

Ancestors and spirits in the light of Luther's theology

ABSTRACT

When dealing with ancestor veneration in the church we ought to listen to African spirituality, the biblical witness, the ecclesial tradition and modernity. African spirituality is characterised by remoteness of the Supreme Being, submission to ancestral authority and tight communal cohesion. Ancestor veneration was not an issue in Luther's time, but it is possible to explore how main tenets of Luther's theology could be applied to ancestor veneration. The hidden and revealed God: the redemptive intentions of God reassure us in times of adversity, suffering and affliction. *Sola Scriptura*: the claim of Yahweh eliminated ancestor veneration from the biblical tradition. *Solus Christus*: God is accessible in Christ and needs no ancestral mediation. *Sola gratia*: all conditions of acceptance are suspended. *Sola fide*: faith is trust in God's promise of a redeemed life. The fruit of the gospel: faith leads to freedom and responsibility rather than submission to authority and fixed codes of conduct. Two aspects of God's rule: believers take up critical responsibility for social structures including the family. The Lord's Supper: the crucified Christ is identified with tangible substances so that he can be ritually present for us here and now. Finally, the Lutheran tradition is critiqued from the perspective of African spirituality: a spiritualised gospel, a truncated concept of salvation and passivity.

THE PROBLEM STATED

That many African Christians appeal to their ancestors in times of distress is a well-known fact. An international study of the Lutheran World Federation was designed to bring the phenomenon into the open.² It motivated me to embark on a more comprehensive research project in which I try to listen to African spirituality, the biblical tradition, the Reformation, modernity and post-modernity. My assumption is that the Word of God must be proclaimed as God's redemptive response to human needs rather than as a body of timeless propositions and prohibitions.³

Although ancestor veneration was not an issue during Luther's time, his theology is a classical example of a redemptive response to spiritual needs. In this paper I explore the way Luther's theology could have responded to ancestor veneration in the church if he had been confronted with this phenomenon. I will deal only with the theology of Luther himself, not with the Lutheran

1 Klaus Nürnberg is Professor emeritus, Fellow and Senior Research Associate at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. <nurnberger@telkomsa.net>, www.klaus-nurnberger.com.

2 This essay is an abbreviated version of a paper drafted for the final workshop of the program on *Spirits, Ancestors and Healing: Global Challenges to the Church* of the Department of Studies of the Lutheran World Federation in January 2006. See Wulffhorst 2006.

3 See Nürnberg 2004:5ff for this stance.

confessions and subsequent developments in Lutheran dogmatics.⁴ In contrast to 16th century Europe, our situation in Southern Africa is characterised by the interaction between three major mindsets: traditionalism, modernity, and postmodernity. Interaction between mindsets implies that they do not occur in isolation, that there are no ‘pure’ forms, that they are in constant flux, that real life is characterised by a vast field of transitions, amalgamations and overlaps.

The ‘typical features’ of such mindsets are spelt out for heuristic purposes. The emphasis of traditionalism lies on ancestral authority. Life in a world determined by uncanny forces is precarious and ancestral authority is designed to keep communal cohesion and tradition intact.⁵ The emphasis in modernity lies on emancipation and mastery over a world determined by natural law. All untested authority is rejected, including that of the church, the Bible, cultural traditions, despotic states, patriarchy and filial piety. The emphasis on postmodernity lies on radical openness.⁶ It revels in plurality, diversity, flux, flexibility and contradiction.

For traditionalists ancestors are ‘real’ because they exercise authority. For modernity they are ‘real’ as internalised collective mindsets that can obstruct rational behaviour. For post-modernists they are ‘real’ either as an expression of the riches of spiritual phenomena, or as a set of oppressive assumptions that must be deconstructed.

Both the biblical witness and Luther’s theology are *post-traditionalist* and *pre-modern*. They are post-traditionalist in the sense that commitment to one personal God, Creator and Redeemer, has taken the place of both dynamistic assumptions and ancestral authority. They are rooted in tradition, but this tradition is geared to a God who is committed to a redeemed future. They are pre-modern in the sense that the motivations and assumptions of the Enlightenment had not surfaced during their times.

For Luther the issue of ancestor veneration was not part of the agenda. The question of authority in general, however, was of critical importance. Moreover, fear of purgatory, the last judgment and the prospect of spending eternity in hell posed the question what the living could do for the deceased. The ostensibly redemptive role of the ‘saints’ posed the question what the deceased could do for the living. Luther expressed strong views on these three issues and they were profoundly grounded in his theological approach as a whole.

The aim of this essay is to explore whether this kind of theology can afford guidance in the sensitive area of ancestor veneration in the African church of today. Let me state from the outset that I do not deem Luther to be infallible, which he never claimed to be. According to the Reformation, continuity lies in the message of the gospel while the church, its theology and its life must constantly be subjected to scrutiny and transformation. Our task is to formulate a theology for our situation just as Luther formulated a theology for his. Therefore the essay will close with a constructive critique of the Lutheran tradition in the light of African spiritual needs.

1. LUTHER’S EXPERIENTIAL APPROACH

Luther’s concern is pastoral. He does not believe in metaphysical speculations. He calls them “unprofitable and idle thoughts”. What God might be in himself and apart from us, cannot be known to us. It is also none of our business. The important question is, what does God *want to be*

4 It is impossible to give references for all statements in such a condensed essay. For detail kindly refer to Nürnberger 2005(a).

5 For my understanding of African traditional religion see Nürnberger 1975 and 2005(b).

6 Postmodernity is “characterised by cheerful ahistoricity, contended rootlessness, guiltless consumerism, and low expectations of the future” Lakeland 1997:xiii.

for us (pro nobis)? Is he with us here on earth or is he located in an inaccessible realm of his own? Is he for us or against us? This approach is remarkable. Through most of its history, Christian theology has reified concepts such as ‘father’, ‘son’ and ‘spirit’ and deduced further propositions from them, for instance about the internal relations between Father and Son and Spirit within the Trinity.

Luther’s theology, in contrast, is geared to the spiritual needs of actual life. This approach makes Luther’s theology capable of entering into dialogue with both traditionalism and modernity. The myths, rituals and metaphors of traditionalism refer to what happens to the community in concrete life. How can the life of the community be protected, strengthened, reconciled, healed? Modernity is similarly geared to life experiences here and now. How do I get mastery over nature and society, how can I optimise my gifts and resources, how can I enjoy life in its fullness?⁷

For an experiential approach the question whether a God exists out there or only in our minds cannot be answered and is beside the point. Similarly the question whether ancestors exist out there or only in our minds are irrelevant. Whatever their ontological status may be, the important question is, *what do they do to us in real life?*

2. WHO OR WHAT IS YOUR GOD?

In the *Large Catechism*, Luther offers an interesting definition of God. Your God is somebody or something in whom you place your trust. You believe in a God of wrath or a God of grace. If you trust in a God of the law, you will have a God of the law and be oppressed by the law. If you trust in a God of grace, you will have a God of grace and be liberated by grace.⁸

It is also your trust that determines whether you believe in God or an idol. If you put your trust in money, then money will be your god. The same is true for spiritual gifts such as expertise, shrewdness, power, favour, friendship or honour. The same is true if you put your trust in a saint, as many Catholics did at the time, or in sorcery and witchcraft, or in a political leader.

For Luther, the differentiation between ancestor veneration and ancestor worship would be beside the point. Concepts do not matter; what matters is the kind of control that an entity assumes over our lives. Do you expect protection and blessings from the ancestors? Do you receive spiritual and moral guidance from them? Do you fear them when you have transgressed their precepts? Do you want to become reconciled with them when you are struck by calamities? Then they have assumed power over your life; they have become your ‘gods’, whether you call that worship or veneration.

Of course, we are expected to respect our neighbours, our parents, our superiors, our pastors, our political leaders. But we should fear, obey and place our trust in God and God alone. If ‘respect for our forebears’ (as practised in Africa), or ‘filial piety’ (as practiced in South East Asia), means honouring one’s parents and keeping the family together, good and well. If ‘respect’ means spiritual dependence or enslavement, the deceased have turned into ‘gods’ in Luther’s sense of the word.

The same is true for the community. We should respect, love and serve the community, but our trust and obedience belong to God and only to God. If Luther had not followed this rule, the

7 This is the prime concern of African Traditional Religion. Cf Magesa 1997.

8 Feuerbach felt vindicated by Luther’s theology and we must come to terms with the truth he expressed. An appeal to ‘revelation’ does not remove the problem because for revelation to work, it must make use of the human capacity to comprehend and interpret. The Word became flesh! Moreover, the biblical faith is indeed a redemptive faith that responds to actual human needs, not a body of metaphysical propositions.

Reformation would never have happened. The same is true for our religious or cultural heritage. For Luther there could be only one divine partner: God himself as he made himself accessible to us in Christ.

In modernity people have come to trust in science, technology, natural resources, financial capital, professional expertise, business initiative, in short, our potentials and capabilities. It would be foolish to think that all these things are rubbish or unimportant. But when you begin to expect protection, blessing and the fullness of life from these entities, they assume control over your life and become your gods. Whether a secularised terminology calls them 'divinities' or 'assets' makes no difference.

3. WHAT KIND OF GOD IS GOD?

What does God do in our lives? As for the biblical witness, God was for Luther the Origin of everything that exists or happens, the Creator of ongoing life (*Deus in vita*). He attributed his very existence, his body, mind and soul, his family, his possessions, his social environment, his relationships, his career - everything that existed for him - to the creative activity of God. Taken seriously, this includes everything: galaxies, forests, societies, spiritual beings, convictions.

For Luther this fact posed a profound problem. Our reality displays the most magnificent manifestations of beauty, wisdom, righteousness and grace. But it also displays the most abhorrent examples of meaninglessness, cruelty, ugliness, stupidity, atrocity and hatred. Christians are not spared the experiences of a meaningless fate, hardship, injustice, disease, and death. If God were not in control of all that, he would not be God. God is also in control of human convictions. We cannot believe in God, our resist God, without God. That is Luther's famous (or infamous) 'enslaved will'.

We experience the magnificent and all-encompassing power of God in his creation, but not his redemptive intentions. This experience Luther calls the 'hidden God' (*Deus absconditus*). God is not hidden because he is absent; he is within us and all around us. God is hidden because we cannot understand his purposes. This fact includes all the evil we experience but do not understand, everything that the concepts of Satan, demons, evil spirits, mental delusions, unbelief, false belief, and so on, refer to.

Luther's experiential approach to the concept of God is surprisingly similar to that of most traditional religions. Here the Supreme Being is not deemed to be absent; on the contrary, it is the power behind everything that exists and happens.⁹ But we cannot understand it. It can stand for justice and beauty and wisdom; but it can also be the Source of the most frightening experiences of life. You never know what to expect.¹⁰

It is precisely because the Supreme Being is not accessible to our understanding and communication, that traditionalists turn to the ancestors whom they know and with whom they can communicate. They are not deemed to be omnipotent, but they have more power than the living. They can be expected to look after their offspring. You can show your loyalty and appeal to their loyalty. You can seek reconciliation with them. You can counteract evil forces such as sorcery. But if all that does not help, there is nothing to be done.

Westerners also experience this powerlessness in times of crisis. They may call it 'fate', or 'tough luck', or 'destiny'. You cannot argue with fate. It does not speak; it does not listen. It just

9 See Nürnberger 1975:174-200.

10 For detail see Setiloane 1976 and Nürnberger 1975.

happens. You do not know why you were singled out. You can only succumb. A mood of giving in to feelings of being left helpless and hopeless we call fatalism. In one form or another, fatalism occurs in virtually all cultures - African traditionalism, Islam, as well as ancient Greek, Roman and Germanic religions.

Luther's faith differs from fatalistic religions. In Christ God has revealed his redemptive intentions. He seeks our survival, our salvation, the fulfilment of our lives. He has given us a firm undertaking that he will be for us and with us under all circumstances. Nothing in reality and beyond reality can ever cut us off from the love of God revealed in Christ (Rom 8:38ff). Luther calls the impact of this proclamation the revealed God (*Deus revelatus*).

But this self-disclosure of God is hidden in a most horrific event, the crucifixion of Christ. The cross is anything but life, redemption and blessing. It is an unmitigated disaster. So God has hidden his promise under the guise of its contrary (*sub contrario*). God wants to assure us that, if he can turn such a ghastly curse into eternal blessing, he is also capable of dealing with our own smaller or larger catastrophes and predicaments. In fact, Luther would be suspicious if everything went well in the life of a Christian. Faith is always afflicted faith (*tentatio*). God is precisely with those who find themselves in trouble. His theology is a theology of the cross (*theologia crucis*) as opposed to a theology of glory (*theologia gloriae*).¹¹

So Luther goes through two steps when confronted with calamities. The first is to recognise that in all predicaments, riddles and adversities of life we are faced with none other than God himself. We are not just confronted with a hostile neighbour, an unjust government, a crippling disease, grinding poverty, a pestering spirit, or the devil himself. We always stand before God, whatever the circumstances. Once we realise this, these seemingly more proximate entities lose their power over our lives. They are no longer the instances we should primarily engage, welcome or fight. We should turn to God and ask God how he wants to deal with them.

But then comes the second step. Confronted with a seemingly indifferent, merciless or wrathful God we have to turn to God's promises in Christ. The gospel says that, in spite of all that we experience, God is for us and with us and not against us. Theology of the cross means that God is precisely with the outcast, the guilty, the suffering, and the afflicted.¹² We have to wrestle with God, like Jacob at the Jabbok. We have to turn to God against God. We have to twist his arm and not let go until he hears us. God himself wants us to be stubborn in our prayers because this is a sign of trust in God and God alone.

This is important for our topic. Luther lived in a pre-scientific age. He attributed all mishaps, afflictions and agonies to the devil and his crowd of minor devils - whether it was the hostility of the pope or his painful haemorrhoids. What was important for Luther, however, was not the devil, but the apparent wrath of God that gave the devil his power. God is in charge. Luther knew that he was actually confronted with God - the 'hidden God' of experience. He knew that he had to trust in the 'revealed God', the God who had committed himself to us in Christ. So in faith he defied the devil, laughed at him, told him to get lost. Only Christ was supposed to be his master, not the devil.

This faith could cure traditionalists of their fear of sorcery. Fear of sorcery is the most destructive element of the traditional world view. Luther observed that witchcraft sows suspicion

11 "Whoever ascribes any bad luck or unpleasantness to the devil or to evil persons and does not, in a spirit of love and praise, accept both evil and good as coming from God ..." breaks the first commandment (Luther's Works 43:17).

12 Luther's theology could provide critically important insights to those church leaders who are afflicted by the fact that they "can pray but not heal" (Haddad 2006).

and discord which can break even the most loving families.¹³ It is true that all sorts of funny things happen to us. Why do I suddenly get sick? Why does lightning strike my homestead? Why does my wife not conceive? When we concentrate on these things, speculate about their causes, suspect our enemies, then we allow these things to assume power over us. We are no longer in charge, as we are meant to be. We become victims.

4. GOD'S EARTHLY MEANS

Are we then allowed to use science, technology, capital, expertise, or medicine for our daily lives? Of course, we are. God's creative and redemptive activity is mediated through human initiatives and earthly events, which Luther calls masks, cocoons, or larvae. According to the biblical witness, God uses fire, rain, fertility, state authority, human diligence, the plough, or the sword. He also uses prophets, law makers, priests and kings. But then it is God who acts through these creatures, and he wants to act redemptively. So we should be critical of their goals, their limitations and their consequences.

Can we then not also use the wisdom of diviners and the herbal knowledge of traditional healers? Of course, we can. Diviners may have a deep intuition of psychological and social processes and herbalists may have a great store of medical knowledge. But we should be critically aware of their goals, their limitations, and their actual performance. Whether we should go to diviners or psychotherapists, to herbalists or medical doctors, is a question of whose treatment is more appropriate and effective.

Can our ancestors not also act as instruments of God? Of course, they can. Modern psychology has taught us that the subconscious has incredible power over human beings, including their bodily functions, their social interaction and their perceptions of the reality in which they are embedded. The impressions that parents and other persons of authority have made upon our consciousness and sub-consciousness can continue to influence us long after they have departed.¹⁴ Such memories can be used by God. But they can also be used by other forces that are hostile to the gospel of Christ. The question is not, therefore, whether they exist, but what they do to us.

Moreover, the power of our memories of the deceased is not the same thing as the power of the deceased themselves. Following the biblical witness, Luther denied that God uses the deceased themselves, simply because they are dead. As in the New Testament, for Luther the communion of saints is the community of believers who are alive at present. The 'cloud of witnesses' (Heb 12:1) refers to the faith that the deceased had when they were alive. It can inspire us in our afflictions. But the metaphor does not imply that they are alive now.

When they were alive, God indeed used our parents and grandparents to give us life, protection and direction in life. But now they are "resting". They no longer participate in God's creative activity; they are also no longer part of Christ's redemptive activity.¹⁵ There are two theological reasons for Luther's stance. 1. In the Catholic church of his time the saints had taken the place of Christ as mediators to a very considerable extent. The same could be said of the ancestors in many African contexts. According to Luther this may not happen. 2. If we trust saints (and ancestors),

13 Luther's Works 24:245.

14 This is also true for Westerners: Schützenberger 1998.

15 Luther could not have agreed with Nyamiti that "the militant Church on earth, the suffering and triumphant Churches of purgatory and heaven form one single tripartite Church ..." so that "the Christian conduct of the earthly Church members should always be closely associated with their divine ancestors and their human ancestors in heaven and purgatory." Quoted by J Elsener 2001:52.

they exercise authority over us. But a Christian should not be under the authority and the power of anything or anybody except God.

5. SCRIPTURES ALONE (SOLA SCRIPTURA)

Let us now look at some of the fundamental principles of the Lutheran Reformation and their further implications. Luther's concept of God is informed essentially by the biblical witness. So what does the Bible itself say about this issue? Not to overload this paper, I will spell that out in another essay. Here it must suffice to make two general observations. First, throughout its history the biblical faith has absorbed, reformulated and integrated insights, worldview patterns and metaphors from its religious and intellectual environment - Canaanite, Babylonian, Persian, Hellenistic and Roman.

This absorptive capacity should not be confused with syncretism. Syncretism denotes faith in more than one divine partner, for instance Yahweh and Ba'al. Prophetic and deuteronomic theology fought a relentless battle against syncretism. Absorption, in contrast, meant that Yahweh integrated the functions of Ba'al as a god of fertility, while Ba'al himself was rejected as a divine partner of Israel. There are scores of other examples. On the basis of these observations there should be no problem with using traditional insights and metaphors to express the Christian faith, as long as they convey the intended meaning and as long as they will not confuse rather than enlighten the congregation.¹⁶

Second, the exclusiveness of faith in Yahweh effectively eliminated ancestor veneration, oracles and divination in the biblical tradition. This is a fact that we must take note of. Luther observed that "there is no example, no story in the Scriptures from which we learn that the saints sought information from the dead".¹⁷ Of course, the lives of predecessors continue to impact the lives of their successors.¹⁸ But that does not make them superiors. Nor are they mediators.¹⁹ This is remarkable because Israel had a strong patriarchal family culture. Families were under the control of male family heads (Ex 21:2ff). Cursing or striking one's parents carried the death penalty. There are long genealogies both in the Old and the New Testament. Yet the deceased were considered to be dead. In *sheol*, the realm of the dead, you would not see the sun. You would not praise God (Ps 6:5; Job 7:9). The life of the clan continued in their descendants (Jdg 2:10).

Even the prime ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, were not feared, honoured, consulted, reconciled, or given sacrifices. In the Priestly code making contact with the deceased, or with any other spirit for that matter, carried the death penalty. In the New Testament death is taken just as seriously. Only if the deceased are really dead does the message of resurrection make any sense. This does not imply that the deceased had turned into demons. It only means that (a) they were sinful and mortal human beings like everybody else, and (b) that death has taken them out of action. Israel was to relate with the "living God", not with dead people or lifeless idols.

16 Nyamiti 1984 is the classical example to whom these two questions must be put.

17 The only example in the Scriptures is 1Sa 28. Luther did not believe that the deceased Samuel really appeared to Saul but that Saul was fooled by the devil (Luther's Works 36:196; 52:180). Today we would rather say that Saul was deceived by his traumatic memories. Instead of turning to the 'living God', the God who always opens up a future for repentant sinners, he turned to the deceased Samuel who had nothing to say other than what he had said when alive, sucking him into the curse of the past.

18 Bediako 1991:224ff.

19 Turaki 1968:168.

6. SOLUS CHRISTUS

Because he was informed by the biblical witness, all this was self-evident for Luther. However, he did not follow the Bible where it seemed to contradict his basic theological assumptions. It was Christ who made the Bible authoritative for him. We do not accept something because it is written in the Bible, but we accept the authority of the Bible because (and as far as) it witnesses to Christ and his redemptive action. Where the Bible does not promulgate Christ (*was Christum treibet*), it has no authority. Where the scriptures seem to move against Christ, Luther says, we have to move Christ against the scriptures.²⁰

God had revealed himself in Christ and Christ was present in the Word of God proclaimed in the power of the Spirit. Any information or advice requested from the dead suggests that “God were not among us, or tell us all things that we ought to know ...”²¹ The same is true, of course, for the church’s traditions. The argument that the veneration of saints had become part of the church’s tradition was rejected by Luther. The same is true for episcopal authority. Apostolicity was located in the apostolic gospel, not in the continuity of an episcopal office. It can claim authority only as far as God wants to use it as an instrument to proclaim the gospel.

7. SOLA GRATIA

To say that Christ is central for our relationship with God was not yet enough for Luther, because who is Christ? Is he a powerful but remote paramount chief, king or emperor in heaven, who is not really interested in our fate here on earth? Is he a cruel dictator who forces his will down our throats? Is he the God of the law who will curse us if we do not follow his instructions to the letter? Is he the God who will tolerate us in his presence only if we have become righteous and pure like angels?

For Luther this is the crux of the matter. If we had to rely on works, Christ would be a judge and tyrant “so that we had to flee from him to Mary and the saints, and not expect of him any grace or comfort”.²² It is the law that makes God a distant and frightening God and that makes intermediaries necessary in the church. Christ stands for God’s grace, not for the law. Even discipleship can become oppressive if it means that we have to achieve a Christ-like condition on the strength of our own moral or spiritual resources. If that happens, the disciples of Christ have lost Christ.

The Protestant tradition speaks of justification by grace, accepted in faith, not through our disposition, achievement, or moral excellence. This legal formulation is difficult to understand and has caused a lot of controversy. So let us rather take our clue from the parable of the prodigal son and speak of God’s suffering, redeeming acceptance of the unacceptable into his fellowship. The father accepts his wayward son back into the fellowship of the family. Through being accepted by the father the situation of the son changes.

Transformation is not a *precondition* of acceptance, but a *consequence* of acceptance. This has two consequences that have not always been clear to Luther and the Lutheran churches: we have no right to exclude others and others have no right to exclude us. We are all unacceptable to God and we have all been accepted by God. Those who refuse to accept being accepted into the

20 Weimarer Ausgabe XXXIX/I 47f, thesis 49; H 94.

21 Luther’s Works 36:196.

22 Luther’s Works 50:20.

fellowship of God simply exclude themselves. But if God accepts us without condition, we *cannot set up conditions of acceptance for others*. The elder brother of the prodigal son has not understood that, and is lost for the community as a result. “Accept each other as Christ has accepted you to the glory of God” (Ro 15:7). When we not only bear each other’s burdens, but bear each other as burdens, we truly participate in the cross of Christ.

Members of ‘sects’, alcoholics, drug addicts, homeless people, abandoned children, AIDS patients, and homosexuals cannot be rejected, ostracised, discriminated against. It is in the fellowship of forgiven sinners that we begin to be transformed into the image of Christ and become acceptable. This includes people who are still under the spell of other spiritual powers. If they desire to be in the fellowship of God, they are welcome in the Church. They are not placed under pressure to conform. But the proclaimed and lived Word of God will seek to liberate and transform them in the power of the Spirit.

8. SOLA FIDE

Luther emphasised that the gospel is a promise. It can never become a possession. We never have God or Christ in our pockets.²³ A promise must be trusted. When a young woman stands before the altar with her husband to be, she has no idea of what is going to happen in future decades of common life. She is given a promise and she trusts that promise because she loves him. She becomes a different human being by putting her trust into a binding agreement.

If her husband should prove to be unfaithful, her strong faith in his integrity, her expectation that he will honour his commitment, her claim to his responsibility may bring him back on track. But if she turns to another man, the relationship is lost. This is exactly how faith responds to God’s promise. God may seem to renege, to abandon us, to turn against us. Then true Christians will not turn to other masters and helpers, such as gods, ancestors or spirits, but confront God himself with his promises, struggle with him, insist that he remain faithful, stick it out with him for better or for worse.

For Luther this struggle with God against God, with God’s promise against God’s apparent indifference or wrath, is characteristic for the Christian faith. According to Luther, faith in Christ is always afflicted faith. It is constantly questioned by a bad conscience, by adverse circumstances, by the accusations of the law and the tricks of the devil. But this only makes the Christian faith a more stubborn, defiant and rebellious sort of faith. Faith in Christ is a refusal to submit to a blind faith, hostile forces, or a wrathful God.

And that makes all the difference. It gives hope in hopeless situations. It opens up the future. It gives courage where our knees begin to wobble. It provides us with strength to face and overcome obstacles. It fortifies us against fear of demons, spirits, sorcery and witchcraft. It obviates suspicions that enemies have caused misfortune, disease or death. Even if they had, they could do nothing whatsoever behind God’s back.

If God is with us and for us, and not against us, nothing in the world and beyond the world can shake our foundations. Any attempt to exorcise evil forces must be based on the proclamation of the gospel. Luther remarked that during his youth witchcraft was rampant, but since the gospel had come to light, it began to vanish.²⁴

23 According to Bediako Christian affirmations are not theological data or assertions but recognitions (2004:38ff).

24 Luther’s Works 27:90. Hiltunen (1986:157) and Munyika (2004:313) similarly report that in Northern Namibia, where 95% of the population have now become Christians, sorcery and witchcraft have become exceptionally rare. Why there and not in the North-Eastern Limpopo province?

9. SIMUL IUSTUS ET PECCATOR

The gospel creates faith in us. Faith is effective and redemptive. While our own lives remain sinful, we are allowed to participate in the new life of Christ. This is a constant struggle in which, again and again, the new life of Christ overcomes our own sinful lives. The righteousness of Christ, which we share, does not become our own but remains the righteousness of another person (*iustitia aliena*). So we are sinners in our own lives and righteous as far as we share in the new life of Christ (*simul iustus et peccator*).

This means that the Christian faith is characteristic of the same ambiguity as other convictions and subject to the same critique. There are aspects that conform to God's redemptive intentions as revealed in Christ and there are aspects that run contrary to them. Rightly understood, the Christian faith is a sensitive and a humble faith. Christians cannot look down upon other convictions, including ancestor veneration. Yet, they will not hesitate to point out shortcomings as they are being exposed by the gospel of Christ – whether their own or those of others.

10. THE GOOD FRUIT OF THE GOSPEL

When we have been accepted into God's fellowship, Christ, the good tree, will produce good fruit in us. We will become changed people. Becoming acceptable does not mean that now at last we begin to observe a code of pre-formulated laws and regulations. Here Luther's approach differs from what became 'Protestant Orthodoxy', most markedly in Puritanism. Here humans are like trains that are meant to run along fixed rails. When sin derails a train, the gospel comes in as an emergency measure and puts the train back onto the rail of the law (*tertius usus legis*).

In Luther's theology it is precisely the opposite. Not the gospel is the emergency measure but the law. Our relationship with God is based on freedom and responsibility. We are like eagles that are meant to surf the winds, keenly observing what happens on the ground, and taking appropriate action when the opportunity presents itself. Sin is when the eagle runs into a power line and breaks his wings. The law comes in as an emergency measure: the eagle is put into a cage so that he does not hurt himself and others. His wing is immobilised with a splint so that it can heal. Once healed, he is released again into freedom.

If we participate in the new life of Christ we will change from slaves or immature children into mature sons and daughters of God. With Christ, we become representatives of God, who share in God's own freedom and responsibility (Gal 3:24-4:7). This means, again, that ancestral spirits have no claim on our subservience and obedience.²⁵

11. PUBLIC RESPONSIBILITY

It is because we are free and responsible that we get involved in the structures and processes of society. We know that society needs rules and laws. We subject ourselves to such rules and laws as are necessary for the smooth running and progress of society. But we also scrutinise them carefully, see whether they fulfil their purpose, make sure that they serve life, bring about justice and open up spaces for development. If they do not, we try to get them changed into something that reflects God's redemptive purposes more closely.

25 Luther has spelt out the relation between freedom and responsibility in his famous treatise *On the freedom of a Christian*: a Christian is free and subject to nobody; a Christian is a servant and serves everybody - out of his/her free will as a participant in God's redemptive action in the world.

This also applies to traditionalist social structures, such as the extended family. If there are religious, cultural or family traditions that serve a good purpose you will support and serve them. But you will not follow them slavishly. You will take responsibility for their adequacy and appropriateness. If they do not fulfil their purpose you will cooperate with others to rethink and reformulate them. Responsibility always looks forward to what reality ought to become; it is never bogged down by what reality has become through past developments.

Should men dominate women or should marriage be a partnership between equals? Should women be circumcised or should they be allowed to experience God's gift of sexual fulfilment as much as the men? Should leaders inherit their positions from their forebears or should they be chosen representatives of the people? Should gifted individuals be allowed to develop their initiatives or forced to fit into a system of closely defined competences and relationships? Should the elderly always call the shots, or should the educated youth be given a chance to make their contribution? We take from our forebears what fits the demands of the future and abandon what is in our way forward.²⁶

12. GOD'S SELF-DISCLOSURE IN THE PROCLAMATION AND THE SACRAMENTS

Luther rejected the 'enthusiastic' idea of a direct communication between the Holy Spirit and the soul of the believer.²⁷ God is present and accessible by speaking to us through his Word, proclaimed by a preacher (*viva vox Evangelii*) on the basis of the apostolic witness (*verbum externum*). The Holy Spirit uses these human words and transforms them into God's Word for us (*testimonium Spiritus Sancti internum*). Put differently, the Holy Spirit is God himself speaking to us through human words; he is nothing but the presence of God for us in Christ here and now (*Christus praesens*). The importance of this insight for our topic is that fellowship with God is accessible, which is not the case in traditionalism.

God in Christ is also present in the sacraments. The sacraments are nothing but the gospel in a visible form (*verbum visibile*). While God always encounters us in earthly guises, which Luther called larvae or cocoons, he is personally present and accessible to us in these means. God accepts us into his fellowship. God uses the fellowship of believers to accept others into his fellowship. This happens in baptism: the fellowship of believers accepts the baptised into God's fellowship in the name of God. This acceptance initiates the process in which the human being hears the Word of God and begins to respond.

This constant process of transformation marks the main difference between baptism and the passage rites applied to newly-born infants in traditional cultures. There are at least two other differences:

1. In the traditional ritual the initiates are accepted into a natural, mostly biologically grown community. Acceptance is conditional. In baptism anybody can enter because baptism is an expression of God's unconditional acceptance.
2. The traditional ritual is meant to strengthen the infant against evil forces with magical means, while in baptism the infant is placed into the hands of God who is above all forces in the universe.

In contrast to baptism, the proclamation of the gospel happens on a continuous basis. Its meaning is to assure the community of believers of God's unwavering commitment to his people.

26 " ... within every religion, there indicators that point towards Christ, and there are indicators which point away from Christ." Bediako 2004:41.

27 In the African context this stance may have to be qualified. Cf Ncozana 2002 as well as Schoffeleers 2000.

The gospel is never only proclaimed, it is also lived out by the community. Here Lutherans can learn a lot from the African Initiated Churches and African traditional religions. Members must feel free to bring their problems to the community and expect support. If we spiritualise the gospel, we are creating a vacuum which will immediately be filled by ancestors and other spiritual powers.

However, we should note the difference between proclamation of the gospel and divination practised by traditional diviners. A diviner tries to smell out the cause of the malady. These may include envy, grudges against family members, the hostility of enemies, or the wrath of the ancestors. There may indeed be real causes located in disturbed relationships which must be addressed. Yet the gospel turns our attention from the past to the future, from what *has become* to what *ought to become*. When asked who had sinned in the case of a blind man, Jesus said that people should turn from the *causes* to the *purpose* of the ailment, namely to glorify God's redemptive action (Jn 9:2ff).

The Lord's Supper is another way in which God becomes present for us. Luther was stubborn in his insistence that Christ, crucified for us, makes himself present through the bread and wine. It is not the body of Christ as such, or the blood of Christ as such, that we receive, but the body broken for us on the cross, the blood spilt for us on the cross. In other words, it is Christ himself in his self-giving, redeeming love that makes himself available to us here and now, just as he has made himself available long ago and far away to humankind on the cross.

For Catholics, bread and wine change into Christ's body and blood. But the host, stored in a box near the altar, does not communicate. In Catholic churches there are altars dedicated to Mary and other saints in immediate proximity to the tabernacle. And that is where all the candles are burning. God is distant, even for Christians, and the saints (or the ancestors) occupy the open space between us and God.²⁸ For Zwingli, real presence was not possible because the cross was an event that happened long ago which we can only remember in gratitude and praise. So for Zwingli Christ is removed from us in terms of time. For Calvin Christ could not be bodily present because he was seated in heaven. Only the Holy Spirit can link us up with him.

Luther rejected any idea of a distance between us and Christ. Because God is the Creator of reality as it unfolds, God must be everywhere. And if Christ had risen to 'the right hand of God', Christ too had to be everywhere. So he was also in the bread, the wine and the gathered community in the Last Supper. Moreover, he identified himself with the bread and wine as the one who gave himself for us on the cross for us. On the strength of this identification we can rest assured that Christ is present *for us* here and now as we celebrate the Last Supper.

The 'real presence' of Christ is of critical importance in a traditionalist context. For most African religions the Supreme Being is the peak of a vast hierarchy of spiritual powers. If God is proclaimed to be high up in heaven, with Christ seated at his right hand ruling over the universe together with the Holy Spirit, African Christians can easily assume that the entire Trinity is inaccessible, thus far removed from ordinary life. Then they relate primarily to the deceased who are present among them and who exercise authority over them. In fact Christ does not have the competence to deal with real problems of life that the ancestors have.²⁹

However, we must get rid of the common misunderstanding among Lutherans that we received a mysterious substance together with the bread and wine (consubstantiation). In a magical

28 For detail see Nürnberger 2005(b). For new developments in the ecumenical debate about the Eucharist see Davies 1992.

29 According to Comaroff 1974:383ff, 94% of her (Christian) respondents among the Tshidi believed that God was far away; 79% appealed to their ancestors in times of crisis; only 10% believed that only Christ represents us before God.

worldview these substances would have particular protective, strengthening and healing powers. This would be really a bad misunderstanding of the Lord's Supper. We do not receive parts of the body and blood of Christ, we receive the living Lord himself in person as he has given himself on the cross for us.

In the Lord's Supper a spiritual reality (Christ's self-giving act on the cross) is identified with a concrete object (bread and wine) so that it can be allocated to people in concrete terms. This happens very often in ordinary life. A bank note is a piece of paper with which a certain value, say 100 Rand, has been identified. It is still paper, but if you burn up the paper you also lose your 100 Rand. There is nothing mysterious about identification. But it makes it possible for us to receive Christ's presence in a concrete form when we receive the bread and wine. The Lord's Supper is a community meal over which our Lord presides. He accepts us into his fellowship and we accept each other as he has accepted us. By receiving his body, crucified for us, we become his body who bears his cross with him.³⁰

This feast of the Christian family takes the place of the ancestral feast of the traditional family. The traditional religious family meal is a sacrificial meal. A goat or an ox is slaughtered for the ancestors. The living members of the family celebrate a family feast together with the ancestors and that binds them together in the tight community of the clan. Do Christians similarly sacrifice something to Christ, their 'ancestor'? No, Christ sacrifices himself for them. Does Christ offer himself to God? No, he makes himself available for God's sacrifice to us. Do priests re-enact the sacrifice of Christ to God? That is how Catholics understand the Eucharist.³¹ For Luther this was a grave misunderstanding. We do not sacrifice anything to God, but God sacrifices himself in Christ to us.³²

13. INSTITUTIONS AND OFFICES

Luther said that God's benevolent rule over the world has two aspects. Through his Word he condemns sin, forgives sin and creates new life in us. Luther called this 'God's rule on the right hand side'. Through institutions and offices God contains evil and furthers the good in society. Luther called this 'God's rule on the left hand side'. Both kinds of rule are meant to overcome evil. In both cases the driving force is God's redeeming love.

As a result, Luther had a great respect for institutions and offices. Parents also belong to this category. They should bring up and educate their kids in the name of God. As representatives of God they must be respected, but they cannot take the place of God. Their authority is part of their mandate, not part of their persons. The function of parents is limited to the stage in life when children are minors and need protection, sustenance and guidance.

Parents should lead their children to the state of mature, free and responsible sons and daughters of God. Emancipation from one's forebears is a Christian imperative because all Christians are meant to become mature, free and responsible sons and daughters of God. Forebears are not to rule over their offspring in perpetuity as is the case in traditionalism. We should indeed love and respect them, but they should not be allowed to impose their will upon us.

30 "But Christ has given his holy body for this purpose - that the thing signified by the sacrament (the fellowship, the change wrought by love) may be put into practice. And Christ values his spiritual body, which is the fellowship of saints, more than his own natural body" (Luther's Works 35:62).

31 Elsener 2001:49.

32 For the Bible, Nürnberger 2004:141ff; for Luther Nürnberger 2005(a):211ff.

14. THE DECEASED HAVE BEEN TAKEN OUT OF ACTION

What about the saints? Three considerations are important here.

1. Catholicism called *exemplary believers* of the past ‘saints’. Biological forebears are not saints. Luther did not reject this idea. For him such saints were examples whose lives should be remembered for their strength and purity of faith. These memories can encourage us to serve Christ better. Luther loved Mary, for instance, for her deep humility. In the Magnificat she claimed nothing for herself but attributed everything to God.³³

2. Whether saints or ancestors, according to Luther we should not imagine that they were alive now, that we could do something for them, that they could do something for us, that they were closer to God than we are, that we could appeal to them, that they could intercede for us, that their merits could make up for our deficiencies before God, that they could mediate between us and God. The deceased are dead.³⁴ True Christians deal with the living God himself.

3. For Luther, as for the New Testament, all living believers in Christ were saints, irrespective of their moral excellence. Of course, in this sense deceased believers also belong to the ‘communion of saints’ as it moves through the centuries. But the church has a past, a present and a future. The existence, thus the membership, of the deceased *lies in the past*. Their lives, and the grace of God that worked in these lives, are not lost. They still exist in the memory of God and of his people, and we hope that they will exist in God’s eschatological future.³⁵ But in the mean time they are dead. We commit them into the hands of God and leave them there.³⁶

In much the same way, the potential existence and membership of the unborn *lie in the future*. They exist in the anticipation of God and his people. Just as the deceased are *no longer* present, the unborn are *not yet* present. Once they are born, we baptise them to become *actual* members of the communion of saints.

15. THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

For *the present*, therefore, our focus should be on the ‘saints’ (= the members) who are currently alive. The deceased cannot play an active role in our lives any longer. The memory of their lives still has an impact, but they themselves do not. Where have the deceased gone? For Luther this is not a valid question to ask. We have no such information. We only have God’s promise. Luther is not fond of speculation. Theological statements refer to faith experiences.³⁷ We can trust that we

33 Luther’s Works 21:308. “If you want to honour Mary, do not regard her on her own, put her in presence of God, far below him, strip her of all honour and see her as an example how God can use the very humble - and thus be strengthened in your faith” (LW 21:322).

34 “But these people are now dead and know nothing of us ... the Holy Spirit teaches us that the saints are dead, certainly they are dead to us, and Scripture has not revealed to us how they are of help in the presence of God and what they do in God ... Therefore the dead who have performed the fatherly office should no longer be invoked since they are not concerned about our affairs ... Their times have indeed come to an end.” Luther’s Works 37:369f).

35 It is only consistent then that Luther rejected Catholic speculations on the various abodes of the dead: heaven, paradise, the limbo of the fathers, the purgatory, the hell of unbaptised infants, the hell of the damned, etc. (Luther’s Works 4:314-316).

36 Luther’s Works 37:369f.

37 Luther can say that “the whereabouts of the souls is *the Word of God or the promise* in which we fall asleep ... I have said this in order to curb unprofitable and idle thoughts about these questions” Luther’s Works 4:314-316; my emphasis.

can place our deceased into the hands of God and that we are safe in God's hands when we depart.³⁸

Taking his clues from the New Testament, Luther says that they are 'resting'. When you are asleep, you do not hear, you do not speak, and you do not act. The dead are no longer part of the drama of life. Our concerns no longer concern them. They do not even know about these concerns.³⁹ They have been taken out of action. If they 'appear', Luther says, this is a deception of the devil.⁴⁰ We do not have to follow Luther in this regard; we can simply say that our conscious and unconscious memories of the deceased are very powerful and cannot easily be controlled.

For many Africans "their departed never sleep" because they are watching over their offspring.⁴¹ For others it is a malady when they wake up because then trouble is sure to come. The point is that they can impact the lives of the living either way. Luther rejects this possibility. The deceased are no longer alive and have not yet risen. So they have no power. The dead are no longer instruments of the creative and redemptive work of God here on earth. We anticipate their eschatological resurrection from the dead, but we should not allow them to control our lives here and now.

The state of the deceased should therefore also not be confused with the state of the risen Christ. Christ represents the eschatological future of God for us, while the ancestors channel the life force of the community from past generations to the living. In Paul's terms, the ancestors belong to the 'flesh' (Php 3:4-8), while Christ is the 'new creation' (2Co 5:16-17).⁴²

16. DEFICIENCIES OF THE LUTHERAN TRADITION AS SEEN FROM AN AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

Individualism

We now look at instances where the Lutheran approach can be critiqued on the basis of African spiritual assumptions. The first of these is individualism. As a pre-Enlightenment and pre-Pietist theologian, Luther was not an individualist. He could talk with the tongues of angels about the beauties and benefits of the Christian community. The prayer to "our Father", rather than "my Father", cuts out all religious selfishness.⁴³ Sharing is one of the most consistent ideas in Luther's theology. In Christ, God and Jesus share their particular characteristics (*communicatio idiomatum*). Christ shares his righteousness and their sin with Christians (the famous "merry exchange"). Christians share their strengths and weaknesses with each other. Christians take the

38 True to his experiential approach, Luther applied the descent of Christ to hell to his agony in Gethsemane; to his being abandoned by God on the cross; to his stay in the realm of death for 3 days (Luther's Works 10:115) where he was paying for our sins (Luther's Works 24:346); to his victory over the devil (Luther's Works 43:27), and even to really tight situations of believers (Luther's Works 6:379). Unwilling to speculate, Luther was uncertain about the meaning of 1 Peter 4:6. Does the text refer to the deceased? Not necessarily: Christ preached to those who are dead in the flesh so that they can be alive in the spirit (Luther's Works 30:113, 121). In another context he called it an 'amazing and frenzied statement'. If Christ was able to preach to the living when alive, was he not able to preach to the dead when dead? While he did not exclude such a possibility, he thought it would be arrogant for us to pretend to know what happened there (Luther's Works 2:85f). Nor was it necessary to know.

39 Luther's Works 55:47.

40 Luther's Works 190-192.

41 Kahakwa 2005:92.

42 For a perceptive analysis see Häselbarth 1972.

43 Luther's Works 43:30.

world's agonies upon their shoulders and share their insight, responsibility and hope with the world.⁴⁴

On the other hand Luther emphasised that each one of us is confronted with the living God in a very personal way. We are each born during our own birth and we each die our own death. We shall each face the last judgment. We are personally responsible before God for every thought, word and action. We cannot hide behind the authority of the Bible, the church, the state, or the family. We cannot expect the righteousness of the saints to make up for our mischief. In his time this emphasis was of critical importance. Luther gave dignity to each individual believer.

It was the Enlightenment and Pietism that turned Luther's stance into Western individualism and spiritualism. Now a bodiless soul was confronted with a world-less God. Others were not involved. Salvation became a private affair between me and my God. For traditional religions these are impossible ideas. Sin is never the sin of a solitary individual standing before a solitary God. Sin is always sin against the community. Forgiveness is forgiveness by the community. Reconciliation is reconciliation with the community. A Lutheran proclamation of the gospel that does not take the communal nature of sin, forgiveness and reconciliation into account will miss its potential audience.

On the other hand we should realise that the Christian community is the community of emancipated individuals who, of their own free will, take up responsibility for the whole. It is not the traditional community where nobody ever comes of age, where each is assigned a predefined status and role, where nobody is allowed to go beyond his/her competence, where all have to toe the line.

A truncated concept of salvation

Because Lutheran theology concentrates on sin and forgiveness, it easily loses sight of the fact that the human situation is precarious in all dimensions of life.⁴⁵ That was not Luther's intention. When you pray "deliver us from evil", he said, "You must include in this 'evil' everything on earth which is evil, such as sickness, poverty, death ..."⁴⁶ Our right of existence is not only threatened by our guilty consciences. We get a fright when we are involved in an accident, when our bodies develop cancer, when our marriage breaks down, when we think that evil forces have caught hold of us, when we are denied our basic human rights. Where is God? Has God turned against us?

Traditionalists are troubled by disease, barrenness, enmity, fear of sorcery, the effects of hidden resentments, unemployment, etc. Modernists are troubled by economic discrepancies, failure in an atmosphere of fierce competition, marginalisation, abuse of political, economic and social power, ecological concerns etc. Salvation does not only address our guilt feelings. If compared with those of the African Independent Churches, our services are abstract and meaningless. Believers must be allowed to bring all their troubles to church, share them with the community, receive consolation, support and strength from the community, otherwise we become irrelevant.⁴⁷

44 See Nürnberger 2005:137-141 for detail.

45 For a profound analysis of the case of the Owambo see Munyika 2004.

46 Luther's Works 51:180.

47 "The greatest attraction of the so-called Independent Churches lies in their open invitation to the Africans to bring their fears and anxieties about witches, sorcerers, bad luck, poverty, illness and all kinds of misfortunes to the church leadership ..." Maimela 1985:1ff.

The gospel turned into a law

One of the characteristics of traditional cultures is the extent to which people can suffer each other. They can really put Christians to shame. Lutherans have always insisted that justification of the sinner by the grace of God, accepted in faith, and not on account of our disposition or achievement, is the centre of the Christian faith, the “article on which the church stands or falls”. So Lutherans should have been the most open, loving and accommodating of all Christians. Their notorious tendency to isolate themselves from others, even from each other, makes one doubt that they take their core conviction seriously. If you accept others only conditionally you have turned the gospel into law.⁴⁸

God’s unconditional acceptance of the unacceptable does not only extend to those who have become guilty in moral terms. Questionable insights, or a lack of insight, are just as unacceptable to God as moral inadequacies. God always accepts us into his fellowship to transform us from within. In his fellowship our convictions, values and norms are bound to change. This may lead to agonising conflicts, but these conflicts are part of the suffering implied by unconditional acceptance, that is, part of the suffering of Christ. The church is a ‘mixed body’ (*ecclesia permixta*), that is, it consists of righteous and sinners. And even a righteous person in Christ is also a sinner in his own old life (*simul iustus et peccator*).

Passive Christians

That God could do something for us without us being involved is a very strange idea for traditional thought. It is also very strange for the biblical witness. Luther emphatically stated that our salvation is the work of God’s grace and God’s grace alone. None of our works can bring it about, or make any contribution whatsoever. When it comes to justification, those who are being justified are totally passive. Luther formulated these radical statements because he wanted to overcome the legalism of the Catholic church of his time where salvation was believed to depend on all kinds of religious efforts.

But the idea that we are passive in our relationship with God is wrong. Luther taught us that God is the Origin of reality as a whole, including our faith. His action makes our action possible. He does not disempower us but empowers us. His initiative does not make our initiative redundant, but evokes and activates it. It is not true to say that if God is at work, we cannot do a thing. God works through our work. As Paul said: “Because in his good pleasure God is at work in you to bring about both your willing and your doing, therefore work out your salvation with fear and trembling” (Php 2:12f).

The idea that we are to remain passive had devastating effects on the Lutheran tradition. Lutherans have been often lethargic, passive, and careless. They are not always up and running; their mission work is often pitiful or absent; they often do not take up responsibilities in the church or the world; they have not been very prominent in prophesy against Nazi Germany or apartheid South Africa. They seem to leave everything to God’s grace - and then nothing happens. Bonhoeffer has called this “cheap grace”. The sooner we get rid of this idea the better.

17. CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

1. We owe a lot to Luther, just as we owe a lot to our parents. But Luther is not our ancestor. We must test our tradition and keep the best, just as Luther has done with the tradition he had inherited.

48 See Nürnberg 2003 for the question whether unity can be based on consensus.

We must respond to the needs of our situations, as Luther has responded so ably to his. We can and must develop a genuinely African, Asian or Latin American theology. But we must be careful not to forfeit our birth right as the children of God. To belong to Christ, and only to him, is not an unimportant addition to our faith. It is the foundation.

2. For Luther the Word of God is God's redemptive response to actual human needs, the 'living voice of the gospel'. Luther's lasting achievement is to have brought us back to the two basic experiences that underlie our faith. First, he subsumes all evil powers under the 'hidden God'. The 'hidden God' is the power we experience in a highly ambiguous reality. Second, he proclaims that this God discloses his redemptive intentions in its contrary, the cross of Christ. This proclamation is taken to be a promise of God's redemptive intentions for us and the world as a whole in spite of all appearances to the contrary. Thus the 'revealed God' overcomes the impression that the God, whom we experience in actual life, is indifferent or hostile to us.

Although it is pre-scientific and does not deny the existence of devils and angels, Luther's approach thus thoroughly demythologises and disempowers all entities that want to determine our lives, whether dangerous or beneficial, whether earthly or spiritual, whether human or divine. The ultimate question to be asked is whether those who follow Luther are being deprived of something precious and profound, or whether they are being liberated from detrimental and unnecessary constraints, empowered to take control of their lives, and led to greater fulfilment of life in fellowship with Christ, their Lord. This question is left for us to decide.

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Prof Klaus Nürnberg
 21 Farmers Folly
 Lynnwood
 PRETORIA
 0081
 Tel.: (012) 348 7909
 E-pos: info@klaus-nurnberger.com