CHAPTER ONE

POVERTY, RICHES, AND THEOLOGY

Christians live in a world where desperate poverty that leads to starvation, preventable deaths, serious disease, damaged relationships, violated bodies, missed opportunities, and moral degeneration are common (cf. Alcock 1997: 48). Many non-poor Christians seem either not to notice, or not to care. Do they have any moral justification to turn away from poor people’s problems? Does the moral vision of Christianity have clear guidelines on whether Christians have responsibilities toward their fellow humans suffering from poverty? Perhaps more important is the question whether Christianity has any special message for poor people themselves. Does God have anything to say to desperately poor people who live next to the luxurious rich? Does He care about the suffering of poor people? Can He help them escape their poverty?

In this thesis I want to explore these issues. I focus on the following question: “What is the message of the Bible about poverty for us today?” This simple question raises many complex issues that must be dealt with before a simple, clear answer can be given. For example, we must determine what poverty is. We must find a way of distinguishing between those who are poor and those who are rich. Furthermore, we must find out why poverty is a moral issue worth considering seriously. What are the effects of poverty on people? We must analyse all the moral issues raised by a complex phenomenon like poverty.

Once we fully understand what poverty is, what consequences it has, and why we must see the moral issues involved, then we can start asking what the Bible has to say about these issues. To eliminate personal bias, all pos-
sible texts dealing with poverty must be read and interpreted. Once that is done, we can try to put everything together into a coherent view about the Biblical message about poverty. Interpreting the Biblical texts, comparing them with current moral thinking, and adapting their message to our contemporary circumstances can help us design a Christian ethics for today that can guide Christians to live responsibly in societies with great inequalities between rich and poor.

South Africa is a country plagued by poverty. Throughout the twentieth century, i.e. liberation theology. Knowing something about poverty in my context and the value of the strongest theological response to poverty, I can proceed to indicate the conception of Christian ethics I rely on for developing the rest of the thesis as an exploration of various dimensions of the simple question: “What is the message of the Bible about poverty for us today?”

1. A Profile of Poverty in South Africa

There is no way that I can write about poverty without acknowledging my own context. What I know of poverty, I have learnt in South Africa. Throughout my life I have observed poverty in many diverse settings, experienced friends and acquaintances who were poor, and read scientific research describing and explaining what I have encountered. Although there might be many overlaps with poverty in other countries, I do not want to claim what follows is universally true and fully applicable to all people everywhere. Such a claim would be too strong. However, extensive reading of social science reports from different parts of the world suggests the possibility that poverty has general characteristics that are shared by people everywhere. Thus, the
possibility exists that my views on poverty might be relevant and helpful to people outside South Africa. If my views do apply elsewhere, people in other countries must judge it for themselves to be so. I start this thesis by making general observations about poverty in South Africa, before I look at the ways theologians have dealt with poverty and riches. Afterwards I will indicate how I want to address the issue of Christians and poverty.

South Africa is a country plagued by poverty. Throughout the twentieth century poor people desperately hoped for interventions to improve their quality of life. Military defeat for the two Boer Republics in the Anglo-Boer War that ended in 1902 left many white people poor. The so-called “poor white” problem reached its climax in the early 1930s when a deep recession hit South Africa. As white people had political power at the expense of the other people in the country, the problems of poor white people were addressed effectively through governmental interventions and a host of initiatives from civil society.

Two other major problems of poverty co-existed with the problem of “poor whites,” but had to wait many decades to be taken seriously. The so-called Coloured people, descendants of slaves, Khoisan, and whites, suffered poverty as a result of their position as slaves, restrictions placed on them by colonial governments, and their role as exploited farm labourers, which was their only option after their loss of land through colonial conquest. Only in 1973 did their problems of poverty become visible after a multi-disciplinary research report by a governmental commission. The political will to tackle those problems through governmental interventions had to wait until after the end of apartheid.

Black people’s problems of poverty started with the colonial conquest of their land long before the twentieth century. Throughout the twentieth century their problems of poverty were ignored by successive white governments,
while political restrictions virtually stalled all attempts by organs of civil society to deal with those problems. Churches did manage to do some good work. A multi-disciplinary research report, lead by Francis Wilson and Mamphela Ramphele and funded by the Carnegie Foundation of New York, brought the full picture of poverty among black people into public consciousness in 1989. After the final destruction of apartheid in 1994, the new democratic government made the eradication of poverty one of their major priorities.

Ramphele (1999) refer to the extremes of inequality in South Africa. How does poverty manifest in South Africa? What are some of the general characteristics of poverty that are easily recognisable to citizens? In what follows, I want to give a profile of poverty in South Africa based on recent information. The profile is not comprehensive, but only intended to provide readers with a glimpse of the nature of the phenomenon of poverty in the context of South Africa.

The information used were gathered in the 1990s. One set of information comes from a major effort of an interdisciplinary team of researchers published in a report called "Key indicators of poverty in South Africa" (May 1995). The report gives statistical descriptions of the major characteristics of poverty in South Africa. The report is based on a multipurpose integrated household survey covering 9000 households throughout South Africa that was done in 1993 by the South Africa Living Standards Survey. This survey measured the standard of living by using consumption levels of households which are based on household expenditure data.

A second set of information comes from a national census held in 1996. The census covers all people in South Africa and provides a wide-ranging set of statistics of which many are relevant in drawing a profile of poverty in South Africa. A major study, based on both interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary team research, provides the third set of information (May 1998). This study
was commissioned by Deputy President Thabo Mbeki and the Inter-Ministerial Committee for Poverty and Inequality. The study was funded by the governments of South Africa, the Netherlands, and Britain, as well as the World Bank, and the United Nations Development Programme. The statistics used in this report comes from the 1995 Income and Expenditure data of the Central Statistical Services (now called Statistics South Africa).

In their book called "Uprooting Poverty," Francis Wilson and Mamphela Ramphele (1989) refer to the extremes of inequality in South Africa as the contrast between grinding poverty and massive wealth. Is this remark true? Does South Africa indeed have a particularly high income inequality that ranks with the worst in the world?

One way of looking at the degree of income inequality is to compare consumption patterns of different income groups. One such comparison of consumption patterns was made between the 40% of households with the lowest incomes and the 10% of households with the highest incomes. The lowest 40% of households comprised 53% of the population, while the highest 10% comprised only 5.8% of the population. These statistics suggest that households in the highest income group are much smaller on average than those in the lower income groups. The consumption patterns of these two groups tell the story of inequality in South Africa. The lowest 40% of households are responsible for 10% of all consumption in South Africa, while the highest 10% is responsible for 40% of all consumption. This means that the rich households consume significantly more than poor households, suggesting high levels of inequality.

A more detailed statistical analysis of consumption patterns show more of the wide gulf between rich and poor in South Africa. In the following table a few selected indicators of consumption patterns for different income groups are compared.
Comparison of Selected Indicators for Different Poverty Income Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Bottom 20%</th>
<th>Bottom 40%</th>
<th>Top 10%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Food as a % of household expenditure</td>
<td>59.2</td>
<td>57.6</td>
<td>14.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Energy, water &amp; rates as % of household expenditure</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12.6</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monthly food expenditure per adult equivalent</td>
<td>69.75</td>
<td>99.81</td>
<td>436.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic dependency ratio</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of household members 15-64 formally employed</td>
<td>23.9</td>
<td>28.7</td>
<td>80.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average people per room</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To show how wide the gap between rich and poor is, I will concentrate on the differences between the top 10% of households and the bottom 40% of households. In the bottom 40% of households food, a basic necessity, forms 57.6% of household expenditure. In the top 10% of households expenditure on food forms a much smaller percentage of household expenditure, i.e., only 14.9%. Looking at monthly expenditure on food from a different angle heightens the contrast. The bottom 40% of households spend R99.81 per month for every adult, while the top 10% of households spend R436.88 per adult. A significant difference!

A similar pattern is repeated in the case of expenditure on municipal services (energy, water, and taxes). The poorest 40% of households spend 12.6% of their income on these services, while the richest 10% spend only 6.3% on theirs. The inequality between rich and poor also shows in the housing that a household can afford for its members. Comparing the num-
bers of persons per room in households obviously ignores many other factors about housing, such as the quality or setting (location). Nevertheless, the differences are telling. In the lowest 40% of households there are one room for every 2.4 persons, whereas in the top 10% of households there are one room for every 0.5 persons. To appreciate the cramped conditions many poor people live in, one must note the number of households with two rooms or less at their disposal. Of all South African households, 32.6% live in two or fewer rooms, ranging from 23.1% of households in the Western Cape to 39.1% in the Eastern Cape.

![Graph showing % Households living in 2 or fewer rooms 10/96]

Abbreviations for the nine provinces: EC = Eastern Cape; FS = Free State; GP = Gauteng; NC = Northern Cape; NW = Northwest; KZN = KwaZulu-Natal; N = Northern Province; MP = Mpumalanga; C = Western Cape; SA = South Africa

The vast inequalities conveyed by the above statistics become understandable in the light of high unemployment figures. In the top 10% of households 80.5% of household members between the ages of 15–64 are formally employed. In the bottom 40% of households only 28.7% of household members are formally employed. These employment figures translate into frightening statistics about the number of people dependent on formally employed peo-
ple. In the top 10% of households 1.8 persons are dependent on those with an income, while in the bottom 40% of households 5.8 persons are dependent on one person with a much smaller income than the income of those in the top 10%!

The figures depicting the monthly income of employed people show how low the income of a large group of people are – added, the income of those roughly two-thirds of the South African population fortunate enough to have employment.

Amongst employed people, 62% earn less than R1,500.00 per month. Roughly 99% of employed people in South Africa earn less than the category where most university professors would have been in 1996, i.e., between R11,000.00 and R16,000.00 per month.

Education is one of the primary means enabling people to adapt successfully in modern industrial societies. It can fulfil this function only if the correct contents and teaching methods are used, and if acceptable facilities and teachers are available. Lack of education results in illiteracy, being not qualified for any career, and an inability to use the resources of the written media.
for self-improvement. There are strong correlations between low formal education and poverty. Not providing good quality education for black people in the apartheid society was often deliberate, to exclude black people from the better positions in society. Throughout the apartheid era there were glaring racial inequalities in expenditure for education per head of population.

There is an interesting correlation between the sharp degree of income inequality and educational qualifications. The tendency is clear: better educational qualifications dramatically reduce the risk of being poor. People with no education are most vulnerable to poverty, as 69% of them are poor. Tertiary education, on the other hand, seems like an insurance policy against poverty, as only 2.5% of people with tertiary education are poor. Of the group with a primary education 54% are poor, while only 24% of people with secondary education are poor. The value of education as buffer against poverty is clearly confirmed.

From the statistics presented above the degree of income inequality in South Africa is quite clear. The question now is how these statistics compare with income inequalities in other countries.

**Comparison of Income Inequality in Selected Middle Income Countries**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Poland</th>
<th>Thailand</th>
<th>Venezuela</th>
<th>Brazil</th>
<th>South Africa</th>
<th>Malaysia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GNP per capita (US$ 1994)</td>
<td>2410</td>
<td>2410</td>
<td>2760</td>
<td>2970</td>
<td>3040</td>
<td>3480</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% share of income of poorest 20%</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% share of income of richest 10%</td>
<td>22.1</td>
<td>37.1</td>
<td>42.7</td>
<td>51.3</td>
<td>41.9</td>
<td>37.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gini co-efficient (May 1998: 25)</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>0.48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The following results emerge from a comparison of income inequality in South Africa with selected middle income countries like South Africa. The countries are Poland, Thailand, Venezuela, Brazil, and Malaysia. The comparison is between the percentage share of income of the poorest 20% of people and the percentage share of income of the richest 10% of people. South Africa's degree of difference between rich and poor measured in those terms is second highest after Brazil. The Gini-coefficient, based on a formula that expresses this relationship, shows how high South Africa's income inequality is compared to countries with a roughly similar GNP (gross national product) per capita.

An obvious correlation in the statistics on poverty in South Africa is the strong link between poverty and race. This link between poverty and race is starkly portrayed in the poverty rate of 1995.

Only 1% of white people were poor, while 60.7% of black people were poor. Apartheid did indeed channel resources to whites and took good care of them at the expense of blacks! Coloured people also have a high poverty rate, as 32% of this group are poor. The poverty rate among Indian people are relatively low at 5.4%.

The strong link between poverty and race can be demonstrated another way by using a different set of statistics, one that predicts the probability of being poor by using race, province, and the rural–urban distinction. Rural white
people have a higher probability of being poor than urban white people. Rural whites have between 3.7% and 10.6% probability of being poor, depending on the province where they live. Urban whites have an almost negligible probability of being poor, varying between 1.2% and 2.8%, depending on the province. In contrast to the relatively low probabilities of white people being poor, black people have frighteningly high probabilities of being poor. The urban blacks have the lowest probability of being poor, ranging between 33.6% and 61.2%, depending on the province. Rural black people can almost not avoid being poor, as their probability for being poor range between 61% and 83.5%, depending on the province. The vast difference between the probability of whites being poor and blacks being poor demonstrates how effectively apartheid established the link between the white race and riches and the black race and poverty.

The link between race and poverty is thus not arbitrary nor coincidental. It is the result of policies of successive white apartheid governments that deliberately impoverished black people. The apartheid policies from 1948 onwards reinforced and exacerbated already existing patterns of poverty among people of colour caused by colonial conquest, denial of political rights, and industrialisation. In a country where sections of the population were excluded for decades from participation in the political processes at national, regional, and local levels, one can expect politics to have a major impact on the incidence and degree of poverty.

One obvious reason for the negative influence of apartheid politics on poverty is that politicians at different levels of government make decisions about the use of public resources. Local, regional, and national governments decide on priorities for public spending, thus determining the allocation of public resources to what they think worthwhile causes. Their priorities determine the amount and placement of public facilities, and the people who benefit from them. Systematic and prolonged bias in public expenditure in
favour of an elite section of the population substantially impoverished those who were excluded. Poor black people experienced the deliberate neglect of infrastructure in their areas, such as the provision of water, electricity, sewerage, and roads.

The distribution of income was strongly tilted in favour of whites during the apartheid era. The extent of the unequal division of wealth and income is reflected in the following statistics of the National Manpower Commission of the average income for black, white, coloured, and Indian families from 1980–1984 (Cooper et al 1986). In 1980, the relative average incomes of members of the four racial categories in which statistics were kept in South Africa were as follows. Black people earned 24.6% of the average income of whites, coloured people 33%, and Indians 43.8%. Despite an increase of 92% in the income of black people from 1980 to 1984, they only earned 25.9% of the average income earned by white people, coloured people earned 35.2%, and Indians 49.4%. The huge wage gap between the races persisted despite dramatic increases.

The legacy of apartheid can be seen in the sharp neglect of the provision of services to black people. Water, electricity, and transport are three services of particular importance to poor people, as their easy access makes more time available for other duties. Rural Africans, who overwhelmingly belong to the poorest 20% of in South African society, spent approximately 189.5 minutes fetching water every day in 1995. Collecting wood took members of the same group 80 minutes per day. More than four hours of these poor people’s time went into fetching water and fuel, time that could have been spent more productively if they had easy access to other sources of energy and water. Difficult access to energy and water means less time and opportunities for engaging in activities that could ameliorate poverty. One example will suffice. Easy access to water can enable poor people to cultivate vegetables for their own use and for generating extra income.
In 1996 access to water has improved as a result of strongly driven government policies to provide poor people access to water. Households with a tap inside were 44.7%, while 16.7% of households had a tap on site. Access to taps within reasonable walking distance reached 19.8% of households. The rest of the households had access to dams / rivers / streams (12.5%), as well as boreholes / rainwater and water carriers (1.2%) (distance not specified).

Significant to note is the racial divide of households with taps inside their dwellings. As expected do black households have the fewest taps inside, only 27.3%. Coloured households do much better at 72.4%, while white
households follow with 96.4% and Indian households with 97.6%.

Collecting wood for cooking and heating drains poor people’s energy and wastes their precious time. Using candles and paraffin for lighting increases the risks of fires in the often highly inflammable housing used by poor people, while also limiting their activities after dark. Electricity further enables people to use a wide variety of electrical appliances that make life easier and stimulate productive activities that could alleviate poverty and promote self-reliance.

In South Africa, 44.7% of households use electricity for cooking, 46.4% use it for heating, and 58.1% for lighting. Wood is used in 23% of households for cooking and in 27.9% for heating. Paraffin is used in 21.6% of households for cooking and in 14.9% for heating. Coal has a much smaller use, only
3.6% of households use it for cooking and 8.5% for heating. Candles are used by 28.8% of households for lighting, while 12.7% of households use paraffin.

Another aspect of poor people’s lives with a strong impact on available time is their means of transport. A comparison between the use of a car or motorbike versus walking to work is instructive. Although not all rich people use cars to drive to work and not all poor people walk to work, the general tendency suggested by these statistics is significant. Only 30% of all South Africans use a car or a motorbike to drive to work. Of this 30%, 6.5% are among the poorest 20% of South Africans, while 76.7% are among the richest 20%. Only 28.3% of all South Africans walk to work. In this case the statistics are reversed. Of the 28.3% who walk to work, only 8.1% are from the
richest 20% of South Africans, while 62% of those walking come from the poorest 20%. Again poor people lose time and energy that they need much more elsewhere.

Housing is a major problem for poor people in South Africa. Most South Africans are familiar with numerous squatter camps (shanty towns) that have sprung up on the outskirts of towns and cities, the traditional housing of black people in rural areas, and the small houses of farm labourers.

In South Africa, 57.5% of households have formal housing, while 18.2% live in traditional housing in rural areas. Informal housing (including shacks) provides dwellings for 16% of households, while 7% of households stay in someone else’s backyard (shacks excluded). A particular important part of any dwelling is the toilet, as the kind of toilet can have an important influence on the prevention of diseases. Only 50.5% of households have access to a flush or chemical toilet, while 32.4% of households use pit latrines. The bucket system is used by 4.7% of households, while 12.4% of households have no toilet whatsoever.

Many well-off people in South Africa cannot imagine anyone living without a telephone. In South Africa, only 29% of households have any kind of telephone in their dwelling, ranging from only 7.5% of households in the Northern Province up to 55.4% of households in the Western Cape. Of all 9,059 million households covered by the census, 1,655 million reported that they
had no access to a telephone – not a public telephone, nor one at a neighbour, or even at work.

Politics influenced the extent of poverty in various other ways. Banning or restricting special interest groups who aimed to mobilise people already poor or at risk of becoming poor, substantially weakened the bargaining position of the poor. For example, banning trade unions left many workers in low paying jobs without effective bargaining power against exploitative employers. Similarly, if people were not allowed to mobilise themselves they could not effectively resist government policies that aimed to relocate them elsewhere. Such relocations often caused poverty because people were dumped at places where making a living was impossible because of overcrowding or adverse climatic conditions. Relocations also destroyed communal and family ties which functioned as buffers against the worst effects of poverty, thus further weakening people’s resistance against poverty.

Relocations were part of a comprehensive policy to move people belonging to certain groups to specified areas, rather than ad hoc measures to remove people from large dam sites or proposed industrial areas. The apartheid government tried to contain members of a racial group to a specific area and those restrictions severely impoverished such people. Laws restricting people’s movement from rural to urban areas, as well as constraints on housing construction in urban areas led to the overpopulation of rural areas, pressing their carrying capacity far beyond their limitations. The concentration of
people led to an overwhelming pressure on the land, which could not carry
the burden being placed on it. Under these circumstances normal production
quotas were significantly lowered, leading to further impoverishment.

The impoverishment of black people relocated and restricted to already
overpopulated homelands (or reserves) comes dramatically to light when
one notes the estimate that nearly 70% of poor people in South Africa live in
the former homelands.

**Nearly 70% of the poor live in the former homelands**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Former Homelands</th>
<th>Poverty rates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transkei</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qwa-Qwa</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebowa</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ciskei</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gazankulu</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bophutatswana</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venda</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KwaZulu</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kangwane</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kwandebele</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The poverty rates in these areas are particularly high, as between 48% and
92% of their inhabitants are poor. Of the ten former homelands, eight have a
poverty rate higher than 60%, while four of them have poverty rates higher
than 70%. These extraordinarily high figures can be traced back to the poli-
cies of racial separation, dictated by colonial conquerors to militarily subor-
dinated and politically dominated indigenous peoples.

The political actions referred to above are examples of actions that apartheid
governments at local, regional, and national levels did to impoverish people. There were numerous acts of omission that did the same, or simply perpetuated existing conditions of poverty. No provision for unemployment insurance, inadequate old age pensions, and inadequate schooling all contributed to poverty. Though there were limitations on government spending, acts of omission could only be acceptable if government actions and policies were judged to be equitable. That never was the case. The result of pursuing unjust policies was the impoverishment of black people in South Africa.

Wilson and Ramphele refer to the scandalous particularity of poverty in South Africa. Perhaps an appropriate set of statistics to conclude the scandalous particularity of this brief profile of poverty in South Africa is one referring to children living in poor households. Children often suffer in poor households for lack of food, clothing, and money to participate in worthwhile activities. Only in two provinces do less than 50% of the children live in poor households, i.e., in Gauteng and the Western Cape. In the other seven provinces, between 59.2% (Northern Cape) and 77.5% (Eastern Cape) of all children live in poor households. Poverty affects them right from the start.

If poverty seriously affects the lives in people in the ways described above, what responses have theologians offered for dealing with the suffering of poor people? In the next section the dominant theological response to poverty this century, that has developed Christian theology in new directions, will be critically scrutinised.

2. Theology and Poverty Thus Far – Dominant Themes

In the last four decades Latin American theologians have initiated a theological turn towards the poor that dominates debates on Christianity and poverty. They follow an important strand in Christian tradition of care for the poor and they extend the turn towards social issues in European theology that got under way in the twentieth century. Nevertheless, their explicit focus
on the plight of poor people brought a new dimension to Christian theology through the introduction of liberation theology. It soon became liberation theologies, as differences in emphases and results emerged among Latin American theologians. The idea of a liberating theology also spread to other oppressed groups, such as women and black people. In what follows, I want to present the main themes of recent theological debates on Christianity and poverty, based on a representative sample of texts drawn from liberation theology, African theology, and responses to them. I focus on these two kinds of liberation theology, as they deal directly with poverty. I will highlight their strengths and discuss the shortcomings. The latter provide opportunities for me to attempt to make some kind of contribution.

(Moss 1988)

What motivates liberation theologies? These theologies arise from the desperate situations of poverty, oppression, and resultant misery that millions of people in Third World countries experience. Liberation theologians use strong language to describe the experiences of the people they serve. They refer to the “scandal of poverty” (De Santa Ana 1979: 67) resulting from a “world of destitution and injustice” (Boff and Boff 1987: 3). The poor people live in a “human and social hell” (Boff and Boff 1987: 3), with the majority experiencing “tremendous social injustices,” living in “dismal poverty” and “inhuman wretchedness” (Hennely 1990: 114). As a result they describe the poor people as being “millions of debased and marginalised human beings” (Boff and Boff 1987: 3) who are impoverished, exploited, despised, and marginalised (De Santa Ana 1979: 124). Liberation theology aims at dialogue with these “non-persons,” i.e., those people who are kept in a subhuman situation through destitution and exclusion (Núñez 1985: 135).

How did the poor people that liberation theologians care about get into these desperate situations? Liberation theologians call these situations “an oppressive status quo” (Martey 1993: 55), a situation of “domination and dependence” (Núñez 1985: 132), and an “oppressive system” that perpetuates
poverty (Jonsson 1993: 78). The causes of these situations are identified as the history of colonialism, missionary preaching endorsing colonialism, oppressive governments, international economic exploitation, and Western imperialism and domination (De Villiers 1987: 2; Martey 1993: 124). Commenting on the role of missionary preaching in Latin America, Segundo says that "literally millions of people are dying because for five centuries the gospel has been interpreted in a particular way" (Segundo 1993: 119). One result of colonialism was a colonial mentality instilled in the colonial subjects that passively accepted political domination and social oppression. This mentality became a major weapon to keep poor and destitute people down. Sometimes this mentality affects the practice of theology negatively as well (cf. Mosala 1989).

A dominant question for liberation theologians is: "What does it mean to be a Christian in these inhuman circumstances?" (Boff 1984: 10). The answer to this question aims to restore the credibility of Christianity through showing poor people that God cares about them (Boff and Boff 1987: 8). Liberation theologians want to make Christianity alive for poor people, demonstrating that this faith can make a difference to their lives (Gutiérrez 1972: 192). To show this difference is necessary to prove the authenticity of the mission of the church (Gutiérrez 1972: 222). The existence of millions of poor people challenge liberation theology to rethink the mission of the church, to revise their priorities, and to get to a new self-understanding of its role and function in society (De Santa Ana 1979: 97).

Through restoring the credibility of the message of Christianity, liberation theologians hope to direct the faith of believers to enable them to transform history (Boff and Boff 1987: 14). They want to create an attractive, human picture of how the world can be that will motivate people to work towards its implementation (Maimela 1987: 151). This picture must have a dominant emphasis on promoting respect for human dignity (Hennely 1990: 521). The
picture must illuminate the search for solutions to desperate poverty with the light of faith and indicate the broad lines of action that will lead to liberation from destitution and oppression (Hennely 1990: 500). Through constructive engagement in real problems of millions of suffering people, liberation theologians want to overcome their own intellectual dependence on European theology and make contributions to theology world-wide. They refuse to be quiet and to refrain from speaking out against the ways that the strong are exploiting the weak (Gutiérrez 1972: 105). They want their theologies to enrich bishops and priests, involved with poor people, to improve their ministries by enabling them to co-operate more effectively in solidarity with the poor and to encourage them to protest more vociferously with the poor against their poverty (Boff and Boff 1987: 18).

The method of liberation theology can best be understood from their desire to be organic intellectuals, i.e. intellectuals who are involved in the lives of the people they serve and who use their intellectual work to further the cause of those people. Practising theology follows after the involvement of theologians in the liberating practice that poor people engage in. Liberation theologians must have first hand knowledge of the oppression and the attempts at liberation of poor people. The theologians must somehow be involved in the struggle for liberation through participation in small Christian groups, trade union, political parties, etc. (Hennely 1990: 416–417). From this practical involvement they get to know the real world of oppressed and destitute people that must be drawn into the heart of the process of theological reflection (Gutiérrez 1972: 196; Boff and Boff 1987: 23).

Liberation theology is developed by theologians with a direct involvement in the lives and political struggles of poor people. Their solidarity with poor people must go even further. Their theology must be practised from the core of a commitment to solidarity with the poor. This implies that they try to view the socio-political reality from the perspective of the poor and give priority to
face the questions the poor raise in their struggle against degrading poverty (Boff 1984: ix). They turn to the Bible and the tradition of theology to find adequate answers to the urgent questions that arise for the poor in their quest for liberation (Maimela 1987: 75).

Liberation theologians do not see their theological theories as absolute, permanent, or everlasting, but rather as temporary interpretations that will change as the socio-political practice they reflect on changes (Boff and Boff 1987: 91). If their theological theories change their societies, they have to reflect anew on the changed society and face up to the new questions in the light of their faith (De Gruchy 1991: 68).

For liberation theologians to know the real world of the oppressed poor people, they must be more than just highly skilled in the art of articulation. Through the art of articulation they can articulate the discourse of society and the oppressed, the world of popular, symbolic and sacramental signs, and the faith and normative tradition of the church (Boff and Boff 1987: 19). However, liberation theologians all emphasise the value of the human sciences for providing a detailed social analysis of the situation of poor people. This analysis is a prerequisite for doing liberation theology. They use strong language to depict the importance of the human sciences for their way of doing theology. They describe the human sciences an “absolutely basic requirement” for liberation theology (Ilunga 1978:3), as it is impossible to practice theology without noting their results (Hennely 1990: 352). The human sciences have an importance that “cannot be overemphasised” (Martey 1993: 75) because of its “great significance” for contemporary theology (Hennely 1990: 352).

What do liberation theologians expect from the human sciences? They expect the human sciences to get to the bottom of events, relationships, and structures in society so that they can get the “most exact understanding
available of the causes" (Hennely 1990: 421). In the process the human sciences can use whatever instruments or tools are needed to provide the "most rigorous possible analysis of the mechanism and functioning" of their society (Hennely 1990: 421; Boff 1984: 76). Through such analyses liberation theologians hope to become aware of all the instances of injustice and oppression, as well as of the sites where justice and participation are enabled (Boff 1984: 76).

A detailed, scientific analysis of the circumstances and causes of poverty and oppression is not enough. Liberation theologians insist on combining such analyses with the rich interpretations the poor themselves make of their world (Boff and Boff 1987: 30). Liberation theologians must articulate these interpretations made by the poor through listening to them attentively. Only by combining scientific analyses with the views of the poor themselves will liberation theologians get to the heart of what is going on in a society.

Part of understanding what is going in a society, is to look critically at existing formulations and embodiments of Christian faith. Both the church and theology are targets of this critical evaluation in the light of new interpretations of the Christian faith. For many liberation theologians the process of liberation starts by viewing existing embodiments of Christianity with suspicion as a result of possible collusion between the church and oppressors (Martey 1993: 57).

Difficult questions are raised that aim at establishing a link between oppressive, inhuman behaviour and similarly oppressive, inhuman understandings of the Christian faith (Segundo 1993: 71). The questions arise from the experience that some strongly Christian countries are simultaneously some of the most inhuman countries as well. The question then becomes whether there is a link between oppressive social practices and oppressive interpretations of Christianity (Segundo 1993: 71; Martey 1993: 57). There is no
doubt in the minds of liberation theologians that Christianity can be misused to justify cruel domination, exploitation, and oppression (Maimela 1987: iii). Liberation theologians thus find it important to critically scrutinise the lives, actions, and practices of Christians involved in exploitative economic relations, dominating political practices, and oppressive human relationships (Maimela 1987: 78–84). The issue is to determine whether what is claimed to be Christian really measures up to that highly moral label (Maimela 1987: 84).

Theology itself must be critically interrogated to determine its authenticity as adequate interpretation of the Word of God. Liberation theologians argue that theology itself cannot be politically neutral. So-called neutral theologies are insufficiently aware of their own presuppositions consisting of political and economic ideologies. These “neutral” theologians do not use social analyses that would have clarified their social starting point and the way they themselves have unconsciously surrendered to the norms, attitudes, and behaviour patterns of their societies (De Santa Ana 1979: 121).

The uncritical attitude towards their own contingent platform of theologising places neutral theologians at risk of falling in the trap of the “bourgeois captivity of theology” (De Santa Ana 1979: 116). This means that theology can fall victim to the perspective of the dominant class in society. What happens is this. The theologians do not personally know impoverished, oppressed people, nor do they see their faces, or hear their voices as parts of their everyday or academic lives (De Santa Ana 1979: 116–117). As a result the theologians do not know about the experiences and sufferings of the poor, they do not hear about their needs, and they are unaware of the urgent questions poor people ask to God and the church (De Santa Ana 1979: 116–117). In this way these “neutral” theologians have become blinded to suffering and unconsciously they have kept the poor from their theological agendas.
Critically evaluating existing embodiments of Christianity in society to determine whether they contribute to oppression or liberation is an important part of liberation theology. How do liberation theologians understand liberation and how do they contribute to the struggle for it? Liberation is understood as more than political liberation. Integral liberation includes economic, spiritual, social, and pedagogical dimensions as well (Boff and Boff 1987: 25, 91). This liberation is ultimately liberation from human sin, as human sin is the deepest reason why human beings are enslaved in various ways in oppressive societies (Hennely 1990: 393).

Liberation theologians refuse to judge sin solely as something personal. They define sin in reasonably conventional terms. Sin is turning away from God and others to seek one’s own advantage (Ilunga 1978: 36). Sin can be seen in people’s refusal to love, care for, or engage in meaningful fellowship with other people (Maimela 1987: 95; 113). That human sin is the underlying reason for most human troubles are still conventional enough (Ilunga 1978: 35). However, liberation theologians insist that sin can be embodied in oppressive and destructive structures and social forces (Gutiérrez 1972: 135; Maimela 1987: 95). Thus, political domination, social oppression, and economic exploitation are the result of human sin and its consequences.

God’s salvation of human beings is likewise defined as comprehensive with radical implications for human societies now. Although God’s salvation might be spiritual, it must be embodied in “temporal realities” (Ilunga 1978: 129). The continued practice of preaching in the church presupposes that people can be changed, renewed, or transformed (Maimela 1987: 118). This presupposition rests on Christ’s salvation that makes it possible that a new (African) humanity could arise (Maimela 1987: 113). Christ’s salvation can change people to care for one another, to engage in fellowship with one another, and motivate them to work for the creation of a just society (Hennely
1990: 71; Maimela 1987: 116). Christ’s salvation manifests itself not only in individual conversions of sinful lives towards God, but also in every societal change from a less human to a more human and just society (Hennely 1990: 71). For this reason Christianity is judged to be a “matchless liberating force” (Ilunga 1978: 129). The church, though, is a flawed carrier of this force and therefore needs continual conversion to the fundamentals of this liberating force so that it can be effectively actualised (Ilunga 1978: 130). The truth of Christianity must show itself in transformed societal structures that enables abundant life for everyone. The value and truth of theology must become clear in new and improved action and practices of the church (Gutiérrez 1972: 101). Orthopraxy, in the sense of doing what God commands so that new habits of living in the world are established, becomes the criterion of theology (Bonino 1975: 81, 89; Hennely 1990: 162).

Liberation from sin and its social embodiments comes about through a partnership between God and human beings (Boff and Boff 1987: 91). God’s love for humans goes against all injustice and exploitation (Gutiérrez 1972: 176). God’s Holy Spirit will lead His children to liberation from everything preventing them from being God’s children and from loving God and one another (Gutiérrez 1972: 153). This divine role in liberation does not invalidate human roles. Human responsibility for liberation from oppression and exploitation starts with conscientisation (Gutiérrez 1972: 80). Conscientisation means that human beings discover themselves as subjects of history who have their own part in making and remaking human societies (Hennely 1990: 47). Through discovery of this role they become aware of the possibility of transforming their situation if they can get to an adequate understanding of those situations (Hennely 1990: 7). Oppressed people must rid themselves of a passive oppressors’ consciousness that disable them to change their concrete circumstances (Gutiérrez 1972: 80). Once they realise that they can become actively engaged in attempts to rebuild their society into something more just, they can become aware of the causes of injustice and
the mechanisms keeping their oppression in place. Through this knowledge they come to see possibilities for changing their society. By joining resistance movements aiming at liberation of people and transformation of society, oppressed people become confident of their power to effect change (Boff and Boff 1987: 6). Through conscientisation oppressed, poor people realise their own responsibilities within the overall web of responsibilities for a society and they can play their parts and make their contributions to create a better society for everyone (Ilunga 1978: 7–8).

Liberation theologians realise that their commitment to struggle alongside the poor against oppressive societal structures might become highly controversial within the Christian church. Nevertheless, they are willing to deal with resulting confrontations, as they firmly believe that the demands of the Gospel are in stark contrast to the practices of unjust and oppressive societies (Gutiérrez 1972: 108). Their firm belief comes from the central importance of the ideas embodied in the slogan “the preferential option for the poor”? What does this slogan mean?

Liberation theologians use different expressions to articulate the idea of a preferential option for the poor. Opting for the poor or making an option for the poor expresses the idea that God and people make a choice for taking care of the interests of the poor (Boff and Boff 1987: 44). To be on the side of the poor, or to side with them, articulates the idea of being next to the poor in their struggle against injustice (Boff and Boff 1987: 4; Boff 1984: 59). To lend support to the downtrodden people in society formulates the idea that people unjustly treated are helped in their need (Hennely 1990: 104). Very similar is the notion of special concern for those trampled underfoot, which suggests that people exploited and treated without respect needs special treatment. Taking up the cause of the poor implies that other people are acting on behalf of the poor to change societal structures for their benefit (Boff 1984: 24). A similar expression states that God “champions the cause
of the poor" (Maimela 1987: 70). The intention is to say that God defends, fights for, or promotes the cause of the poor. A German expression, "Die Hinwendung zu den Notleidenden" (Schwantes 1975: 279) has the element of turning towards those who are in need. An Afrikaans formulation goes as follows: "opkom vir diegene wat geen regte het nie of aan wie geen reg geskied nie" (Cloete and Smit 1984: 66). These phrases point to the idea that God stands up for those whose rights are violated and those without any rights.

One can see from the various shades of meaning articulated by different expressions of the core idea of the preferential option for the poor that the justification for this option is that God the Father and Jesus Christ have both demonstrated the option (Boff and Boff 1987: 44; Boff 1984: 40). Throughout the Bible evidence are available that God cares for the poor and vulnerable people of society in a special way. Christ Himself lived a poor life and made many statements suggesting that the poor must be treated in a special way. When both rich and poor people make an option for the poor, they are merely imitating what God has already done (Hennely 1990: 523).

What does it imply to make this option for the poor? From the different expressions for the preferential option for the poor discussed above, two dominant meanings emerge. One is the idea of standing beside the poor and supporting them in their struggle against their poverty. The other is taking up their cause and acting on their behalf. Further implications of the preferential option for the poor are as follows. Poor people themselves are challenged to take up the preferential option for the poor. For them it implies that they make an option for others like them or even poorer, become prepared to join others in a struggle to eradicate their poverty, and thus become agents of their own liberation (Boff 1984: 24; Boff and Boff 1987: 46).

For non-poor people the preferential option for the poor have more implica-
tions. Non-poor people must acknowledge that poor people have rights and that those rights must be defended against oppressors and taught to the poor so that they can know how to use them (Hennely 1990: 104; Cloete and Smit 1984: 66). Not all rights are equal and liberation theologians concur that the right to life is most important, followed by the right to the means of life (Boff 1984: 44). Only then follow rights to political and civil freedoms. Thus, a preferential option for the poor implies that non-poor people will struggle alongside the poor to establish justice in their favour through comprehensive social transformations (Boff 1984: 24). Through proclaiming Christ and His preferential option to the poor, they can enable the poor get resources to restore their dignity, help in their liberation, and lead them to new relationships with God and their fellow humans (Hennely 1990: 256).

How does liberation theologies justify this preferential option for the poor through the use of Biblical texts? It was already noted that they refer to God’s action in history towards the poor and therefore conclude that His followers must imitate His values and actions. Liberation theologians argue that although themes like these might not be the most important themes in the Bible, they are the most relevant for the poor in their situation of oppression and exploitation (Boff and Boff 1987: 33). Thus, when they read the Bible from the perspective of the poor and oppressed, they highlight those aspects that reflect God’s willingness and ability to overthrow unjust regimes, provide freedom to all people, and to give abundant life to everyone (De Gruchy 1991: 75).

Two Biblical texts play an especially prominent part in justifying the preferential option for the poor. The exodus narrative in the Old Testament plays a fundamental role as prototype of all liberation from enslavement and oppression. God listened to the cries of the oppressed and enslaved Israelites and liberated them from Egyptian bondage. This liberation is read primarily as a political act (Gutiérrez 1972: 116). God chooses for the poor, the lowly,
and oppressed and against the mighty, arrogant oppressors. Some liberation theologians read the exodus as both political and religious and give more emphasis to the role of the exodus in the formation of God’s people, Israel (Hennely 1990: 397). This perspective adds to the importance of God giving Israel freedom the fact that He also gave them land, a law, a covenant, and descendants to populate the land (Hennely 1990: 474). In the New Testament the identification of Jesus with the poor, vulnerable, and marginalised people of Matthew 25: 31–46 is strongly emphasised as justification for the preferential option for the poor. Jesus chose to identify so strongly with them that He saw any aid to them as aid to Himself.

God’s followers who make the option for the poor are called the evangelical poor. These are people, not necessarily poor, who show solidarity with the poor and place themselves in God’s service to be His instruments and signs of His Kingdom (Boff and Boff 1987: 48). They open themselves completely to God in gratitude for their salvation and do not find the meaning of their lives in accumulating wealth, power, or glory (Boff and Boff 1987: 48). They pursue a simple lifestyle so that they will have resources left with which to help the poor (Roy 1993: 104). Their simple, sometimes poor, lifestyle is simultaneously a protest against the genuine poverty suffered by the real poor people in society (Gutiérrez 1972: 221). However, there are limits to this identification with the poor. Non-poor people have to realise that they will never be as the poor (Boff 1984: x). Although the non-poor can be allies to the poor and show commitment to their cause, they can never “participate sufficiently in their passion,” nor ever be “part and parcel of their crucified lives” (Boff 1984: x). One must note the religious metaphors used to describe aspects of the lives of the poor that the non-poor cannot experience. These limits to full identification with poor people should make the non-poor humble. They will have to allow poor people to be agents of their own liberation. The non-poor can support them in their struggle.
3. Shortcomings in Liberation Theology

The major shortcomings in liberation theologies that I would like to address are the following. Although liberation theologians stress the indispensability of the human sciences for theology, they do not make sufficient use of them. Their social analyses are not detailed enough, especially as far the phenomenon of poverty goes. Their use of Marxism as theoretical instrument for social analysis is not good enough anymore. Recent detailed research on poverty in the human sciences can provide far more refined analyses than a Marxist framework can.

Their focus on the role of the human sciences caused liberation theologians to neglect the role of philosophy. Recent debates in political philosophy on the nature of a just society can provide interesting and useful analyses of the matters of justice involved in poverty. Linking a Biblical ethics on poverty and wealth with the moral issues raised by contemporary understandings of justice might be instructive.

Liberation theologians do not provide enough detailed analyses of all relevant scriptural texts dealing with poverty. Furthermore, they do not focus enough on biblical texts that deal with wealth and riches. I intend addressing these shortcomings through presenting analyses of all texts directly relevant to poverty and riches in the Bible. I do not want to present a theology of poverty and riches, but rather both a Biblical and Christian ethics of poverty and riches. A theology of poverty and riches suggests that it articulates the full or main message of the Biblical texts. An ethics of poverty and riches is far more modest, suggesting it deals with one aspect of the message contained in the Biblical texts. Thus, through this choice I want to deliberately acknowledge that the message of the Biblical texts is immensely richer than just its message on poverty and riches, however important I firmly believe the latter is. But how does one design a Christian ethics of poverty and riches? In what follows, I will present my view of ethics that will guide my attempt to
construct a Christian ethics of poverty and riches in this thesis.

4. The Nature of Christian Ethics

Ethics concerns the acceptable behaviour of people toward other people. Ethics defines what people ought to do for others, what they ought to refrain from doing to others, and what reasons they must present in justification. In ethical debates people argue whether they should only protect their own interests, or whether the interests of other people should also be taken into account. If other interests should count, then ethics usually indicates to what extent we should consider the interests of other people.

What makes Christian ethics unique is the role assigned to the ancient sacred texts of the Bible. The God proclaimed by these texts is judged as sovereign and therefore the sole authority and ground of Christian ethics. Human beings are not the subjects of ethics, that is, the designers of ethical principles and the makers of arguments in support thereof. They are only the interpreters of how the sovereign God portrayed in the ancient sacred texts of the Bible commands His followers to conform to His will and character. Believers are thus not subjects of the ethical statements of Christian ethics, but the predicates to whom these statements apply (Barth 1957: 550). Theologians do not create Christian ethics nor do they lay down the rules, but merely articulate, systematise, and apply what they find the God of the ancient sacred texts saying.

Christian ethics are fully determined by the contents of faith in God. The problem of ethics is not one to be solved by human reason, community values, or tradition as guiding principles or grounding sources. The problem of ethics is understood to be a theological problem. What this means is not only that the moral teaching of the ancient sacred texts of the Bible should always be seen in relation to the full collection of Biblical texts and thus in the theological context of their central teachings. It means that Christian
ethics belongs to systematic theology, and especially to the doctrine of God (Barth 1957: 512). To understand the doctrines of the Christian church, in particular those about God, means to know what God wants from humans. To understand God as Lord that rules, implies to know that He wants humans to obey His (ethical) commands (Barth 1957: 512). Faith in God as Lord of a believer’s life is indissolubly linked to the practice of living according to God’s norms and values. The ground of Christian ethics thus is the God proclaimed by the Biblical texts.

The link between faith in God and an ethical life is found in both collections of ancient sacred texts, namely, the Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament texts religion and morality are discussed together in several ways (cf. Kaiser 1983: 4). For their authors God provides the standard of good behaviour and believers must want to embody important characteristics of God, like love, holiness, and compassion, in their lives. To know God thus means that a person will know what is the right and just thing to do. God has saved and delivered the people of Israel in the past, therefore He can demand that they live according to His commands. God’s choice to save Israel is the ground for urging them to live a holy life (Kaiser 1983: 33). The motivation to live ethically comes from a personal relationship with God who made the first move to choose and save people (Kaiser 1983: 5, 6). Their response must be obedience to what God commands.

The collection of New Testament texts also focus on what God has already done for humans and how they thus ought to respond. In the ancient sacred texts of the New Testament God acted through Jesus Christ to benefit all people. Jesus died on the cross and was resurrected to live and rule with God for the sake of humans. His work of salvation has major implications for the daily lives of believers and the Christian church. Anyone who accepts God’s salvation are under obligation to follow the commands of God – to live an ethical lifestyle appropriate to people who proclaim God’s lordship over
their lives and hope for God’s new world to come.

The strongest formulation of the unity between ethics and systematic theology comes from Karl Barth (1957: 509). He argues that the ancient sacred texts of the Bible have two major themes that are inextricably linked. The first theme is the divine election of grace, which Barth describes as the content of the Gospel, that is, God’s good news to humans (Barth 1957: 510). God’s purpose in electing humans to be His followers is to rule over them. For this reason God’s election of humans determines their lives to serve Him and witness about Him. God thus claims humans for Himself, puts them under His command, and sanctifies them (Barth 1957: 516). In turn, they must fully accept that what God has done is right.

The second theme found in the ancient sacred texts of the Bible is inferred from the first. Barth is convinced that believers learn to understand what God wants from them and for them by noting what He has done for them. Having thus noted His divine election of grace as that what He did for humans, it now remains to determine what He wants from us and for us. God’s divine command is found in the Law, regarded by Barth as the form of the Gospel (Barth 1957: 509). Jesus, in His human life on earth, is the big answer to the ethical question. His whole life was freely and fully subject only to the will and command of God. To be subject to God’s commands is to come face to face with the One giving those commands.

This strong link between faith in God and an ethical life, between what God has already done for us and how we ought to respond, between the grace of God and the law or command of God has the further function to communicate the contents of the ancient sacred texts to people who do not believe in God. Thus, not only are systematic theology and Christian ethics inextricably linked, but also Christian ethics and missiology. The accepted way in the Christian church of proving the truth of the ancient sacred texts of the Bible
is to live an ethical life based on their contents. More powerful than any theoretical argument is the demonstration of the truth of the love of God for humans in the lives of believers. What believers confess in faith are best exemplified and validated through ethical conduct fully commensurate with the meanings of the ancient sacred texts of the Bible. Believers making their faith true in everyday life shows to everyone that God’s recreation of the world at the end of time is already at work in a transformative healing of their lives. Thus, ethics becomes mission proclaiming hope (Nürenberger in Eybers et al 1982: 227, 247).

Christian ethics figures out what conformity to God implies for people’s everyday life. What should be the priorities of believers? What are the contents of a new lifestyle that ought to accompany the transformation that faith in God causes in the life of a person? How should believers take care of the lives, talents, opportunities, relationships, and environments God have entrusted them with? From these questions the unique focus of Christian ethics emerges. The uniqueness results from an exclusive grounding in the meanings of the ancient sacred texts of the Bible to function as normative guide and orientation for its contents.

The unique contents of Christian ethics do not result from the isolation of theological ethics from other intellectual disciplines. Christian ethics needs intellectual disciplines other than theology for the formulation of ethical problems. To formulate ethical problems in sufficient detail is necessary for a satisfactory discussion and an adequate answer to such problems. To understand the world of humans and the details of their situation is a prerequisite for ethical reflection (Nürenberger in Eybers et al 1982: 247). The contents of ethical reflection can be influenced decisively by the detailed analysis of an ethical issue (De Villiers 1978: 178). Ethical arguments depend to some extent on empirical information that must be consistent with results obtained from currently accepted methods of inquiry. They also depend on
beliefs about social processes and the nature of human beings. Such beliefs must be defensible and based on adequate grounds if the ethical arguments are to be convincing. To interpret ethical issues Christian ethics must use research results from other sciences to get a comprehensive picture that must be accompanied by an in depth analysis of the issue. Interpretations of ethical issues might not be fully impartial and value-neutral, as the interpreter’s moral and religious convictions will play a role in the way the interpreter reads a moral situation (De Villiers 1978: 178). However, prior moral or religious bias can be minimised if Christian ethics actively engages other kinds of ethics and ethical theories in dialogue. Such engagement is important for several reasons. Theologians are influenced by other kinds of ethics and ethical theories and they form part of the *Vorverständnis* with which they read the ancient sacred texts (Hays 1996: 2). They ought to be aware of, and acknowledge, such influences. Only through such awareness can they consciously deal with their prejudices and eliminate those seemingly incompatible with their Christian faith. Taking other kinds of ethics seriously will also help them to recognise what sources of moral wisdom other than those drawn from the ancient sacred texts of the Bible play a role in the development of their ethical views (cf. Hays 1996: 295).

There are other important reasons for dialogue with different ethical views. To listen to the legitimate concerns, motives, assertions, and problems expressed by other ethical views provide theologians with sources and material for their own discussions. Two attitudes are appropriate toward these sources and material. An openness to absorb anything that is useful for better understanding of an ethical issue at hand can enhance the intellectual depth with which Christian ethics deals with issues (Barth 1957: 524, 527). Absorbing aspects and insights from different ethical theories has the danger of uncritically accepting their views, methods, principles, or definitions of moral issues. This happens when the categories and concepts of other
ethical discourses are uncritically accepted without subjecting them to sustained critical scrutiny informed by a detailed understanding of the meanings of the ancient sacred texts of the Bible.

To avoid unacceptable influences on Christian ethics as a result of uncritical acceptance of elements of other theories, and to do justice to the privileged perspective assigned to the ancient sacred texts of the Bible, a critical attitude is needed. Through seriously considering different ethical views, engaging in robust dialogue, and carefully examining their implications, Christian ethics can keep to its unique focus. This dialogue must not only be in one direction. Theologians can usefully employ other ethical views to interrogate their own. Critical scrutiny of one’s own views can point to shortcomings, such as a lack of clarity, insufficient arguments in support of values, inadequate coherence, and so on.

We have seen that the unique focus of Christian ethics is determined by the way it uses the ancient sacred texts of the Bible to articulate its views. I want to argue that the nature of Christian ethics closely resemble the nature of Old or New Testament theology through important similarities, though significant differences must be noted as well. Hasel (1991: 194–208) assigns three tasks to Old Testament theology. First is the task of writing the theology of each separate text (or Bible book). Hasel stresses that the themes, motifs, and concepts of each text must be explained and interpreted so that the diversity and richness of each text will come to the fore. Next follow the task of inferring longitudinal themes emerging from the various theologies of the texts already presented. Through an inductive strategy these themes are allowed to emerge from the detailed interpretations of the diversity of texts already examined. The final task of OT theology is find the underlying bond that binds the various theologies and themes together. How does Christian ethics relate to these tasks of Old Testament theology?
Christian ethics has a different starting point. OT theology starts by taking the separate texts as given and wants to interpret their meaning. Christian ethics starts with an ethical issue — well understood — that needs to be resolved. Then a Biblical ethics is articulated. This is done in the following way. Instead of analysing a particular text (book), Biblical ethics gathers all textual evidence related to the ethical issue in question. Once the textual evidence has been selected, these sections drawn from Biblical texts are analysed and interpreted in the same way as Biblical theology does.

However, Christian ethicists mostly rely on the professional work of exegetes as basis for their interpretations, as they themselves do not have specialised training or sophisticated skills for textual analysis and interpretation comparable to those of Old or New Testament scholars. Hopefully they have good enough theological judgement for evaluating the results of exegesis and making decisions in cases of conflicting interpretations. Understanding sections of texts properly requires more than good exegesis, it always requires linking the section with the larger context of the text (Biblical book), the collection of Old or New Testament texts and finally the whole Bible itself. For this task the Christian ethicist needs to critically appropriate the research results of theologians specialised in Old or New Testament theology. At this point a Biblical ethics is done, but it does not yet complete the task of a Christian ethics. The Christian ethicist must go one step further to create a dialogue between the unique ethical voice of the ancient sacred texts of the Bible and a contemporary understanding of the ethical issue illuminated by an multi-disciplinary interpretation thereof. This dialogue might lead the Christian ethicist back to the primary sources of the ancient sacred texts, until a dialogue has been established where the answer to the ethical problem is judged intellectually satisfying.

What are the functions of Christian ethics in the church? Christian ethics must teach the community of believers what God expects of them as re-
response to what He has done for them. Christian ethics must provide guidance to believers on how to live meaningful lives that communicate to other people that a loving God exists and cares for all people. This can be done by using the images, categories, values, and principles found in the ancient sacred texts of the Bible to overturn conventional ways of looking at human life and stimulate new ways of interpreting the individual and communal lives of believers.

What are the implications, that flow from the conception of Christian ethics described above, for the next seven chapters of this thesis? I interpret them as follows.

5. The Methodology of the Thesis

Three important matters emerge from the discussions of liberation theology and the nature of Christian ethics that are relevant for the chapters that are to follow. First, the uniqueness of Christian ethics lies in its use of the ancient sacred texts of the Bible as normative guide and definitive orientation for its contents. The God proclaimed by the Bible is judged to be the author and ground of Christian ethics. From this central role given to God follows that Christian ethics posits a strong link between faith in God and an ethical life. What God has done for humans requires them to respond to Him in obedience to His commands. In the chapters to follow I will use the ancient sacred texts of the Bible as definitive of a Christian ethics and be aware of the strong link posited between faith in God and obedience to His ethical commands.

Christian ethics needs other intellectual disciplines in its quest to find answers to contemporary moral problems. This is the second matter from the preceding discussion relevant to the chapters to follow. To give detailed formulations of ethical problems, Christian ethics needs the results, insights, and methods of other scientific disciplines. The social sciences can provide
information based on currently accepted methods of inquiry that accord with state of the art results and beliefs about social processes and human nature. Liberation theologians did not fully exploit the possibilities offered by the contemporary social sciences. Theories of philosophical ethics can provide useful analyses, ideas, and arguments for enriching Christian ethics. Liberation theologians generally neglected the contributions current philosophy can make. When reading philosophical ethics with an open mind to appropriate what is useful and a critical mind to engage them in robust dialogue, Christian ethics can be refreshed to look at ethical issues in a new way. Using such theories wisely to engage one's own views with a self-evaluative attitude aimed at critical scrutiny, can challenge Christian ethicists to improve the clarity, refine the contents, and better the arguments of their own views.

The method that Christian ethics ought to follow is the third matter to emerge from the preceding discussion. The importance of a detailed analysis of the ethical problem has already been mentioned. Once that is done, all relevant textual material in the Bible must be gathered, interpreted, and placed in context of the larger text of the Bible. Liberation theologians do not use a wide enough range of texts relevant to issues of poverty. The ethics embodied in the Biblical texts can be uncovered when the collected texts are carefully interpreted. This ethics can be called an Old Testament ethics, a New Testament ethics, or when combined, a Biblical ethics. To make a Biblical ethics relevant to our contemporary world, it must be transformed into a Christian ethics. This involves a dialogue between the unique ethical voices of the Biblical texts, our contemporary understanding of the ethical problem, and current moral voices dealing with this problem. From this dialogue a humanly formulated construction of a revisable Christian ethics, applicable to our world now, can be produced.

Throughout the thesis I will make use of textual analysis and interpretation, whether I read ancient sacred texts, their scholarly interpretations, or current
social science reports and philosophical theories.

6. The Plan of the Thesis

In this thesis I want to answer the simple question: "What is the message of the Bible about poverty for us today?" To get a simple answer to this question of Christian ethics I will have to do four things. These things are required by the conception of Christian ethics sketched above. They are as follows: [1] I must understand the complexities of poverty, [2] I must explain the moral issues raised by the complexities of poverty, [3] I must analyse Biblical texts related to issues of poverty, and [4] I must develop a theory of Christian ethics for dealing with poverty in contemporary societies. As will become clear later on, the link between rich and poor is particularly strong in the Bible. For this reason the analysis of Biblical texts will also include texts dealing with riches and wealth.

A slightly more detailed description of the four things I plan to do in this thesis reads as follows.

• I analyse and unpack the personal, social, political, and moral dimensions of the problem of poverty in considerable detail through the use of philosophy and the human sciences. I give a definition of poverty, discuss its indicators and causes, show how to draw a profile of individual cases, and explore the individual and social consequences of poverty. I also give a detailed discussion of the moral issues involved in poverty (Chapters 1, 3, 4, & 5);

• I develop a Christian ethics on poverty and riches based on close readings of relevant Biblical texts in both the Old and New Testaments (chapters 6 & 7) that include a wider spectrum than those usually found in liberation theology. The contents of these two chapters are integrated into a Biblical ethics of poverty and riches. From this Biblical ethics I develop a Christian ethics on poverty and riches in dialogue with the public morality expressed by contemporary philosophical theories of justice
(chapter 8);

- I present a framework of ideas that I believe any person anywhere in the world can use [1] for understanding their poverty and [2] for morally evaluating their situation, despite the fact that I work from within my own South African context (chapters 4, 5, 6, 7, 8).

- I justify the scientific status of theology so as to safeguard the intellectual status of my work. This chapter might be necessary to justify my interdisciplinary approach outlined above (chapter 2).

I am convinced that growth and development in most sciences result from interdisciplinary work. I therefore adopt a strong interdisciplinary approach in this thesis. I make use of recent philosophical theories of justice and hermeneutics, extensive empirical research done by various multi-disciplinary teams in South Africa, sociological explanations of poverty, and theological exegesis and ethics. I see the human sciences as being involved in problem-solving, therefore I draw on any intellectual resources needed to clarify the problem of poverty or the interpretation of the Bible. A creative fusion of various disciplinary perspectives can enable me to show the relevance of Christian ethics for contemporary issues concerning poverty.

The plan of the thesis is as follows. In Chapter One I have drawn a profile of poverty in South Africa. Then I looked at theological discussions of poverty in recent theology. Afterwards followed a brief methodological justification for the interdisciplinary nature of this study in Christian ethics. In Chapter Two I give a fuller methodological justification for my project. I answer the question whether ancient religious texts from different socio-cultural periods in history can teach us anything about poverty and wealth. I justify a concept of theology as science, based on my conception of science as a complex system. I also develop my own conception of the hermeneutics that are involved. Chapter Three explains the complexity of poverty and the link between poverty and wealth. I give definitions of poverty and wealth. I then
discuss the possible causes of poverty and show why poverty is a complex phenomenon.

In Chapter Four I develop two arguments, based on empirical team research done in South Africa. One argument shows that Christians ought to take poverty seriously as a result of the serious effects it has on individuals and members of their households. The other argument makes the point that poverty is a threat to democratic societies. In Chapter Five I explain the concept of justice in political philosophy and demonstrate why this concept is particularly appropriate for articulating the moral issues involved in issues of poverty and wealth.

In Chapter Six I analyse and interpret all texts from the Old Testament that might be relevant for understanding or dealing with poverty and wealth. In Chapter Seven I analyse and interpret all texts from the New Testament that might be relevant for understanding or dealing with poverty and wealth. In the final chapter, Chapter Eight, I develop a comprehensive Christian theory of poverty and wealth. I compare the social context of the Bible with those of contemporary democracies. I link my philosophical analyses of poverty with textual evidence from the Bible. The proposed Christian ethics on poverty and riches are linked to the larger themes of the Biblical message. This is necessary, as I believe the Biblical message about poverty cannot be divorced from many of the major themes of the Bible. Finally, I explore the role a Christian ethics of wealth and poverty can play in shaping public philosophy and policy in contemporary constitutional democracies.