, but at least with fundamentalism the Gospel remains intact (König 2006:7).

Perhaps the choice is not between fundamentalism or liberalism/contextualism. Perhaps the answer lies instead in a confessing theology. A theology, including church history, that in faith accepts and confesses the Bible as the trustworthy and authoritative Word of God and that uses this Word as the norm for its scholarly work. It takes into account the results of modern science but does not use them as a reason to deny the Word of God but to stand by what the Word of God says about itself. It confesses the Word even if we do not always know how it relates to the findings of science. The findings of science also remain provisional and have in the past proven to be subject to change. Perhaps a confessing theology, accepting the Word of God as it is given to us, is the most honest and objective way of doing theology/church history. I find something of this kind of approach in the words about the young Russian soprano Anna Netrebko, “She understands that whether her audiences are sitting in an opera house or in front of a television screen listening to her on a CD, her way of reaching them ultimately boils down to one crucial thing: the composer’s score” (Orlando: Anna and the Camera, 5).

3.2 Church history is theology

Although it is not the whole of theology, as an academic and scientific discipline church history is theology. If we define theology as “the scientific and time-determined answer to the revelation of God regarding Himself and his direct relation to the cosmos” (Heyns & Jonker 1974:137) or as Steven Paas (2006:17-18) says “theology is the scholarly study of God’s revealed relationship with His creation and with His people”, then church history can be described as the study of the reaction, the obedience or disobedience, of the church to the Word of God, the revelation of God in time – the church being the individual Christian, the church being the community of saints, the church in its assemblies, the church in the functions that it has to fulfil in this world and the church as part and parcel of the context in which it lives at any given time. This means that church history is not only a descriptive science that describes the past in a neutral way. Church history must first and foremost try to determine what the role of the Word of God was in a specific time, how that church of the past reacted to the Word of God, and how it obeyed or disobeyed the Word of God. Bakhuizen van den Brink (1965) sees a very close relationship between the church and the credo, and because of this relationship he believes church history differs from all other forms of history. It is the task of church history to do justice to the Christian faith as an objective force arising only from the Gospel. All of this means that church history is history, but indeed *church* history which makes it primarily the object of research for theology.

3.3 The kingdom of God

Before we say something about the church as a basic theological concept in church history we must first pay attention to the *kingdom of God* as a very important theological concept for a methodology of church history. The kingdom of God forms the primary context for the existence of the whole of creation and especially for the existence of the church. The church is part of the kingdom of God, a very important part for that matter, but the church is not the whole of the kingdom of God. Herman Ridderbos (1978:1) called the kingdom of God the most theocentric concept that Scripture offers for our understanding of creation, man, the world, current and future times; and to this we can certainly also add past times. The kingdom of God and the sovereign rule of Christ include the whole of creation. Where the kingship of Christ is acknowledged, something of the kingdom of God becomes visible, individuals become free and the whole pattern of their lives changes (Ridderbos 1960:303). There is nothing of which it can be said that it does not belong to the kingdom of God even though the kingship of God is not accepted by everyone or everywhere. The concept of the kingdom of God is important if we, for instance, want to understand the difference between church history and the history of Christianity.

3.4 The church

Our concept of the church is a very important theological concept in church history. Within the kingdom of God there are those who obey and accept the Gospel of Jesus Christ and are gathered into a unity, namely the church - the church as a confessing, cultic and orderly community; the church with its message as a teaching - which includes the history of theological training and teaching in the church - preaching, disciplinary community with its offices and assemblies, its pastorate, its deaconate, its missionary and social calling as well as its prophetic task. It stands in relationship to the state - which is a very important relationship because the church is obliged to obey the laws which the state makes unless those laws are contrary to the Word of God - to the economy, politics and the educational system, marriages and families and many other individuals, associations as well as the directional and associational pluralistic systems of the country in which it exists. We can also refer to the history of the various disciplines of theology which also form part of the history of the church; furthermore there is the history of the various forms of art in the church - the art of painting, sculpture, music and architecture which all form part of the history of the church. We may add to these disciplines such as biblical archaeology, the history of denominations, awakenings in history, schisms, reformers and reformations, the history of church leaders, church fathers, popes, monasticism, and the histories of ordinary church members. All of these concerns constitute the field of church history. In all of these concerns the church has its own identity which is primarily to preach the Word of God, to bear witness to the Word of God in all the forms mentioned and to build up the believers' faith in the Word of God. Additionally, the church has to measure the society in which it lives against the Word of God and also minister the Word of God to that society. It is with the history of this church that church history is concerned in order to try to determine how the church of the past fulfilled its task; and so to help the church of the current day to be all the more the church of God within His kingdom.

3.5 Christ the only head of the church

It must also be remembered that Jesus Christ is the only head of the church and that he rules His church through His Word and Spirit and the offices that He gave for the building up of believers (Coertzen 2004:91-99).

3.6 Between the indicative and the imperative of the Word of God

Together with the above observations there is the additional fact that the church always lives between the indicative and the imperative of the Word of God - in Christ the church is holy but she must also always become more and more holy in Him; her faith must be seen through her deeds (Coertzen 2004:118-124).

3 CONCLUSION

This article is an attempt to express some thoughts regarding a methodology for church history. It does not pretend to say everything there is to say about a methodology for church history. It has tried in the first place to clarify what we mean when we speak of a methodology for church history as distinct from the methods and techniques of church history. In the second place it has tried to identify some reasons for the need to have clarity on church historical methodology; and in the third place it has tried to identify a few theological markers for the practise of church history – the Word of God, church history as a theological science, the importance of the kingdom of God in church history, the theological nature of the church and what this means for church history. In the fourth place, it has looked at the headship and governance of Christ over the church and finally the fact that church history is always practised between the indicative and the imperative of the Word of God.

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