

# Basic Lines of Protestant Biblical Hermeneutics and the Question of a Biblical Justification or Denial of Women's Ordination

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In the context of the congress "'We have heard and we know" (Jn 4:42) - Ways of interpreting Scripture. Congress for Theologians from the Baltic Region" on 14 to 15.05.2018 in Lübeck, I was given the task of providing an overview of the theological discussion on Protestant hermeneutics of Scripture. For this purpose, I will first give a brief insight into the overall topic of "hermeneutics" (1) and then focus the question of the validity of the Bible (2) as an issue of the Protestant principle of Scripture. Then (3) I will look at three central hermeneutical perspectives in more detail. In the framework thus outlined, I will then consider (4) how a decision on the ordination of women could be reached today relying on Protestant and biblical hermeneutics. A conclusion (5) finishes my presentation.

## 1. The History of Contemporary Hermeneutics

Since the middle of the last century, the term "hermeneutics" has been greatly expanded in the humanities.<sup>36</sup> I would first like to give a rough definition for our common understanding: By hermeneutics I mean the "art" or "science of interpretation", or more simply: "the discussion about the way in which interpretation is carried out".<sup>37</sup> For a long time, the subject of hermeneutics has mainly been authoritative texts; these are pri-

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<sup>36</sup> Presentation based on Jean Grondin (2012<sup>3</sup>): Einführung in die philosophische Hermeneutik (Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics), Darmstadt, pp 7-12.

<sup>37</sup> As stated by Elisabeth Hartlieb (2007): „Die einzige Regel und Richtschnur ...“. Ist das protestantische Schriftprinzip an sein Ende gekommen? (The only rule and guide. Has the Protestant Principle of Scripture Come to an End?) in: Gerlinde Baumann/ Elisabeth Hartlieb, Fundament des Glaubens oder Kulturdenkmal? Vom Umgang mit der Bibel heute (Foundation of Faith or Cultural Monument. Dealing with the Bible Today), Leipzig, pp 59-88, this on p: 72.

marily biblical, but also legal texts. Hermeneutics in this understanding is therefore originally biblical hermeneutics or legal hermeneutics. This relatively narrow subject area was expanded in the European Enlightenment period. According to Friedrich Schleiermacher, hermeneutics is the "art theory of understanding", the subject of which is no longer only authoritative writings. After Schleiermacher, the subject area was then further expanded in the 20th century. Wilhelm Dilthey understands hermeneutics as the methodological *basic science of the humanities*, and according to Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer it shows the path to a philosophy whose subject is *understanding of the entire world*.

Expanding the understanding of hermeneutics has not been without consequences for biblical hermeneutics either. Thus, there are different syntheses between the biblical sciences and philosophical hermeneutics. These include, for example, the existential-philosophical exegesis of Rudolf Bultmann. Hermeneutics is also extended to the interpretation of culture, of which religion is one of the manifestations; Wilhelm Gräb and others could be named.

Where in this broad debate is the field of Biblical hermeneutics located, especially Protestant biblical hermeneutics in our post-Enlightenment era?<sup>38</sup>

## **2. The Scripture Principle as the Basic Issue of Protestant Biblical Hermeneutics**

The peculiarity and at the same time the fundamental dogmatic problem of Protestant biblical hermeneutics can be summarised under the concept of the Scripture Principle. Scripture alone (*sola scriptura*) is supposed to be the basis of theological statements, and in Lutheran terms it is oriented towards the principle of "what promotes [= preaches] Christ". But in the Enlightenment period, the appreciation of human reason was discovered, combining it with developing historical thinking. Subsequently, histori-

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<sup>38</sup> In line with statements by Hartlieb (2007).

ty is postulated as a criterion of truth, also for biblical texts. Historicity forms an important basis for the historical-critical method that would be developed in the coming centuries. Biblical texts are now also considered historical texts, which are to be examined using the same methods as other texts. And if they are to claim validity, their content must be accessible to human reasoning.

Old Protestant Orthodoxy (from the end of the 16th to the beginning of the 18th century) is opposed to such an interpretation of the Bible which is strongly oriented towards history and reason. According to this doctrine, the authority of the Bible is based on the fact that it contains divine revelation and can claim unrestricted and unaltered validity - regardless of what historical research or rational thought may reveal.<sup>39</sup> To this day, Protestant theology has endeavoured to devise new relations between human authorship of Scripture and divine revelation that offer a way out of this dilemma. In doing so, different paths are taken.<sup>40</sup> Often the need for interpretation of the Bible is emphasised, which brings us back to the field of hermeneutics. The New Testament scholar Christine Gerber outlines the alternatives today as follows: "The fundamental question is ... not what is written in the Bible, but the hermeneutical question about the way in which Scripture has meaning for us: Are the biblical voices which [for example] theologically substantiate a contemporary institution [such

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<sup>39</sup> A brief account of the life and work of Johann Gerhard, the main representative of Lutheran Orthodoxy, is found in Henning Graf Reventlow (2001): *Epochen der Bibelauslegung (Von der Aufklärung bis zum 20. Jahrhundert, Bd. 4)*, (*Epochs of Bible Interpretation, Volume IV: From the Enlightenment to the 20th Century*) München, 21-30.

<sup>40</sup> Hartlieb (2007), 70-72 cites two approaches with biblical reference in this regard: Karl Barth emphasises the Word of God as a divine revelation, whereby the Bible appears as divine self-communication. Contextual, experience-based theologies, on the other hand, try in a less theoretical way to start off with the liberating impulse the Bible texts can unfold for people in very practical situations. In both cases the character of divine inspiration through the Bible does not have its base at the level of the text, but in the first case with God himself and his way of self-communication, and in the second case with the reader.

as marriage] to be understood in such a way that this very institution [of marriage] ... represents God's will laid down in creation? Or is a hermeneutic process necessary to clarify how the profound experience of God as witnessed in the biblical texts can be asserted even in changed social situations?"<sup>41</sup> The key question is therefore whether the Bible contains statements that must be put into practice regardless of the context, or whether the Bible requires constant reinterpretation in every age. Let us decide here with scientific theology for the latter strategy<sup>42</sup> and consider the most important hermeneutical perspectives somewhat more in detail.

### 3. Central Perspectives of Biblical Hermeneutics

Not only in our times<sup>43</sup> is there a multitude of biblical hermeneutical perspectives,<sup>44</sup> which today of course are also connected with the multitude

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<sup>41</sup> Christine Gerber (2006): *Wie wird Ehe- und Familienethik „schriftgemäß“? – eine Zustimmung zur Orientierungshilfe (How do marriage and family ethics become "scriptural"? – Agreeing with the orientation guide)*, in: *Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland* (ed.), *Zwischen Autonomie und Angewiesenheit. Die Orientierungshilfe der EKD in der Kontroverse (Between autonomy and dependence. The EKD's orientation guide in a controversy)*, Frankfurt/M., pp 24-30, this on p 26.

<sup>42</sup> Another possibility would be to link with the existing anti- or post-hermeneutical theories, which are available in different forms; cf. e.g. Marcus Döbert (2009): *Posthermeneutische Theologie. Plädoyer für ein neues Paradigma (Post-hermeneutical Theology. Pleading for a new Paradigm)*, Stuttgart.

<sup>43</sup> Luther and Zimmermann relating to this point out that Origene already postulated a multiple meaning of Scripture. Cf. Susanne Luther/Ruben Zimmermann (2014): *Bibelauslegung als Verstehenslehre (Bible exegesis as hermeneutics)*, in: Luther/Zimmermann [eds.], *Studienbuch Hermeneutik. Bibelauslegung durch die Jahrhunderte als Lernfeld der Textinterpretation: Portraits – Modelle – Quellentexte, Gütersloh, 13-71 (Bible interpretation through the centuries as a learning field for text interpretation: Portraits - Models - Source Texts)*; here: 60. This multiple meaning of writing - as well as the later connection to the fourfold meaning of Scripture in the Middle Ages - already represents a combination of perspectives that lie on different levels.

<sup>44</sup> Gerd Theißen uses the term "polyphonic hermeneutics" for a similar phenomenon in his study *"Polyphones Verstehen. Entwürfe zur Bibelhermeneutik"* (Berlin 2014) (*"Polyphonic Understanding. Developing Biblical Hermeneutics"*); 3, 64 and more (according to Luther/ Zimmermann (2014), 57).

of new approaches to Bible interpretation and literary theory. In their detailed introduction to the "Studienbuch Hermeneutik" (Study Book) (2014), the New Testament scholars Susanne Luther and Ruben Zimmermann examine numerous biblical hermeneutical efforts in the history of Christianity. They come to several conclusions, two of which I would like to mention here.

### 3.1

On the one hand, "the diversity of interpretation approaches ... is a heritage of Bible interpretation from the beginning that must be perceived and preserved."<sup>45</sup>

### 3.2

On the other hand, the different approaches of interpretation reflect three perspectives, each being given a different weight:<sup>46</sup> author, text and reader.<sup>47</sup> I would now like to take a closer look at these three perspectives, following Elisabeth Hartlieb who is lecturer in systematic theology.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Luther/ Zimmermann (2014), 60.

<sup>46</sup> Briefly Ruben Zimmermann (2015): article Hermeneutics, section 4.1: <https://www.bibelwissenschaft.de/wirelex/das-wissenschaftlich-religionspaedagogische-lexikon/wirelex/sachwort/anzeigen/details/hermeneutik/ch/14aa66029f0f88d8494e5835faab903d/#h6> (last accessed 08.09.2021); in more detail Luther/ Zimmermann (2014), pp 59-64.

<sup>47</sup> As the New Testament scholar Ulrich Luz makes clear, these three perspectives have been part of the doctrine of the Inspiration of Scripture since the time of the Old Church; after the Reformation, Protestant theology took up these ideas again; as (but in a different order) in Ulrich Luz (2014): *Theologische Hermeneutik des Neuen Testaments* (Theological Hermeneutics of the New Testament), Neukirchen-Vluyn, 110f.

<sup>48</sup> "Plurality" and the Latin terms are the terms used in Zimmermann (2015), section 4.1; for more details see Luther/ Zimmermann (2014), 59-64. For the dogmatic details, I refer to Hartlieb (2007), 59-88.

### 3.2.1

The first concern are the historical questions - which I have just mentioned - which consider the authors and the *original meaning* of the biblical texts. This hermeneutical perspective has existed not just since the Enlightenment, but during this time it has become more elaborate and has prevailed over the previous practice of interpreting the literary or allegorical meaning of the biblical texts. In some positions of Old Protestant Orthodoxy, however, the authorship of Scripture is ascribed to God or the Holy Spirit alone, in an exaggerated verbal inspiration; the historical human authors then play the role of "assistants" at best.<sup>49</sup> This clearly shows the above-mentioned dilemma of the Protestant principle of scripture.

### 3.2.2

The second hermeneutical perspective focuses on the *biblical text as such*. The high esteem in which the biblical text itself is held, is already laid out in the scriptural principle of Reformation. The argument here goes against the position of the Roman Catholic Church. The Roman Catholic Church recognises tradition as the second authority of the Church alongside the Bible, and the Church's teaching authority as the third. This triad of authorities is opposed by Protestant understanding, which accepts only the biblical text as authoritative. This way of thinking finds a succinct expression in the wording of the Formula of Concord of 1577, according to which the Bible is "the one [meaning *only*] rule and guideline" which is supposed to guide all Protestant activity. Old Protestant Orthodoxy subsequently expanded this scriptural principle into

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<sup>49</sup> "Amanuenses" is the term used by Johann Gerhard (1610): *Tractatus de Legitima Scripturae Sacrae Interpretatione*, 15; after Uta Wiggermann (2009): Article *Schrift/Schriftprinzip III Kirchengeschichtlich* (Scripture/Scriptural Principle III in Church History), in: Wischmeyer, Oda (eds.), *Lexikon der Bibelhermeneutik. Begriffe - Methoden - Theorien- Konzepte*, Berlin, 523f., here: 524; even more detailed and also with reference to Gerhard see Luz (2014), 110f: according to Johann Gerhard, the own will of the biblical author is switched off during the process of inspiration.

an independent doctrine of scripture, which also includes the aforementioned doctrine of *verbal inspiration*, i.e. the inspiration of the words of the biblical text. This expands the idea of the early church, according to which the writers of the Bible and its message are inspired by the Holy Spirit as a whole. However, to underpin the sole authority of Scripture, Old Protestant Orthodoxy goes much further: verbal inspiration can be extended to the individual words and their stylistic idiosyncrasies, and even to the Hebrew vowel signs.<sup>50</sup>

As texts in the 20th century take on a new meaning as independent works of art, the focus shifts from the *authority* of a text to its *autonomy*. In some cases, historical thinking is criticised as it is doubted that just one original meaning can actually be reconstructed. Rather a plurality of meanings should be assumed, which a text can legitimately create out of itself - as an individual text, but even more so in connection with other texts forming an intertextual conversation. In this perspective, the meaning of texts can now be reconstructed with the help of methods of literary analysis (such as narratology)

In the interpretation of biblical texts, these insights become hermeneutically virulent, especially when not just isolated individual verses of the Bible are to be interpreted, but texts are to be understood within the framework of the entire biblical canon. The Old Testament scholar Jürgen Ebach describes this as follows:

"... it is not unusual for me to be able to agree with a biblical term only when I contradict another biblical term. The variety of biblical testimonies of lives lived by people in many different times and under often very different conditions, which can even reach the point of contradiction, is preserved in the canon of 'Scripture' in binding diversity."<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> So according to Luz (2014), 111.

<sup>51</sup> Jürgen Ebach (2013): Alttestamentliche Notizen zur "Orientierungshilfe" des Rates der EKD zum Thema "Familien" (Old Testament notes in the orientation guide of the Council of the EKD on the issue of "Family"), in: Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland (ed.), Zwischen Autonomie und Angewiesenheit. Die Orientierungshilfe der EKD in der

In other words: the polyphony of the Bible in many cases *inevitably* leads to the fact that theological decisions have to be based on a selection or by setting priorities as to which texts should claim validity for today and in what way – and which texts should not. This selection is made by the Bible readers,<sup>52</sup> which brings us to the third perspective:

### 3.2.3

Here the *readers or listeners* of the text are in the focus. In the post-Enlightenment theological tradition, Friedrich Schleiermacher above all others sets this priority. In connection with the doctrine of inspiration, one could speak here of *personal inspiration*, i.e. not – as indicated above at the beginning of 3.2. – of verbal, word inspiration of the biblical text, but of the inspiration of the readers of the text. This is how the scholar in New Testament and Systematic Theology Ulrich Körtner has recently spoken of the "inspired reader".<sup>53</sup> This modern reception of older hermeneutical thinking can also be found in the context of the *linguistic turn* and post-modern philosophy of language, such as the aesthetics of reception. The focus here is particularly on the reader's or listener's efforts to discover meaning for themselves in the (biblical and other) texts. This meaning is closely correlated with the specific world in which they live, which therefore requires special attention. Some contextual hermeneutics can be assigned to this line of thought, such as liberation theology or feminist biblical hermeneutics.

Following the example of the systematic theologian Elisabeth Hartlieb, I would like to introduce another important difference within this perspec-

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Kontroverse (Between autonomy and dependence. The EKD's orientation guide in a controversy), Frankfurt/M., pp 51-53, here: 53.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Luz (2014), p 462 f. with reference to a "canon within the canon" having to be created.

<sup>53</sup> Ulrich Körtner (1994): *Der inspirierte Leser. Zentrale Aspekte biblischer Hermeneutik* (The inspired reader. Central aspects of Biblical hermeneutics, Göttingen; Körtner likens this "inspired reader" to the "implicit reader" of the biblical text.

tive, namely to look at the reader not only as an individual, but also as a collective, i.e. as an *interpreting community or church*.<sup>54</sup> The church - especially after the incompatibilities already described in section 2 above - is today the most important guarantor of a certain hermeneutics. It is the church which decisively shapes the interpretation of the Bible by the faithful. For most believers, this happens through practice in devotions or church services, or through their own interpretation of the Bible, for example in Bible study groups. Last but not least, the church shapes the interpretation of the Bible through its decisions on pressing issues of the time, which are reflected in the EKD's memorandums and guidelines. In contrast to the individual readers of the Bible mentioned above, who discover *meaning* for themselves in the texts, the church is now more concerned with questions of the *validity* of the texts.

The three basic hermeneutical perspectives just presented provide a framework in which a considerable range of possible hermeneutical perspectives can be found. We will now move into this wide area when we turn our attention in the next section to the question of the ordination of women.

#### **4. Biblical Hermeneutics and the Ordination of Women Today**

I am taking up the three hermeneutical perspectives that have just been developed: first, the historical perspective considering the authors, second, the focus on the texts, and third, the view that people and groups reading the Bible are taking today. My focus concerning the exemplary texts is, among others, those New Testament texts which repeatedly are quoted in churches with an Evangelical background that argue against the ordination of women. These are the texts on the command for women to be silent in 1 Cor 11:2-16; 14:33-36 and 1 Tim 2:11-15, and the text on

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<sup>54</sup> Luz (2014) describes the church as an interpreting community which imprints itself on the individual readers (p 181f.); at another point he goes beyond this and regards the church as a dialogue community about the bible (p 555 – 558).

the subordination of women to men in Eph 5:22-33.<sup>55</sup> In the following, starting from the exegetical and hermeneutical basis presented, we shall sketch out specific possibilities of interpretation which do not speak against the ordination of women today.

#### 4.1

*The author's perspective or the historical perspective* on the biblical texts: In this perspective it could be pointed out that texts like Eph 5:22-33 and other so-called "domestic codes", from which the Evangelical side often derives the subordination of women, are not in line with Pauline preaching. Rather, such later texts push back Paul's own insights and are instead oriented towards the spirit of the time (Zeitgeist), as Christine Gerber puts it.<sup>56</sup> The pointed historical-theological argument here could be: What weighs more heavily for us today? The voice of the apostle Paul or a later interpretation that can be interpreted as an appeasement strategy in the society codes of those times, as we can find for example in the letter to the Ephesians? From the perspective of historical biblical hermeneutics, preferably it could be argued to base the discussion about the ordination of women in a modern Protestant church not on a later command of women subordination in Eph 5:22-33, but to oppose it in line with the older Pauline texts.

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<sup>55</sup> In editing the text (1 Cor; 1 Tim) I refer to Christine Globig (1994): *Frauenordination im Kontext lutherischer Ekklesiologie. Ein Beitrag zum ökumenischen Gespräch* (Ordination of Women in the context of Lutheran ecclesiology. A contribution to ecumenical conversation), KiKonf 36, Göttingen, 73; for Eph 5 Gerber (2013), 26.

<sup>56</sup> So Gerber (2013), 27: "Especially the 'domestic codes' (Col 3,18-4,1; Eph 5,22-6,4; cf. 1 Pet 2,18-3,7 and 1 Tim 2,9-15.3,1-5), which became the guiding model of a Christian bourgeois family, follow the spirit of the times (Zeitgeist) with their emphasis on patriarchal marriage and family, and definitely not Paul. If the Ephesians' letter justifies marriage with special theological effort, its obvious aim is to make use of the name of Paul to override Paul's way of qualifying marriage."

## 4.2

This brings me to the second hermeneutical perspective, *the text-centred arguments*. Against the background of the verbal inspiration as developed by Old Protestant Orthodoxy, the entire text of the Bible applies word for word, without changes and with equal value. So, if we can read in 1 Cor 14 and 1 Tim 2 that women are to be silent in the congregation, this represents a real obstacle to the recognition of women's ordination for Protestant communities which are closely oriented towards verbal inspiration. However, this only applies if - as is often the case with such groups - the inner biblical polyphony is disregarded, which has already been pointed out earlier (3.2.2.) in my reference to Jürgen Ebach. In the early days of Christianity, we do not only find the aforementioned commandment to be silent, but there are also a number of women who preach. This applies not only the witnesses of resurrection, i.e. the women at the grave of Jesus, who preach.<sup>57</sup> The woman apostle Junia and other women who are mentioned in Rom 16 did strive to spread the faith in Jesus of Nazareth by preaching and mission work as well. A command for women to be silent, as postulated in 1 Cor 14 and 1 Tim 2, therefore does not reflect the position of *all* early Christian texts or churches, but favours just a certain tendency. This tendency is based - similar to Eph 5 - on what was opportune in the society of the time. In addition, the early Christian women who preached could also refer to Old Testament texts in which prophetesses such as Hulda<sup>58</sup> or the wife of Isaiah<sup>59</sup> are mentioned;

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<sup>57</sup> Luise Schottroff points to Mk 16,7; Mt 28,7; 28,9-10; Lk 24,6-10; 24,22-23; Joh 20,18 (41). According to Luise Schottroff (1992): *Die Frauen haben nicht geschwiegen. Über Prophetinnen, Apostelinnen und Bischöfinnen im frühen Christentum*, in: „... das Weib rede in der Gemeinde“. (The women did not remain silent. On Prophetesses, women apostles and women bishops in early Christianity, in: "... the woman shall speak in the congregation") Maria Jepsen: *Erste lutherische Bischöfin. Dokumente und Stellungnahmen* (Maria Jepsen. *First Lutheran Woman Bishop. Documents and Statements*), (GTB 1118), Gütersloh 1992, 41-48

<sup>58</sup> 2 Kings 22,14-20 par 2 Chr 34,22-28

<sup>59</sup> Is 8,3

and Miriam, the sister of Moses, was also considered a prophetess.<sup>60</sup> - So there would be a whole line of biblical texts that make clear that there were indeed women in the Old and New Testament who preached and spoke with authority. The question is on which texts the emphasis is placed in each case.

### 4.3

Let us now look at the third hermeneutical perspective developed above, which focuses on the *readers* or the *interpreting community*. I would like to present three possible arguments here.

#### 4.3.1

A first dogmatic reasoning could follow personal inspiration, i.e. the spiritual gifts of the Bible readers. There is agreement that the Spirit of Christ leads people to *liberation*. What this liberation can look like is understood in different ways. Let us refer here to the original Christian baptismal formula of Gal 3:28, which says, among other things, that in Christ it is not important whether someone is a man or a woman. Thus, the gift of the Spirit of Christ would mean, among other things, that the gender boundaries are abolished in the church of Christ. So today a pointed and critical question could be: Should we really link the admission of certain people to a preaching ministry or to ordination only to gender, with reference to early Christian traditions?

#### 4.3.2

A second argument could focus on the issue of how problematic it would be to generally exclude *women* from *reading and interpreting the Bible*. To support the necessary inclusion of women, one could for example argue with the basis of the theology of creation: In the text on the image of God (Gen 1:26-28) men and women are of equal rank. A ban for

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<sup>60</sup> Ex 15,20-21

women to publicly read and interpret the Bible would have to offer good arguments as to how this Bible text of fundamental equality could be understood differently.

### 4.3.3

A third line of argument would focus on the *church as a community of readers*. First of all, it would have to be clarified in principle whether all parts of ethical frameworks which were valid in biblical times should be applied without fail today; I have already addressed this problem above in section 2. based on Christine Gerber's statement. In the Protestant Church in Germany, a hermeneutical, deliberative procedure seeks to find practical solutions for many ethical issues. But it often happens, particularly from the Evangelical side, that so-called "biblical arguments" are introduced to oppose certain phenomena or developments of today. These include the wide range of lifestyles - above all homosexuality - but also equal rights for women, living together in the family, or even the theory of evolution. Especially groups with an Evangelical, Biblicist or fundamentalist leaning repeatedly put these issues on the agenda of churches. This leads even today some churches to the brink of division, which is perhaps also the case in Latvia at present.

Formally speaking, there are three possible ways in the deliberative process favoured here, to reach a hermeneutically based decision:

#### 4.3.3.1

First, one could indeed take exclusive and complete *orientation from biblical commandments, bans and instructions*. However, this has never been practised in the church in this way. Otherwise, for example, we would not be allowed to charge interest on borrowed money today<sup>61</sup> - to give a few obvious examples - which would call the entire banking system into question; we would not be allowed to wear clothing made of

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<sup>61</sup> Ex 22,24; Lev 25,35-38; Dtn 22,30; also Ez 22,2.12; Ps 15.

mixed fabric,<sup>62</sup> or eat bloody steak or black pudding.<sup>63</sup> Christianity has always chosen which commandments should be considered important and which should be considered secondary; one need only think of the struggle at the so-called Council of Apostles over the question of male circumcision.<sup>64</sup> Apart from this, there are many questions relevant today to which there are no answers at all in the Bible. This approach of close orientation on the wording of the Bible is therefore hardly a viable one.

#### 4.3.3.2

Second, a *central authority* could decide case to case or in principle what should apply in the church. This is the path the Roman Catholic Church has taken. However, this path contradicts the "priesthood of all believers", which has become a strong tenet since the Reformation and the "doctrinal authority which Luther granted to the Christian congregation".<sup>65</sup> This approach is therefore also out of question in our context.

#### 4.3.3.3

Third and finally, one could use certain overriding criteria or guiding principles to select which texts of the Bible are to have greater or lesser validity at a particular time and on particular topics. This would develop a "*canon within a canon*". This would reduce the biblical polyphony to a certain degree, as a certain emphasis would be set. This strategy is practised today by many Protestant churches; in common discussion processes they agree which of the many voices and approaches of the Bible is to give orientation to the church. The result may be different at different times. Fundamental principle in this process is the idea that every responsible Christian decides for himself or herself, in complete freedom of

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<sup>62</sup> Lev 19,19.

<sup>63</sup> Lev 17,10-14; Acts 15,20.

<sup>64</sup> Gal 2, 1-10; Acts 15.

<sup>65</sup> Hartlieb (2007), 62.

faith, in his or her attachment to the Bible and as part of the community of believers, which orientation he or she will take from the Bible. Decisions by the respective Protestant church merely define a certain framework.

The Protestant Church in Germany follows this third approach outlined above. Reasons for this could be named: If the biblical conditions were to be transferred unreflected and without fail to the world we live in today, our interpretation of the Bible would have to constantly orient itself to the framework of a church and society, which is deeply rooted in the world of antiquity. This includes not only structural discrimination of women, but also other deeply rooted inequalities such as slavery or the lack of rights of people without possessions. All these circumstances are characteristics of the time when the Bible was written, without necessarily being addressed in it. They do not correspond, however, to the human image, as it has been developed in Christian theology over the centuries. One of the main features of this Christian anthropology, based on the theology of creation, is, for example, that people should have equal opportunities and that they should not automatically be given fewer rights and opportunities in life because of their origin from a certain class, because they belong to a certain gender or because they are lacking economic wealth. - The fact that such insights are not always present in the member churches of the EKD is shown by the *Orientation Guide on Family* issued by the Council of the EKD in 2013<sup>66</sup> and the subsequent discussions, which sometimes were fierce, especially because of criticism from Evangelical groups.<sup>67</sup> It was only after publication, that it was spec-

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<sup>66</sup> Kirchenamt der EKD (Hg.) (2013<sup>2</sup>): Zwischen Autonomie und Angewiesenheit. Familie als verlässliche Gemeinschaft stärken. Eine Orientierungshilfe des Rates der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland (Between Autonomy and Dependence. To Strengthen Family as a Reliable Community. A Guide by the Council of the EKD), Gütersloh.

<sup>67</sup> See for example: Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland (ed.) (2014): Familien stärken in Kirche und Sozialpolitik. Zur familienpolitischen Debatte um die Orientierungshilfe der EKD. Symposium des Rates der EKD am 04.07.2014 in Berlin (To Strengthen

ified, that an protestant interpretation of the Bible cannot disregard the situation and always offer the same application of biblical texts or individual verses, but that a hermeneutical process must be followed.

A whole range of very different arguments could therefore be identified, which argue in favour of a Protestant church today to decide in favour of the ordination of women in a hermeneutically responsible way, with reference to the Bible.

## **5. Conclusion**

Hermeneutic thinking – as the recognition of a necessity of Bible interpretation – has existed since the early church. Just as far back goes the plurality of ways of interpretation. In many cases, interpretations concentrate on a closer look at the original authors of the text, the original meaning, the text itself or the readers of the text and their community of interpretation. A particular problem area of Protestant Biblical hermeneutics is the relationship between Scripture and Revelation, the Scripture Principle. Roughly speaking, many churches and theological faculties have followed Martin Luther in recognising the need for interpretation of the Bible, and in discussing the appropriate interpretation of the texts with a general line of biblical thought which must first be determined. Groups and churches with an Evangelical orientation, on the other hand, take a different approach. They reject the need for interpretation of the Bible. In their view, the biblical texts are applicable in our time without further reflection. A recourse to the verbal inspiration of Old Protestant Orthodoxy could justify that such a procedure is legitimate in an Evangelical church. In this practice, church actions and teachings are usually based, without hermeneutical justification, on just a few biblical texts which are always the same, without reference to other biblical voices and without giving reasons why these should be considered less in certain cases.

In a hermeneutically reflected understanding on the other hand, all three hermeneutical perspectives – concerning the historical authors, the text and the readers – should be taken into account, and a well-founded decision should be made, possibly with reference to an overall biblical concept that is reflected concerning its relationship to today.

It should, however, not go unmentioned that the image shown here of the Protestant approach to biblical texts as a basis for church or social action, i.e. the approach cultivated by regional churches of the EKD or the EKD itself, reflects an idealistic image. It is, unfortunately, often (still) the case that biblical texts are appended with hindsight and rather unconnected to arguments based in systematic theology.<sup>68</sup> It was this procedure that contributed to the fact, that when the EKD gave guidance on the issue of family and lifestyles,<sup>69</sup> conflicts had to be dealt with, amongst other things, about the interpretation of biblical texts.<sup>70</sup> However, as is clear above, this has led to some clarification which gives rise to hope for more appropriate use of biblical texts in church publications in future.

In the ideal procedure outlined here, all three hermeneutical perspectives show that there are solid arguments in favour of women being awarded the right to the preaching office. Experience shows, however, that a solid

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<sup>68</sup> Michael Haspel (2000) [Homophober Biblizismus. Vom sola scriptura zum tota scriptura bei der ethischen Urteilsbildung in bezug auf sexuelle Orientierung und gleichgeschlechtliche Lebensgemeinschaften (From solascriptura to tota scriptura in finding ethical guidance concerning sexual orientation and same-sex partnerships), in: Siegfried Keil/Michael Haspel. (eds.), Gleichgeschlechtliche Lebensgemeinschaften in sozialetischer Perspektive. Beiträge zur rechtlichen Regelung pluraler Lebensformen (Same-sex partnerships in a perspective of social ethics. Contributions to a legal structure of pluralistic lifestyles), Neukirchen-Vluyn, 123-149] pointedly remarks with a view to the „Denkschriften-Denkschrift“ der EKD (Memoranda memorandum of the EKD) [Rat der EKD (ed.) (1970): Aufgaben und Grenzen kirchlicher Äußerungen zu gesellschaftlichen Fragen. Eine Denkschrift der Kammer für soziale Ordnung der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland, Gütersloh.] the practice of the church in such a way the “citing Biblical texts by itself had a quality of lending authority to a document.” (148).

<sup>69</sup> Church Office of the EKD, (2013<sup>2</sup>).

<sup>70</sup> EKD (2013).

biblical and biblical-hermeneutical foundation is usually not sufficient to bring about fundamental changes in a church. Cooperation with other stakeholders with similar aims is essential. Therefore, wishes for the Protestant sisters (and brothers!) in Latvia go beyond tracing a biblical foundation for the ordination of women, and extend to the hope that they will find active support for their cause outside the church as well.

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