

Evangelical Christianity and African Culture. A  
Critical Assessment of the Salvific Significance of  
the Cross of Christ in Shona Culture.

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DISSERTATION PRESENTED FOR THE  
DEGREE OF DOCTOR  
OF THEOLOGY  
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF  
STELLENBOSCH



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MARCH 2007

## DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this dissertation is my own original work and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it at any University for a degree.

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## ABSTRACT

This research investigates the salvific significance of the Cross of Christ in Shona culture from an evangelical perspective. It explores the typology of positions in evangelical Christianity and identifies the cross of Christ as one of its central tenets. The meaning of the cross is described and explained using diverse metaphors found in the Old and New Testaments. This research argues that the key metaphors used are drawn from the immediate context in which the understanding of the cross is sought because metaphors work within cultures where a shared encyclopedia can be assumed. The application is therefore that each culture and generation needs to contextually find ways of conceptualising and communicating the cross of Christ. It is in the process of doing this that the Cross of Christ will have transformational impact in a given culture.

The immediate context of this research is Shona culture and this culture is explored by looking at its typology of themes. Here the research identifies the ancestor motif as key to understanding Shona culture and religion as well as making sense of the Cross of Christ and its salvific significance. The research argues that both the person and work of Christ, in particular what he accomplished on the cross, must be understood, expressed and accepted from an African(Shona) perspective if evangelical Christianity is to have any meaningful and transformational impact.

The research therefore argues that the Christian calling is a cultural task. Christians are called to a cultural context and to fulfill this calling, Christians should neither take flight from the world of culture nor simply affirm it but engage it creatively as co-workers with God. The task of the church as a community of believers is therefore to bring about community transformation by affirming what can and should be affirmed in Shona culture and confronting what can and must be confronted. The understanding in this regard is that God acts redemptively towards reality through the church and he therefore uses Christians to bring about liberation, wholeness and soundness to communities when we trust in him. This can only happen when the evangelical understanding of the cross of Christ and its saving significance includes within it a commitment to the world and to the task of bringing healing grace to the poor, starving and oppressed.

## OPSOMMING

In hierdie studie word die Christuskrus se verlossingsbetekenis (*salvific significance*) in die Shona-kultuur vanuit 'n evangelistiese perspektief ondersoek. Die tipologie van posisies in die evangelistiese Christendom word ondersoek en die Christuskrus word as een van die hoofdele geïdentifiseer. Die krus se betekenis word beskryf deur uiteenlopende metafore in die Ou en Nuwe Testament te gebruik. Die mening word gehuldig dat die hoofmetafore wat gebruik is, verkry is vanuit die onmiddellike konteks waarin daar na die krus se betekenis gesoek word. Die rede is dat metafore binne kulturele werk waar 'n gedeelte ensiklopedie veronderstel kan word. Die toepassing is dat elke kultuur en generasie wyses kontekstueel moet vind om die Christuskrus te konseptualiseer en te kommunikeer. Die krus sal in hierdie proses 'n impak van transformasie op 'n gegewe kultuur hê.

Die onmiddellike konteks van hierdie studie is die Shona-kultuur wat ondersoek word deur dié kultuur se tipologie van temas in oënskou te neem. Die voorvader-motif word geïdentifiseer as die sleutel tot ander se begrip van die Shona-kultuur en -godsdienst en om sin te maak van die Christuskrus en sy verlossingsbetekenis. In hierdie studie word die mening gehuldig dat Christus as persoon en sy werk, veral dít wat Hy aan die krus bereik het, vanuit 'n Afrika- (Shona)perspektief begryp, uitgedruk en aanvaar moet word voordat evangelistiese Christenskap 'n betekenisvolle impak van transformasie kan hê.

Hier word die mening dus gehandhaaf dat die Christelike roeping 'n kulturele taak is. Om hulle roeping in 'n kulturele konteks te vervul, behoort Christene nie van kultuur weg te vlug nie, maar moet hulle dit bevestig en kreatief as God se medewerkers daarby betrokke raak. Die taak van die kerk as 'n gemeenskap van gelowiges is om gemeenskapstransformasie te laat realiseer deur dit te bevestig en te konfronteer wat in die spesifieke kultuur gepas is. God gebruik die kerk en Christene om bevryding, heelheid en gesondheid in gemeenskappe te laat realiseer wanneer die mens in Hom glo. Dit kan gebeur slegs wanneer die evangelistiese begrip van die Christuskrus en sy verlossingsbetekenis die verbintenis tot die wêreld insluit, asook die verbintenis tot die taak om genesende genade aan die armes, uitgehongertes en verdruktes te bring.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Post-graduate research is a very costly undertaking and I would therefore like to acknowledge the financial support I received from John Stott Ministries (USA), Overseas Council International (OCI), Mission to The World (MTW), Friends of the Theological College of Zimbabwe, Monte Vista Reformed Presbyterian Church and the Kingston family. This list is obviously far too short to include everyone who came to our rescue when we desperately needed moral and financial support.

Thanks are also due to the George Whitefield College library Staff and the Warden and Staff of Tyndale House, Cambridge whose assistance during the past three years was critical in getting the research done. I had the privilege of spending three weeks at Tyndale House and every minute was worth it. I am also indebted to my study leaders, Professor DJ Smit and Professor NN Koopman whose thoughtful and most generous remarks about the research kept me believing that I could do it.

A final and entirely inadequate word of thanks must go to my dear wife, Nosizo and lovely daughters, Nothabo and Rumbidzaishe. Their love, understanding and support has meant more to me than I can express. I therefore would like to dedicate this work to them with my deepest love and gratitude.

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## CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCING THE RESEARCH

### **1.1. Introduction and Overview of the Research**

This work is divided into five chapters. Chapter One introduces the research, stating the research problem and area of study, the methodology that guides the research and procedure, the nature of the research and a literature review. The meaning of ‘evangelical’ and ‘African’ is considered, in particular the typology of positions that define evangelical Christianity and the typology of themes in African culture(s) and religion(s).

Chapter Two explores the cross of Christ as a central tenet of evangelical Christianity through the eyes of John Calvin and Derek Tidball. According to these theologians, the cross is so central to evangelicalism that its identity and relevance are both irrevocably tied up with the crucified Christ. Evangelical Christians believe that in and through ‘Christ crucified’ God became our substitute, bore our sins, died in our place the death we deserved to die, in order that we might be restored to his favour and adopted into his family. Calvin and Tidball make use of different typologies or motifs to express the different ways the church has responded and expressed the message of the cross at different times. This chapter will therefore establish the general evangelical understanding of this central tenet without necessarily critiquing it.

Chapter Three is concerned with the relationship of Christ and culture as understood by Richard Niebuhr and Charles Kraft. This is the Western perspective and is important in developing a more accurate understanding of the missionary engagement in Africa, especially the way they viewed the African people and their culture. Niebuhr and Kraft also work with typologies of the Christ and culture relationship and through these they paint pictures of how the church has responded to the challenges of culture through the ages.

Chapter Four brings into the research the African perspective of the Christ and culture question by considering the work of Lamin Sanneh and Kwame Bediako. The two African theologians present both a critique of the missionary enterprise in Africa as well as new insights in response to it. Their main concern is the impact of African culture on the understanding and expression of who Jesus Christ is, and what he has done. Equally, they are concerned about the impact of Jesus Christ on African culture especially when his person and

work is understood and accepted from an African culture perspective. Bediako and Sanneh also use typologies as a way of allowing the rich African context to express who Jesus is and the meaning of what he accomplished on the cross.

Chapter Five brings all these perspectives together, especially the African perspective for a critical assessment of the meaning and significance of the cross in Shona culture. What is of critical importance in this chapter is the genuine Shona response to the fundamental question of Jesus Christ in Mark 8:29 (Who do you say that I am?) as well as the response of Jesus Christ to the demands of Shona culture. Not only is the Shona Christian confronted with the person of Christ but also his work on the cross. Not only is Christ confronted with Shona culture but also with traditional religion. Who is the crucified Christ to Shona Christians and what is the significance of what he has accomplished through his death on the cross to their faith and conduct?

## **1.2. Research Problem and Area of Study**

A. There is no doubt that at the turn of the millenium, Africa has earned a prominent place in Christian history because of the extra-ordinary growth of Christianity on the continent. In 1985, the Center for African Christianity in Nairobi recorded that there were over 205 million Christians in Africa. Some statistics showed that every day approximately 13,000 to 16,000 people become Christians.<sup>1</sup> The estimation then was that by the turn of the century, the Christian population in Africa would be over 350 million, meaning that Africa would then have the largest Christian concentration in the world. These figures are no longer just statistics but fact.

Andrew Walls (1976:180), leading scholar of world Christianity, described this as one of the most important events in the whole of Christian history:

It is nothing less than a complete change in the centre of gravity of Christianity, so that the heartlands of the Church are no longer in Europe, decreasingly in North America, but in Latin America, in certain parts of Asia, and most important for our present purposes, in Africa.

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<sup>1</sup> This figure was estimated by David Barrett, an Anglican researcher based in Nairobi. Cf. David Lamb, *The Africans* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984), 143. A figure of 15,000 was cited in *New Blackfires*, Jan. 1984, 3, which also stated that Europe has a decrease of 7,500 Christian per day.



This new situation has also been hailed by the Swiss missiologist Buhmann (1986:6) as “the coming of the Third Church.” He points to the fact that the first thousand years of church history were under the aegis of the Eastern Church in the eastern half of the Roman Empire, and in the second millennium the leading church was the Western Church in the other half. Buhmann goes on to say, “Now the Third Millennium will evidently stand under the leadership of the Third Church, the Southern Church. I am convinced that the most important drives and inspirations for the whole church in the future will come from the Third Church.”

According to the analysis of Watson Omulokole (1998:24-26), a lecturer and chaplain at Kenyatta University in Kenya, all this is happening when African countries have finally extricated themselves from the shackles of colonialism and oppression and the winds of change are sweeping with it the manacles of foreign domination. Ecclesiastically, this is viewed by many African theologians as the opportune time for the church in Africa to take advantage of the winds of change and claim independence from the Western church by establishing authentic, biblical, African expressions of Christianity. To do this in a way that will help establish the foundation for an ongoing process of making Christianity relevant to the African context, I would want to argue that the starting point is the fundamental question of what Richard Niebuhr has called ‘the enduring problem’ of Christ and culture.

Anthropologists and behavioural scientist tell us that to be human is to be immersed in some specific culture. Human beings generally are so totally immersed in their culture that they cannot be defined apart from it. According to the Charles Kraft (1989:46), missionary and anthropologist, culture holds us as the sea holds fish. If this is so, then deliberately reflecting on the relationship of Evangelical Christianity and African culture is one of the most important exercises for the African church because the very message of Christianity cannot be communicated intelligently apart from culture. In fact, Jesus Christ cannot be truly appropriated unless expressed, understood and accepted in the context of culture.

This understanding is clearly reflected in the the New Testament as critical for an authentic and contextual expression of the faith. The Christianity that is evident in the pages of the New Testament is not conservative but dynamic, adaptive and unafraid to take the risk of allowing the gospel to realistically face new cultures. This is what Jesus, Paul, Augustine,

Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, and Wesley did in their time, they did not simply preserve the fundamentals of the Christian faith, but they innovatively and creatively made them relevant to their cultural context. This is what the early church was forced to do when it began to spread out from Palestine into the Roman world and in the process encountered other cultures. According to the Gambian born theologian, Lamin Sanneh (1989:6-7), the same phenomenon happened when the missionary program advanced through the centuries and the subsequent realization that the Christian faith could not be communicated in a vacuum but in the context of culture.

In development this argument a few key passages appear to stand out in popularity among African Christians and theologians. I have found references in articles and books to Acts 2 (the Pentecost event), Acts 10 (the conversion of Cornelius), Acts 14 (especially v. 17: 'Yet he has not left himself without testimony'), Acts 15 (the Council of Jerusalem) and Acts 17 (Paul's sermon on the Aeropagus). My main interest for the purpose of this research is Acts 15 because just as with the other passages, many African Christians can identify easily with the missionary situation as described here, especially the issues that the incipient Christian communities faced with regard to their traditional cultural and political context.

The Nigerian theologian, Bolaji Idowu (1968:426-34) commenting on the meaning and importance of Acts 15 for African theology, wrote that the church in Africa came into being with a prefabricated theology and that converts found themselves in the position of those early converts before the council of Jerusalem, by being required to undergo some equivalent of circumcision. The Ghanaian theologian, Kwame Bediako often refers to the Book of Acts, both in his *Theology and Identity* (1992), and his later *Christianity in Africa* (1995). His references to Acts 15 are usually related to the issue of the Judaisers and to Paul as the one who ensured that the Gentiles would feel at home in the gospel.<sup>2</sup> Another Nigerian theologian, Justin Ukpong (1994:58) relates Acts 15 to Jesus' model and approach to inculturation, while hinting that this text fights against the imposition of Jewish culture. The Catholic theologian, Eugene Hillman (1993:28-48) quotes Acts 15 in support of his 'radically new attitude' towards a thorough-going Africanisation of Christianity in Africa. Another Ghanaian, Kwesi

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<sup>2</sup>See Bediako, *Theology and Identity*: 249

Dickson<sup>3</sup>, in his book, *Uncompleted Mission* (1991:28-48), devotes quite a few pages to 'mission in the Acts of the Apostles' and he also writes on the Council of Jerusalem (1991:28-48). For him, mission in Africa is not complete because of the exclusivist character of Western Christian mission, especially in its exclusion of African traditions (1991:137).

**B.** The Acts 15 experience particularly points out that the question of evangelical Christianity and African culture is not an idle one, it is not an empty post-colonial triumphalistic notion, but rather, a matter that must be dealt with if the African church is to make its mark in the new millennium. The evidence on the African scene overwhelmingly suggests that the biblical precedents as understood by the different theologians above have not been fully emulated resulting in what Diane Stinton<sup>4</sup> (2004:4) has referred to as a "christological crisis." According to Bishop Taylor (1963:16), African believers struggle to appropriate Jesus Christ authentically because Christianity is perceived as a "white people's religion, and Jesus as the answer to questions a white man would ask, the solution to the needs that Western man would feel, the Saviour of the world of European world-view." In other words, Jesus Christ was presented to Africans packaged in Western culture and they were expected to accept both as gospel truth.

Hillman (1993:38) puts it across this way: 'Where the Judaisers had failed, the Europeanisers triumphed'. African Christians criticise Western missionaries for forcing their cultural and ecclesiastical traditions upon them. They blame the missionaries for a Judaising attitude: 'You cannot be saved in your heathen and backward traditions, unless you're "circumcised" into Western traditions'. Like the Judaeans, Western missionaries were (and still are!) victims of the exclusivist and ethnocentric traditions of the dominant Western world. They came to Africa and continue to do so, with the wrong assumption that European culture was the only bona fide cultural medium for the transmission of God's truth. They had the problem of ethnocentrism - they viewed African culture in terms of their own culture. Consequently, they made pseudo-Europeans out of Africans upon conversion. One obvious example was the fact that upon conversion, the African had to discard their African name. Changes had to occur in

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<sup>3</sup> Kwesi Dickson is Professor Emeritus in the Department for the Study of Religion, University of Ghana and President of the All Africa Conference of Churches. He previously served as President of the Conference of the Methodist Church, Ghana.

<sup>4</sup> Diane B. Stinton is Professor of Theology at Daystar University, Nairobi Kenya and has written a book 'Jesus of Africa – Voices of Contemporary African Christology.'

the way Africans dressed, in their manners, language and the like (as discussed in Idowu: 1965). One had to become a 'European proselyte' in order to be an authentic Christian.'

Alioune Diop<sup>5</sup> (in Parratt 1995:7) articulates this clearly: 'Western religion has succeeded in converting African Christians into a people without soul or face, a pale shadow of the dominating pride of the Christian West'. The Cameroonian Catholic theologian, Engelbert Mveng<sup>6</sup> (1999:156) exposes the devastating effects of this message in the phrase 'anthropological poverty':

When persons are deprived not only of goods and possessions of a material, moral, intellectual, cultural, or sociological order, but of everything that makes up the foundation of their being-in-the-world and the specificity of their 'ipseity' as individual, society, and history - when persons are bereft of their identity, their dignity, their freedom, their thought, their history, their language, their faith universe, and their basic creativity, deprived of all their rights, their hopes, their ambitions - they sink into a kind of poverty which no longer concerns only exterior or interior goods or possessions but strikes at the very being, essence, and dignity of the human person. It is this poverty that we call anthropological poverty.

Responses to this Western-culture dominated gospel and missionary attitude that undermines African culture vary. The Malawian born theologian, Harvey Sindima<sup>7</sup> (1994:13ff) accurately identifies three different responses to the Gospel among Africans that deserve attention: Firstly there are those Africans who felt their society was being threatened by the foreign missionary enterprise and therefore rejected Christianity as a foreign religion. Also some rejected Christianity because of the prejudice of some missionaries toward African life and culture.

Secondly there are those Africans who accepted the package of Christian faith dressed in Western attire but the problem of foreign culture pressed hard on them. After they were baptised, they found that their new faith and the African way of life belonged to two

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<sup>5</sup> Alioune Diop is a Senegalese editor and cultural theorist who has written extensively on issues of culture and the Christian faith.

<sup>6</sup> Engelbert Mveng is a Jesuit priest, African art specialist, and theorist on Third World theology.

<sup>7</sup> Harvey Sindima, a Malawian, is professor of Philosophy and Religion at Colgate University.

irreconcilable worlds. The package of the new faith included rejecting one's past and assimilating Western values. Faced with a dichotomy between faith and culture, those who converted to Christianity rejected their culture altogether. According to Sindima (1994:14), the major concern for most African converts centred around alienation from the community and the loss of a sense of identity.

The third response were those Africans who sought to have both worlds, Christianity and traditional way of life. In their struggle to remain faithful to their heritage these converts, just like the Gentiles in Acts 15 only wanted Jesus Christ and not missionary culture. They therefore disengaged themselves from the institutions which brought the Gospel and that way allowed the Christian message to interact with the traditional way of life without the interference of missionaries. The result was a new form of Christianity, what some theologians have called 'authentic African Christianity!' In some respect I identify myself with this response as one who holds uncompromisingly to the finality of Jesus Christ for salvation and his incarnation in the various cultures of the world. I want to believe that I am an African by culture and a Christian by faith. But since I am an advocate of an intergrated life, I call myself an African Christian and a Christian African. In other words I want my faith to transform my culture and at the same time allow my culture to re-express my faith.

From the second and third kinds of responses emerged two types of Christianity, Sindima (1994:126) calls them, missionary and indigenous/independent churches. Missionary Christianity takes Western thought and practice as normative for all Christians everywhere, whilst indigenous churches take traditional indigenous thought and practice as normative. Missionary Christianity rejected African cosmology and culture as ways by which divine revelation could be mediated whilst for independent churches the same is the stage and medium through which God interact meets humanity.

The effect of this missionary approach is that African historic churches are (im)properly influenced by Western Christianity in the fields of education, world-view, language, liturgy, music, dress, church architecture etc. And yet the truth of the matter is that African believers away from their own traditions are lost somewhere between Africa and Europe; hence

Mveng's diagnosis of anthropological poverty, and Archbishop Desmond Tutu's<sup>8</sup> (in Fashole-Luke 1978:367-368) diagnosis of the African Christian as suffering from a form of religious schizophrenia, a split in the African soul:

With part of himself/herself he has been compelled to pay lip service to Christianity as understood, expressed and preached by white people. But with an ever greater part of himself/herself, a part he/she has often been ashamed to acknowledge openly and which he/she has struggled to repress, he/she has felt that his Africanness was being violated. The white people's largely cerebral religion was hardly touching the depths of his/her African soul; he/she was being redeemed of sins he/she did not believe he/she had committed; he/she was given answers, and often splendid answers, to questions he/she had not asked.

These 'diseases' of anthropological poverty and religious schizophrenia are the result of the proselytisation of African believers into Western Christianity. Elaborating on the significance of Christianity being perceived in Africa as "white people's religion," Taylor (1963:16) pinpointed the heart of the problem:

Christ has been presented as the answer to the questions white people would ask, the solution to the needs Western people would feel, the Saviour of the world of the European world-view, the object of adoration and prayer of historic Christendom. But if Christ were to appear as the answer to the questions that Africans are asking, what would he look like? If he came into the world of African cosmology to redeem humanity as Africans understand them, would Christ be recognizable to the rest of the Church Universal? And if Africa offered Christ the praises and petitions of her total, uninhibited humanity, would they be acceptable?

The question of this inquiry is therefore: *given that there is an African (Shona) perceptive to the Christ and culture question, who is the 'Crucified Christ' to the African (Shona) Christian and what is his significance?* If we turned around Taylor's insight on how Christ is perceived in Africa, how does Christ become the answer to the questions African people ask, the solution to the need they feel and the Saviour of the African world-view. What would

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<sup>8</sup> The most Revd Desmond Tutu, Archbishop Emeritus of Cape Town, Anglican Church of Southern Africa.

Christ look like and how would he be understood if he came into the world of Shona cosmology to redeem man and woman as Africans understand him, would he be recognizable to the rest of the Church Universal?

My main interest is to apply an African understanding of the relationship of Christ and culture to how Christ and his death on the cross would be understood, articulated and accepted by the Shona Christian and the consequential significance thereof. The basis of this investigation is the centrality of Jesus Christ to Evangelical Christianity and his death on the cross as its distinguishing mark.

This research will therefore argue for a positive and yet conservative approach to the relationship of Christ and culture. In this approach, I take the integral wholeness of all creation seriously and this includes human cultures. Human beings meet Christ in the context of culture and not apart from it, for Christ can only be understood and accepted in this context. This therefore means that not only are individuals and communities converted to Christ but ultimately all creation must be renewed and that includes cultural values. Culture, just like all creation, remains under God's sovereign rule even as he judges it and Christian obedience includes cultural action.

The implication of this argument is that Christ must be found in African (Shona) culture, understood, articulated and accepted in such a way that he is at home in African culture and Africans view him as their own. Understood this way, Christ transforms Africans in culture and by implication, cultural values are also transformed. This transformation is understood against a background of the death of Christ on the cross and what he accomplished through it. The 'Crucified Christ' is understood by Shona Christians as their only ancestor and therefore their healer, chief, elder brother and liberator.

### **1.3. Evangelical Christianity - A Typology of Positions**

In this section I will define what Evangelical Christianity is and identify its diversity of positions.

A. The term "Evangelical" is a wide-reaching definitional "canopy" that cover a number of protestant groups. Some Evangelical theologians like John Stott (1999:15-16) have dared to



argue that the term dates back from earlier than the fifteenth century. He refers to what he calls 'proto-evangelicals' - all those other Christian leaders who attributed ultimate authority to Scripture and salvation to Christ crucified alone. This could include even the great church father Augustine, who proclaimed divine grace as the only remedy for human guilt.

In the fifteenth century John Wycliffe was called Doctor *evangelicus* and in the sixteenth century the term 'Evangelical' was first used to refer to Catholic writers who wished to revert to more biblical beliefs and practices than those associated with the late medieval church (McGrath 1995:19). But it was only in the early eighteenth century, in relation to the so-called Evangelical Revival associated with John Wesley and George Whitefield that the term came into widespread use. In the seventeenth century the term 'Evangelical' had been applied both to the Puritans in England and to the Pietists in Germany, and in the sixteenth century to the Reformers. They called themselves "*evangelical men*," a designation which Martin Luther adopted as *die Evangelischen* (McGrath 1995:19).

David Bebbington (1994:389) in his overview of how Evangelical theologians have described the evangelical faith identifies three senses in which the term "*evangelical*" is used today. The first sense is to see as "evangelical" all Christians who affirm a few key doctrines and practical emphases. A second sense is to look at evangelicalism as an organic group of movements and religious tradition. Within this context "*evangelical*" denotes a style as much as a set of beliefs. A third sense of the term is as the self-ascribed label for a coalition that arose during the second World War. This group came into being as a reaction against the perceived anti-intellectual separatist, belligerent nature of the fundamentalist movement in the 1920s and 1930s.

Karl Barth (1960:11) distinguished the evangelical faith from other professing Christians and defined "Evangelical" to mean "informed by the gospel of Jesus Christ, as heard afresh in the sixteenth century Reformation by direct return to Holy Scripture." Barth goes as far as qualifying the Reformation as an evangelical event because of the way it provided for a renewed emphasis on the gospel as critical for all life. According to Harriet Harris (1998:197) the term 'evangelical' was used of both Reformed and Lutheran churches since Reformation because they based their teaching pre-eminently on the 'Gospel.' McGrath (1995:13) similarly explained that the term 'evangelical' was especially associated with the 1520s,



when the French term *evangelique* and the German *evangelisch* began to feature prominently in the controversial writings of the early Reformation.

Clearly the word evangelical could have been on Calvin's lips, but would it therefore be appropriate to associate him with *Evangelicalism*? Harris (1998:198) would respond negatively, as she argued that "Evangelicals affirm most credal statements as a matter of orthodoxy, but they have not developed theological thinking on all credal matters." McGrath (1995 :94) on the other hand, claimed exactly the opposite :

Evangelicalism is historic [Orthodox] Christianity. Its beliefs correspond to the central doctrines of the Christian churches down the ages, including the two most important doctrines of the patristic period : the doctrine of the 'two natures,' human and divine, of Jesus Christ, and the doctrine of the Trinity. In its vigorous defence of the biblical foundations, theological legitimacy and spiritual relevance of these doctrines, evangelicalism has shown itself to have every right to claim to be a standard-bearer of historic orthodox Christianity in the modern period.

Morris Inch (1978:11), whilst acknowledging the merit of what is implied by Barth, gives a word of caution. His opinion is that the Reformation was not exclusively nor solely an evangelical revival, no matter how largely a part evangelical concern may have played in it. In any case the evangelical principle derives from Scripture itself and not from some subsequent historical event.

**B.** The term evangelicalism is used in a diversity of ways. A study of modern day evangelical faith reveals that while there seems little doubt about its growth and influence in today's world, especially on the African continent, the picture is less clear as has always been when its meaning is considered. According to David Wells (1994:389), the attempt to define evangelicalism is growing more and more difficult because its centre - what has provided the unity for people who differ on particulars - has become increasingly elusive and hard to describe.

Unfortunately, not everyone agrees with Wells. In fact most evangelical theologians have argued that nothing has actually changed in evangelical faith; what is changing is our

recognition of its many vagaries and nuances, and this recognition is a good thing. For example, the ethos of evangelical Christianity that revolves primarily around the gospel has not changed. Evangelical Christianity continues to demonstrate an unwavering commitment to the Christian gospel which, according to Robert Johnson (in Dayton and Johnson 1991:261), consists of “a dedication to the gospel that is expressed in personal faith in Christ as Lord, an understanding of the gospel as defined authoritatively by Scripture, and a desire to communicate the gospel both in evangelism and social reform.”<sup>9</sup>

Since Christians encounter the dynamics of this gospel in different ways and context, Evangelicalism is multifaceted. On the Denominational front, Thomas Stransky (1988:24) refers to their preponderance within mainline, confessional, ‘peace’ and free churches, as well as being found among such influences as the ‘Holiness’ tradition and non-denominational bodies such as para-church groups.<sup>10</sup> On the theological front, the unifying factor of the gospel permits a generous measure of legitimate diversity, as Gabriel Fackres’s (1993:22-23) typology of evangelical variety reveals, viz. fundamentalists,<sup>11</sup> old evangelicals,<sup>12</sup> new evangelicals,<sup>13</sup> justice and peace evangelicals,<sup>14</sup> charismatic evangelicals,<sup>15</sup> and ecumenical evangelicals.<sup>16</sup> According to Derek Tidball (1994:14),

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<sup>9</sup> His description complements that of David Bebbington, whose classic definition prevails as a more popular one in use by historians of Evangelicalism, which highlights four specific hallmarks of evangelical Christianity: “biblicism (a reliance on the Bible as ultimate religious authority), conversion (a stress on the New Birth [conversion]), activism (an energetic, individualistic approach to religious duties and social involvement), and crucicentrism (a focus on Christ’s redeeming work as the heart of essential Christianity. Cited in Mark A. Noll, David W. Bebbington and George A. Rawlyk (Eds), *Evangelicalism: Comparative Studies of Popular Protestantism in North America, The British Isles, and Beyond* (New York:Oxford University, 1994),6.

<sup>10</sup> On their denominational connection, Millard Erickson points out: “Some evangelicals are found within ‘mainline’ denominations – older, more officially liberal groups. Many are found within separate denominations which are distinguished by a clearly evangelical bent. Yet others are independent evangelicals, either members of independent churches or unaffiliated to any local congregation. Another distinction is between charismatic or even Pentecostal evangelicals and non-charismatic evangelicals.” See Erickson, “Evangelicalism: USA” in McGrath (Ed), *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Modern Christian Thought*, 188.

<sup>11</sup> That is those who adhere to ultra-inerrancy of the written Word as the criterion of faithfulness and who exhibit a polemical and separatist mentality in faith and life, with the Jerry Falwells as the classic models.

<sup>12</sup> That is those who stress personal conversion and mass evangelism, with Billy Graham as the classic model.

<sup>13</sup> That is those who since the 1950s stress the social import of faith and criticise fundamentalist sectarianism, with the periodical Christianity Today as the classic expression.

<sup>14</sup> That is those activist evangelicals who advocate a political agenda at variance with the Religious Right, with Ronald Sider and the journal Sojourners espousing its typical tradition and political agenda.

<sup>15</sup> That is those who advocate the expression of the new birth in second blessings – glossolalia, healing, celebrative worship, and intense group experience.

<sup>16</sup> That is those who tend towards relationships with the larger Christian community, with Charles Colson or Richard Mouw as exemplary figures.

Bebbington's quadrilateral "has quickly established itself as near to a consensus as we might ever expect to reach."<sup>17</sup>

Dayton and Johnston (1991:261) numbered what they considered the four characteristics most Evangelicals affirm: the Bible as the sole authority for belief and practice; conversion as a personal experience; the nurture of spirituality and holiness; and mission, including both evangelism and social reform. In one of his brief descriptions, Bloesch (1983:5) goes more or less in the same direction:

The key to evangelical unity lies in a common commitment to Jesus Christ as the divine Saviour from sin, a common purpose to fulfil the great commission and a common acknowledgement of the absolute normativeness of Holy Scripture.

In more or less the same manner, Smith (2003:30) describes what Evangelicals have in common:

...a thoroughgoing commitment to the authority of the Bible; a personal experience of salvation from sin; received in a moment of living faith; and finally an outreach in missionary evangelism.

What these different evangelical theologians seem to be saying is that in seeking to define what it means to be evangelical, it is inevitable that we begin with the gospel. According to Stott (1999:25), the obvious reason being that both our theology (evangelicalism) and our activity (evangelism) derive their meaning and their importance from the good news (the evangel). And so the three essentials to which they are determined to bear witness to are: the gracious initiative of God the Father in revealing himself to us, in redeeming us through Christ crucified and in transforming us through the indwelling Spirit. In other words the evangelical faith is the Trinitarian faith<sup>18</sup> and it comes as no surprise when Evangelical Christianity places important emphasis on the Word, the cross and the Spirit.

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<sup>17</sup> In *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730 to the 1980s*, Bebbington elaborates these four characteristics, with many historical examples, on pages 3-19. They have been widely accepted. Clive Calver and Rob Warner adopted them, in their book *Together We Stand*, although Rob Warner added two further characteristics, namely "Christocentric" and "longing for revival" (see pp. 94-105).

<sup>18</sup> In *The Radical Evangelical: Seeking a Place to Stand* (London: SPCK, 1996). Nigel Wright also writes of the primacy of the Trinity in evangelical religion.

Evangelical Christians, theologians and those outside have therefore come to appreciate the multi-faceted reality of global Evangelicalism. No one could have said it better than Timothy Smith (1994:390) when he described Evangelicalism as a real “*mosaic*.” Think of it more in terms of an extended family that, despite some strange and eccentric members, remains a single family. Or maybe there are different “types” of evangelicalism much as there are different types of viruses. Evangelicalism is “a river that doesn’t have its banks very well defined,” comments Robert Schuller (in Woodward 1983:89). Yet, although the banks might be ill-defined, the central theological channel can still be straightforwardly articulated. Evangelicals are those who identify with the orthodox faith of the Reformers in their answers to Christianity’s two fundamental questions: (1) How is it possible for a sinner to be saved and to be reconciled to his or her Creator and God? (the answer: *solus Christus; sola gratia; sola fide*); (2) By what authority do I believe what I believe and teach what I teach? (The answer: *sola scriptura*). (Stott 1968:1). Evangelicals, that is, have a personal faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and a commitment to the Bible as the sole and binding authority.

Evangelical theologians, thus, distinguish themselves from other theologians within the Christian community by accepting as axiomatic the Bible’s inherent authority. Opinions abound concerning the role of tradition vis-à-vis Scripture. A variety of answers are given concerning the contribution of the theologian’s context in his or her theological formulations. Some evangelicals stress the experiential dimensions of the Christian faith and see these as central to the theological enterprise. But within this diversity there is a centredness.

African evangelicals are however unhappy with the obviously narrow assumption that the only way evangelical typologies are identified and described is by referring to the North American and British/European expressions of the movement. It is narrow because it no longer represents the geographical spread of evangelism as a global movement. Thus for many evangelicals the significant changes in the centres from which evangelicalism is growing and flowing come as a breath of fresh air. The shift of evangelical influence, as of Christianity broadly, to the African, Asian, Latin and South American churches is already making its impact globally. This is demonstrated clearly by the influence of the writings of Orlando Costas and Rene Padilla (Latin Americans); of Vinay Samuel and Ramoth

Ramachandra (from the Indian sub-continent); and Kwame Bediako and Lamin Sanneh (Africa).

Andrew Walls (1996:43-46) has for some time been spelling out the significance of this change for the church generally.<sup>19</sup> For a specific example of the way third world evangelical leaders are questioning the presupposition of Western evangelicals, Kwame Bediako (1989:52) provides a pointed challenge in his article, 'World Evangelization, Institutional Evangelicalism and the Future of the Christian World Mission'. Bediako commends the wholistic understanding of the Gospel achieved at Lausanne 1974, but is deeply concerned about the erosion of that wholistic approach in subsequent international evangelical gatherings, particularly questioning the right of Western agencies to initiate global evangelistic programmes based on concepts like 'unreached peoples' without any reference to the existing churches adjacent to such groups. He also questions Western over-dependance on the social sciences rather than Christian mission history as the proper source for deriving methodology in evangelism.

#### **1.4. African Culture - A Typology of Themes.**

A. Africa is undoubtedly a continent with a fascinating diversity of peoples, 800 million of them, making up about 13% of the world population. These peoples together make up about 50 nations, making the African continent the second largest in the world. Africa can be divided into five regions: North Africa, West Africa, Central Africa, East Africa and Southern Africa. Each of these represents a cultural and geographic region which is different from the others in many ways: for example with regard to the languages spoken. The four main language families are: Afro-Asiatic, Niger-Congo, and Nilo-Saharan, and Khoisan. Each of these language families can be further broken down into smaller groups. At least 1,000 different languages have been identified in Africa. They reflect the great ethnic diversity of this continent. Each ethnic group has its own distinct language, traditions, arts and craft, history, way of life and religion. At the same time, over the centuries the different groups have also influenced one another and contributed to and enriched one another's culture.

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<sup>19</sup>See, e.g., 'Culture and Coherence in Christian History' in the *Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of the Faith*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996, 43-45.

**B.** African cultural life reflects a rich diversity and the major debate for those seeking to understand African peoples, their history, culture and religion, is whether or not we can speak of African culture and African traditional religion (in the singular)? Scholars rightfully point out the danger of generalizations about Africa that lack sufficient regard for the vastness of this continent and the diversity of its peoples, languages, cultures and histories.

The honest analysis of this debate is that owing to its diversity, Africa has a very rich historical, cultural and religious heritage. But this heritage is not uniform, it has similarities, but there are also differences from time to time, from place to place, and from people to people. Some of this heritage originated on the African soil; it is therefore, genuinely African and indigenous. However some developed through contact with peoples of other countries and continents. It therefore goes without saying that each African people has its own cultural heritage, but the similarities make it possible to speak of African culture (in the singular) (Mbiti 1975:7-9). In other words the recognition of diversity in Africa should not overlook “the reality of, and aspiration for, a commonality and homogeneity in the African experience (Mugambi 1989:5).” Overall, contemporary African theologians reveal awareness of the hazard of overgeneralization and guard against it by specifying the particular people group to which they refer.

Soyinka (1985:16), and many with him, would further argue that there exists a common bond among African peoples that transcends their experiences even across the continents, linking Africa with parts of the Americas and the Caribbean. These are what he calls the “*enia dudu*,” a Yoruba expression for “the black peoples,” linked by a common tragic heritage of victimization, forceful emigration, ideological and human denigration, but also of complementarity, interaction and productivity. Asante and Asante (1985:90) describes Africa as one cultural river with numerous tributaries characterized by their specific responses to history and the environment and the unity is based on the commonalities among the people. To the degree that the material conditions influence the choices people make, Africans share similarities in behavior, perceptions, and technologies. Peoples of Africa share a common experience, struggle, and origin. The sharing of origin gives colour significance but not necessarily dominant significance. As Soyinka (1985:5) says in “The African World in the Ethno-cultural Debate,” the black Cuban whose complexion may be lighter than the

Moroccan's may be a brother less because of colour than the common response to the same rhythms, the same rituals, the same African sense.

One argument given by those of the anti-African culture school is that the African culture cannot exist because Africa encompasses too many ethnic groups. Such an argument is not made with regard to European culture or Asian culture. While it is easy to argue that there are numerous cultures within the Arab, European, and Asian cultures, it is an argument with little meaning when one understands that the unity of experiences, struggle, and origin cause each of these major cultures to have an internal unity. So it is with African culture.

### 1.5. Shona Culture

The Shona have been defined as a distinct Southern East African ethnicity that should be understood as an amalgamation of related dialects first coined by South African linguist Clement Doke in 1951. Historians commonly refer to the term Shona as a modern invention of post-colonial nationalism based on the common language, *ChiShona*. Doke used Shona as a linguistic categorization in 1931 in an attempt to consolidate and unify the diverse collection of languages spoken within the then Rhodesia. Linguistically, therefore, Shona is an amalgamation of mutually intelligible dialects which include the following six dominant groups of Kalanga, Karanga, Zezuru, Ndau, Korekore and the Manyika (Daneel 1971:28).

According to Bourdillon (1976) the derivation of the word 'Shona' is uncertain and did not exist to describe any ethnic grouping before the advent of colonialism. Bullock<sup>20</sup> (1927:12) confirmed the same when he said, "The word Shona is used *faute de mieux*; nor need we look for its etymological derivation, because it has none". The extension of the term to all tribes native to the then 'Rhodesia' appears to have been a British innovation (Cf. von Sicard 1950). Bullock (1927:12) calls it, "one of those British bowdlerisations, which are borne so patiently by a long-suffering world". Historians therefore understand the term Shona to be a nationalistic modern phenomenon described as an artificial ethno-linguistic category used to consolidate this amalgamation of dialects (Cf. Doke 1931:30).

The Historian David Beach (1980:19) however, identifies the origination of the term Shona

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<sup>20</sup> Charles Bullock was Native commissioner, and Examiner in Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe.



with the Ndebele<sup>21</sup> ‘*abetshona*’ meaning ‘those from over there’ and was popularized by use during colonial times. The Ndebele also used it as a derogatory name for the people they had defeated. It is therefore not surprising that the Shona did not call themselves by this name and at first disliked it. Even today most Shonas tend rather to classify themselves by their chiefdoms or their dialect groups (Karanga, Manyika, Zezuru, Korekore, ect).

What is of essence, however is that the people who define this cultural cluster nonetheless exhibit sufficiently marked and undeniable commonalities such as a shared linguistic (ChiShona), politico-geographic location and cultural (social traditions, norms, practices, values, beliefs) conformity to set them apart as a distinct ethnic group. The majority of Shona speakers reside within the national republic of Zimbabwe and northwestern region of Mozambique. However, there are also a number of isolated scattered segments in South Africa, Malawi, Botswana, and Zambia (Bourdillon 1976:31).<sup>22</sup> The Shona make-up 80-84% percent of Zimbabwe’s population of approximately thirteen million and the rest is primarily made-up of Nguni Speaking Ndebeles (Murray 1981:196).

### 1.5.1. Shona Identity and Solidarity

Shona group identity and solidarity is undergirded by the Bantu principle of *cognates ergo sum* (I belong/am related, therefore I am). This idea is captured by Tutu’s dictum, *A person is a person through other persons* (cf. Pato 1997:54). Mbiti (cf. Pato 1997:56) gives the Bantu principle as, *I belong, therefore, I am*, as contrasted with the Cartesian principle (cf. Rene Descartes – 1596-1650), *I can think, therefore, I am*. Pato’s version in dialogue with Mbiti is, *We are related, therefore, we are*.

This fundamental principle has been described as a double-edged sword. The negative edge tends to subsume the individual into collective identity and is therefore understood to be a disadvantage to both men and women. The positive is that this principle has become the basis for a revival or a rebirth of traditional culture and religion. It has to be both culture and religion because for Africans, the two are so interwoven that they are inseparable.

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<sup>21</sup> The Ndebele people of Zimbabwe are a branch of the Zulus of South Africa who split from King Shaka in the early 1820s under the leadership of Mzilikazi, a former general in Shaka’s army.

<sup>22</sup> Michael Bourdillon is a Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Zimbabwe. He has undertaken extensive research of the Shona peoples.



This inseparability of culture and religion is not at all surprising especially if you consider what religion means to the African peoples in general. African theologians, inter alia, John Mbiti and Bolaji Idowu<sup>23</sup> (cf. Judith Behemuka 1989:2) postulate that the African is notoriously religious. Tshishiku Tshibangu has observed that religion “impregnates the entire texture of individual life in Africa.” In his chapter on “Religion and Social Evolution” in Africa Since 1935 (Mazrui 1993), volume 8 of UNESCO’s General History of African series, Tshibangu writes: “The African is profoundly, incurably a believer, a religious person. To him religion is not just a set of beliefs but a way of life, the basis of culture, identity and moral values. Religion is an essential part of the tradition that helps to promote both social stability and creative innovation.”

The importance of traditional African religion (see Mazrui 1993:505) goes well beyond just statistics as presented by missiologists. For many African Christians, the basis of moral values still derives more from the old cosmology than from the new beliefs (See Mazrui 1993:505). Cited as evidence is the continuing involvement of ancestors in the life of their successors, belief in the forces of good and evil that “can be manipulated by direct access to the divinities through prayer and sacrifice, belief in the efficacy of charms and amulets to ward off evil,” and finally, “the vast area of African life which Christianity has invaded but has not succeeded in completely displacing,” the area of health and healing. If anything at all, this is a description of an all encompassing-holistic religious worldview. There is here the concept of interdependence, interconnectedness or wholeness of life. It is as Archbishop Desmond Tutu<sup>24</sup> (cf Luke Lungile Pato 1997:55) asserts that the whole rhythm of daily life is a continuous liturgy that permeates such daily activities as eating, drinking, ploughing, etc., and that there is no dichotomy between the sacred and the secular, the material and the spiritual. ‘All life is religious, all life is sacred, all life is of a piece’.

A South African theologian, Luke Lungile Pato (1997:55) underscores this notion by asserting that everything from before birth to life after death is initiated. Similarly, John Pobee (1992:69), in claiming that homo Africanus experiences the *mysterium tremendum* in community. The term *communio sanctorum* (cf. Rev. E.K. Mosothoane, in Kuckertz, H.

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<sup>23</sup> John Mbiti and Bolaji Idowu are specialists in African Culture and Religion. John Mbiti is Canon of the Anglican Church and professor of the Ecumenical Institute of WCC in Geneva.

<sup>24</sup> Desmond Tutu is a retired Anglican Archbishop, active in the ANC and protagonist of Black Theology of Liberation. Tutu was Nobel Peace prize winner in 1984.

1991:12,80) is inclusive of the whole of Shona life. Vincent Mulago<sup>25</sup> (1991:119) explains that in Bantu religious worldview there is a vital unity between the mundane and the extra-mundane world. This is the link between the ancestors as the living dead and their living descendants (Nyamiti 1984:15-16). Similarly, there is vital participation in that the dead are closer to God and are therefore given supernatural powers necessary in mediation, and/or for the punishing of offender(s). The living descendants participate by empowering their dead as ancestors in the ceremony of *kuchenura/kugadzira/kurovaguva* (the homing of the spirit). It is therefore not surprising that the Shona acknowledge any separation of religion from social, economic and political aspects as superficial. This is particularly demonstrated in the Shona social system of organization and religious worldview.

It is therefore not surprising that prior to Christianity the Shona knew and worshipped God, that is, in their way of life and general orientation to the Supreme Being/Mwari. This view accentuates the understanding that culture is a preamble to faith, or, is a **preparation evangelica** (*a precedent to evangelization*) (Nyamiti 1973:18,30).

### 1.5.2. Shona Traditional beliefs and ritual

Daneel (1971:79ff) classifies Shona beliefs and practices into four distinct but interrelated categories associated with (1) the High God, (2) the spirit world, (3) the diviner-herbalist, and (4) the wizard (sorcerer or witch). The first category recognizes the general belief in a Supreme Being, the second covers a wide range of activities related to ancestral and alien spirits, while the third category concerns the divinatory and magical practices of the most versatile specialist in Shona religion, the *n'anga* (diviner-herbalist). The fourth category also deals with the magical practices.

#### 1.5.2.1. The High-God

The Shona are known to have an elaborate *Mwari* cult, centring in a Supreme Being (*Mwari*) (Mushona 1932:27). *Mwari* is the most common name for the high god and it was spread particularly by Christian missionaries and was therefore explicitly associated with Christianity ever since. Daneel (1970:15-16) explains the probable origination of the concept 'Mwari' by showing its great affinity with the *Mwali* religion of Tanzania. In terms of *Bantu migration movement*, the *Mwari cult*, could have been brought to Zimbabwe by the *Mbire*

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<sup>25</sup> Monsignor Vincent Mulago is a Kenyan Roman Catholic priest.

tribe of Tanzania (totem: *Shoko, monkey*). This underscores the correspondence between **Mwari** and **Muali** (Van der Merwe 1957:2-5). Muali is the God of agriculture, and, in parallel with the Shona designate of Mwari, the rainmaker or giver of rain is thus first and foremost responsible for fertility, both for humans and crops. It seems that the tradition of the Mbire past lends support to Von Sicard's view that there is a definite relationship between the Kilimanjaro Muali and the Shona Mwari. Mwari's most popular praise-name: **Dzivaguru** (the Great Pool) is associated with the idea of rain. As **Dzivaguru**, Mwari can be relied upon to provide the people with rain. Mwari is also Sororezhou (head of the elephant; and as such: father), Nyadenga (Possessor of the sky) and Wokumusoro (the One above) (Von Sicard 1944:150).

**Mwari** is **Musiki** (from kusika: to create), Musikavanhu (Creator of mankind), Muvambapasi (Founder of the earth), the source of all beings and is therefore understood as a universal God, who, for example, gives rain, sunshine, and growth to all (Van der Merwe 1957:8). In this perspective, the forests are holy (*anoyera*), especially the places where people gather things like mushrooms, wild fruits, honey, game - things which are thought to be made available to all people (Shirley A. Thorpe<sup>26</sup> 1991:55). On the same note, these gifts of Mwari are supposed to be collected with respect and sparingly. Violation of such laws of the forest can result in punishment from Mwari through ancestors. People now and again report cases of people getting lost, or, of mysterious disappearances of people in such forests.

But Mwari of the Shona is also understood as the remote high god and therefore is not involved in the daily affairs of people, and similarly in the individuals' needs (Thorpe 1991:54; Bourdillon 1976:322-323). As such, Mwari is accessible only through ancestral mediation. Thorpe explains that for this reason, few rituals are dedicated to Mwari. These include, the *mukwerera* (*petitioning for rain*) ritual, or rituals performed in cases of severe drought, through the Mwari oracular cult at Matonjeni – Matopo Hills in Bulawayo (Daneel 1970:18). In the concept of Mwari as Creator par excellence, and the ultimate giver of rain, fertility of both land and human beings are prerogatives of God.

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<sup>26</sup> Shirley Thorpe is an American who spent 30 years in South Africa. She lectured in *Missiology and the Role of Black Theology in Dismantling Apartheid*. She was also lecturer at UNISA in Religious Studies. Thorpe contributed to research on African Traditional Religions (including the Shona Mwari Religion).

Bourdillon (1976:323) concurs with Thorpe on the concept of Mwari conceived by the Shona as remote and not involved, in the following category of events attributed to the High God:

- (a) Events with an effect more widespread than the territorial domain of even the most powerful lion spirit. Thus the drought of 1970 was attributed to Mwari.
- (b) Events which are in the natural order of things – i.e. do not require further explanation in terms of a personal agent – e.g. the death of an old person, that is, where witchcraft is not suspected. Similarly, mild illnesses, where no diviner is consulted.
- (c) Thunder, especially lightning – these events reveal occasional and unusual power coming from the heavens which is terrifying, unpredictable in terms of the ordinary events of social life.

Schoffeleers (1978:249) gives a similar list as concerning the Korekore's understanding of divine providence.

The immanence of God is highlighted in Shona names, which also emphasize Mwari as the ultimate authority and giver of everything. Mwari is addressed as **Ishe** (*king/chief*). These Shona designates of **Mwari** include, *inter alia*, **Simbrashe** (*strength/power of God*), **Tinashe** (*God is with/among us*), **Kudakwashe** (*the will of God*), **Nyasha/Ngonidzashe** (*mercy of God*) and **Ruvarashe** (*flower of God*). However, it can be said that these are neo-Christian designations of God.

The interpretive concept that emerges from the above mentioned names is that of an ambivalent deity, both immanent and transcendent. Ever present in his creation He stands in direct relation to the life-giving water. His association with all things created evokes an almost pantheistic conception because a clear distinction between Him and His creation is not conceived. As Taylor puts it, 'no distinction can be made between sacred and secular, between natural and supernatural, for nature, man and the unseen are inseparably involved in one another in a total community' (Taylor in Daneel 1971:82). Mwari is involved in the total community of things and living things. Unfortunately this concept of an immanent deity only coincides with the Shona's intuitive awareness of His presence rather than with a rational projection of the nature of His being. In the final analysis, Mwari is not an 'abstract power' void of anthropomorphic attributes. His close association with the apex of the hierarchically

structured world of human ancestors contributes towards His anthropomorphic character and makes of Him the transcendent but personal God, the One above (Daneel 1971:83).

In the Shona religious worldview, as subscribing to hierarchy, the highest principle is therefore, **Mwari**, understood as the Supreme Being and Creator God beyond and above ancestral hierarchies and therefore can only be approached indirectly through mediation of senior lineage ancestors. The ancestors are understood as *the living dead* and through their death they have resumed supernatural powers as closest to Mwari, and, as mhondoro (lion/tribal tutelary spirits). This empowers them to protect, mediate and even punish their descendants for wrong done. This view is captured by a South African theologian, Gabriel Setiloane (cf. Wanamaker 1997:288) in a poem:

*The dead are not dead, they are ever near us,  
Approving and disapproving all our actions,  
They chide us when we go wrong,  
Bless and sustain us for good deeds done,  
For kindness shown, and strangers made to feel at home,  
They increase our store, and punish our pride.*

Gordon Chavhunduka<sup>27</sup> (1978:12) explains the above elements as concerning the Shona's understanding of Ancestral mediation as follows:

*Many Shona people believe that the deceased kinsmen continue to take an interest in the affairs of their descendants. They believe that the ancestors have power to prevent evil and also help the living in solving their daily problems. They are interested in the behaviour of their descendants and may punish them in case of bad behaviour. It is believed that the ancestors' spirits use different means to enforce correct behaviour. If, for example, a man commits incest, or fails to perform a necessary ritual for a dead kinsman, the ancestors may punish him with illness, and in extreme cases, with death. The ancestors' spirits can do this by withdrawing their vital protection and so permitting evil influences, such as witchcraft to harm the individual or withdrawal of such blessings as good rainfall.*

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<sup>27</sup> Gordon Chavhunduka is the current President of the Zimbabwe National Healers' Association (ZINATHA).

It can be said that the above views can be captured in the Shona/Bantu principle of an ethic that flows from ontology. In this ontological anthropology, that is, *ubuntu-unhu* in Shona, the Shona believe in vital communion between ancestors.

The etymology of *Bantu*, people, is from *ntu* and *muntu* whose Shona equivalents are *unhu* and *munhu* as denoting *personality* and *person*, respectively. Setiloane says it is important to understand that “UBUNTU (Zulu), Unhu (Shona) is a concept much deeper than the European word for Person or Personality can translate, meaning the very essence of being, the equivalent of ‘the soul’ in Western Christian language (Setiloane in Sindima 1994:132).” In this anthropological/ontological ethic, and, as portrayed in the above poem, there is increase or diminution of being. In other words, actions which are good, such as respect for persons and other people’s property increase one’s personhood and the reverse is true of bad actions, such as being quarrelsome and stealing. The Shona talk of a good person as *munhu ane unhu* (*being fully human*). The reverse is, *haana unhu* (*being sub-human*). The latter, as a person who shows individualism and acts badly, is seen to be a liability to the health and general well-being of the family, clan, tribe and nation (Bourdillon 1977:2.138).

Commenting on the legacy of evangelization, Ela says that the missionary enterprise failed to recognize this African humanity.

Missionary endeavor touched only the aspects of African humanity which seemed worthwhile, leaving as unproductive a no-man’s land disfigured by tangles of questions, doubts, hopes and unfulfilled expectations of every kind. If it were possible to begin the mission over again – something which must be done in many regions where those already in receipt of the sacraments must be evangelized afresh – one thing which would have to be taken very seriously is the whole sphere of the African as a human being who was belittled and cheated under the old system of traditional evangelism (Ela in Sindima 1994:132).

### 1.5.2.2. The Spirit World

Daneel (1971:91) distinguishes three main categories of spirits in the Shona spirit world. These are the *midzimu* (sing.mu-), (ancestral spirits); the *shavi* (alien spirits) that do not belong to the same clan, tribe or ethnic group as their hosts; and the (*ngozi*) or avenging spirits.

### 1.5.2.2.1 The ancestral spirits (*midzimu*).

At the core of Shona religiosity are beliefs and practices associated with the family, clan, tribe and the ancestors. In Shona religion, there are two groups of ancestors, that is, *vadzimu* (*family spirits*) and tribal tutelary spirits, whom Schoffeleers (1978) aptly calls *guardians of the land*. The later are also called lion spirits, *mhondoro*. The word *mudzimu* (pl. *vadzimu*) means spirit of a dead person and includes every spirit, and thus strictly speaking denotes both the spirits of dead relations and the tribal guardian spirits (*mhondoro*) (Gelfand 1962:51). The tribal guardian spirits originated from a living man or woman, who founded the clan (*rudzi*) many years ago. Everybody in a clan is related to the spirit that protects the clan. Thus there is a link between the chief, every member of the tribe, and the *mhondoro* protecting it.

The *mhondoro* living hosts or *spirit mediums* are in turn called *masvikiro* (sng. *svikiro*) (Schoffeleers 1978:235-313; Bourdillon 1976:263, 293-327; Gelfand 1959:2-23). It is not clear whether the cult is directed to a single spirit or to a plurality of ancestors. Bullock argues that it is not towards any specific ancestor, but to ancestors as a symbol, representing the continuity of the family line (Bullock 1928:130).

When a Shona is asked, ‘Which of your *midzimu* is responsible for your well being?’, he/she will invariably reply: ‘*Ndinochengetwa navabereki vangu . . .*’, i.e. ‘I am looked after by those who have borne me.’ The parents referred to are the *midzimu yapamusha* (home ancestors), and include a person’s deceased father (*baba*), mother (*mai*), and paternal grandparents (*tateguru and mbuya*). These four ancestors are directly concerned with the welfare of all the members of one’s household.

The basic of all this is that the Shona believe that they communicate with Mwari through their ancestors (*Vadzimu – parents and grandparents*). The *vadzimu* are believed to constitute an invisible community within the community of the living, always around their descendants, caring for them and participating in their joys and sorrows (Moyo 1988:199). Spirit mediums (*masvikiro*) communicate with the *vadzimu* on behalf of the people.



Charles Wanamaker (1997:286-293) of the University of Cape Town identifies three primary functions of Bantu ancestors, as follows:

- (a) givers and sustainers of life,
- (b) guardians of the social and moral order,
- (c) mediators

#### **1.5.2.2.2. How does a person become a mudzimu?**

There are various ways in which a person becomes a mudzimu. The Shona believe that during this life every person already has a spirit, but it is often regarded as not evident or active. Only the spirit of the living-dead ancestors is active. Your own spirit only achieves a separate and independent identity after death (Daneel 1971:96). As Holleman (1953:27-28) says, until a man dies it is therefore the spirit of his sekuru (grandfather) and not his own that may be active. When death occurs the persona spirit gets its own identity, separate from the sekuru's spirit. If this is generally true of the Shona, it follows that for them the *mudzimu* of a living person is only a potential entity which cannot be identified with his own individuality or his own conscious ego (Murphree 1969:33).

A person's spirit only obtains its full identity and independent existence within the ancestral hierarchy when the necessary rituals have taken place after death (Daneel 1971:97). This is usually done about six to twelve months later when the spirit of the deceased is officially 'brought back home' by its living descendants. The ritual activities of this occasion signifies the formal introduction of the wandering spirit into the ranks of the family ancestors. Full ancestorhood thus being attained, the mudzimu is now endowed with its full powers to protect or harm. Propitiatory rites cannot be effective before the 'home-bringing' ceremony has taken place. The latter remains the key ritual and prerequisite to all subsequent forms of 'ancestor worship'.

Since social maturity in everyday life depends on marriage, full ancestorhood can only be achieved by a deceased who has been married. 'Home-bringing' ceremonies are not conducted for the spirits of the unmarried dead or children. They are relatively unimportant unless they pfuka (turn against someone) and return as avenging spirits to demand retribution from those who had unduly wronged or harmed them in life. In such cases propitiatory rites, resembling ngozi rituals are performed.



### 1.5.2.2.3 Alien/Stranger Spirits (Mashave)

A very common type of spirit occurring in Shona ritual and belief system are those called *Mashave*. *Shave* is a generic name for all spirits from an alien group – including, according to Bourdillon (1987:242), “the spirits of neighbouring peoples, of white people, of certain animals (especially baboons) and occasionally of other objects such as elephants”. However little is usually known about the person or animal during its life and these spirits normally come as complete strangers to the communities of their mediums. Sometimes a shave is said to possess a medium in order to help him or her perform a particular task (as in the case of a healing shave). Being strangers, mashave are said to choose their hosts arbitrarily, but once a spirit has done so it is expected to remain in the family and when the original host dies, to possess a descendant or close relative of his.

*Mashave* of human origin are often spirits of aliens who died away from home or of young unmarried persons. Such spirits would not have been settled with the final funeral ceremony and therefore wander around restlessly (Daneel 1971:128). Having no living descendants they seek to express themselves by taking possession of unrelated persons (Cf. Hugo 1935:52; Gelfand 1959:121; Kumbirai 1966/7 VII (Dec. 1966). The common characteristic of all Shavi spirits is therefore that they never belong to the *rudzi* (tribe or lineage) of their hosts.

What is intriguing is that mashave are credited to be the source of all remarkable talents, from hunting to healing. One spirit may be particularly good at detecting the causes of illness or death, while others specializes in medicine for particular ailments. Women doctors often divine with the aid of *Zvipuna* and *Dzviti mashavi*, but the *Njuzu* type of spirit is by far the most popular agent among them, when it comes to the procurement of medicines for epilepsy (*zvipusha*), scabies (*mhezi*) and especially barrenness amongst women (*ngomwa*). *Njuzu* is regarded as a water spirit living in or underneath a pool or river. At one stage or another the *Njuzu* possesses its host (hardly ever a male) and leads her to the ‘city of the *Njuzu* spirits’ (*Guta reNjuzu*) under the nearest dam or river, where she stays for several days (Daneel 1971:129). The spirits supply their mediums with medicative reeds, water plants, white clay, etc. (all medicines associated with the water), which are the only things to be taken back on the return journey. The hosts of *Njuzu*, like all shavi mediums, can only practise their occupation when their spirits take hold of them. Whenever they treat patients, a spell of ritual

purification, which includes the washing of hands and face, or the whole body, is needed to induce the spirit to put in an appearance. Thus the Njuzu spirit's close association with water and purity becomes evident during each healing session.

Among the Ndau of the Chipinge District it is presumed that everyone has a number of secret *mashave* which he honours in private and from which he obtains his personal talents: such spirits simply convey skills and rarely come out by possessing their hosts. In other areas, stranger spirits are associated primarily with possession dances and many (baboon spirits, for example) are said to possess their hosts only in order to dance and to convey no real skills. In most areas, such traditional arts as hunting, playing the *mbira* (a dominant Shona musical instrument), divining and healing are attributed to possession by appropriate *mashave*, which must be honoured occasionally and which periodically come out in possession dances (Bourdillon 1987: 283).

This is something that the highly corporate, conformist Shona tradition needs to accommodate such exceptional, often individualistic gifted people. The only other alternative would be to brand the deviant person a witch, with all that such a verdict would entail; and in the case of non-malignant individuals the Shona do not resort to this diagnosis. Aschwanden (1989: 169) writes:

The world of the spirits and of the accompanying ideology is not an individual achievement but part of a people's cultural creation. One can thus argue that the society with such an ideology makes it possible for a creative, ambitious individual, who no longer wants to conform to its norms, to develop and yet remain part of that society. So instead of letting the individual disintegrate, its creative abilities are used in a way which serves the higher god.

The powers of shavi spirits are always subordinate to those of the ancestors. It is possible that through the influence of Christianity the shavi-God relationship has become closer in recent years. Several shavi hosts were practising Christians for some time before they became shvi mediums. These people often mention the co-operation between God and shavi spirits. Also before selecting its host, the shavi must get permission from the family ancestors, who 'open the door' to the alien spirit to enter a prospective host's homestead. Should the spirit of a

deceased n'anga, who had practised his profession with the aid of a shavi, wish to possess one of his descendants, his mudzimu is always accompanied by the shavi, in which case the inheriting n'anga will generally attribute his healing powers to both his mudzimu and the deceased's shavi, or differentiate between the divinatory powers bestowed upon him by his mudzimu and the curative insight he derived from the ancestor's shavi, or vice versa. The mashavi powers never excel that of the ancestors (Daneel 1971:130).

#### 1.5.2.2.4 Avenging Spirits - Angry spirits<sup>28</sup> (Ngozi)

Bourdillon (1987:273) contends that of all evil influences among the Shona, the avenging/angry spirit (*ngozi*) is the most formidable, dangerous, and therefore the most feared. *Ngozi* are the avenging/angry spirits of people who were wronged in their lifetime – murder victims, the defrauded, the abused – and are now intent on redressing their wrongs by wreaking havoc in the families of the offenders. Daneel (1971: 133f) makes two interesting points about the *ngozi* spirit. The first is that such a spirit is not morally wicked since it “has a just cause and is somehow allowed by Mwari to claim its dues from the living”. The second is that a *ngozi* “is never a member of the afflicted person's patrilineage. It is always a foregner (*mutorwa*) in the sense of belonging to another (including the matri-) lineage”. *Ngozi* are appeased by compensating them and exorcising the afflicted. Attempts may even be made to fool them (see Aschwanden 1987: 51ff). One way or another, the justice of their claims is not denied.

According to the Shona, the fear associated with this spirit does not imply moral wickedness on the part of the *ngozi* because it is understood to have a just cause and is allowed by Mwari to claim its dues from the living. It is however bad in the sense that it causes destruction without mercy amongst the relatives of the guilty person (Daneel 1971:133).

Gelfand (1959:153) distinguishes between four kinds of *ngozi* amongst the Zezuru: 1) the spirit of a murdered person; 2) the spirit of a person from whom something was borrowed during his life without being returned; 3) the spirit of a deceased spouse who returns to his or her surviving partner because of desertion or bad care during a period of critical illness; and 4) the parental spirit that returns to its own children to punish them for maltreatment. The

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<sup>28</sup> The name for such spirits is *Ngozi*. Accounts of *Ngozi* are given in Gelfand 1959, pp. 153-161; 1962, pp. 69-83; 1966a, pp. 70-72.

additional type of circumstance, according to Gelfand (1966:70), which can give rise to the emergence of a ngozi spirit 'are occasions when a man goes off with another man's wife; when a loan is not repaid; or if the bride-price (roora) is not paid to the bride's father. According to these motivations a spirit can turn ngozi in response to a wide range of injustices, which leads us towards a broad concept of the avenging spirit.

Daneel (1971:134) tries to narrow down the ngozi concept. In the first place, the ngozi proper is a killer who cause havoc in the family of the guilty person. In this capacity the avenging spirit is never a member of the afflicted person's patrilineage. It is always a foreigner (mutorwa), in the sense of belonging to another lineage. A person's own patrilineal spirits can never become ngozi to him in the full sense of the word. This distinction limits Gelfand's third and fourth types of Ngozi.

In the second place a mutorwa (foreigner) spirit only turns ngozi as a result of fatal injury such as outright murder, or actions leading to the death or suicide of the aggrieved person, such as ill-treatment of a severe nature, refusal to feed a person, desertion during critical illness, improper care of a sick or disabled person, or the casting out of a person from the homestead where he used to be fed, which leads to eventual death. In the third place the ngozi always claims compensation of a retributory nature. Death can only be substituted with life, which in this context involves the transfer of cattle and/or an unmarried girl (*mhandara*) from the culprit's family to the deceased's relatives, where the latter bears children as 'wife of the ngozi' to replace the damage done to his lineage.

According to these three basic aspects Gelfand's third and fourth categories of vengeful spirits do not necessarily belong to the Southern Shona concept of the ngozi proper. This does not mean that these spirits do not claim retribution, for they do, but their punitive measures are less drastic than those of the ngozi.

The ngozi often starts afflicting the guilty's party's relatives by causing severe illness. Mental disorder is one of the most frequent symptoms of ngozi-inflicted illness. Major disasters can be avoided if the people find out soon enough that a ngozi has turned against them, but in most cases, ngozi affliction is diagnosed only after the successive deaths of a number of family members. Having selected one of the afflicted family members, the ngozi will reveal

itself. It will first ask the people why they killed him. Then compensatory demands are made. Confirmation from a *n'anga* (*traditional healer*) is needed before the family will start negotiating with the relatives of the deceased. Only a specialized and powerful *n'anga* will be willing to treat ngozi cases because if he blocks the spirit's passage to the afflicted family, it may turn on his own relatives out of spite (Crawford 1967:89).

Once ngozi trouble has been officially diagnosed one or more of the following three types of protective measures can be taken:

1. Compensation is given to the ngozi;
2. Exorcism of the vengeful spirit is effected by a *n'anga*, and
3. Preventive measures are taken to protect all the blood relatives of the afflicted persons against future attacks.

In Shona communities, the fear of avenging spirits can act as a sanction for ethical behaviour. During life a person must never do anything that might provoke someone to return as an avenging spirit, and this sanction is particularly relevant in the payment of debts and in the distribution of property after death. Occasionally a person may threaten to become an avenging spirit in order to obtain what he believes to be his due, and in extreme circumstances the person may even threaten to commit suicide in order to hasten this revenge (Cf. Holleman 1952:257, 357f; 1958: 187f; Kumbirai 1964:63). The fear of making a spirit angry is also a sanction for performing ceremonies carefully and correctly.

#### **1.5.2.2. The Diviner-Herbalist (kushopera)**

In Shona tradition, a traditional healer is called a *n'anga* and there are both women and men *n'angas* (Daneel 1971:149). The Shona perspective of healing is always holistic and therefore the Shona *n'anga* is concerned with the healing of the whole person, that is, in *psychosomatic therapy* (Chavhunduka 1977:2. 142-143). On how to become a *n'anga*, the Shona understand that it is a healing ministry given by the *mudzimu* or healing *shavi* (alien spirit), all of which are ultimately given by God as a Healer and Creator, par excellence. This view is accentuated by the Shona in the understanding that trees, herbs, shrubs etc. used for medicine are to be preserved and made available to all. For example when a herbalist digs out roots, he/she must make sure to leave some part of the plant intact for continual propagation.

The Shona understand that the herbs *muti (herb)* is holy and when going to collect it, one must inform the ancestors first.

The activity of the n'anga embraces all the aspects of healthy social life among the Shona, that is, from before birth to the here-after (Gelfand and Stephen Mavi 1985:6-72). Chavhunduka (Bourdillon 1977:2. 131) distinguishes between three types of traditional healers, that is, *diviner, diviner-therapist, and therapist-herbalist*. I prefer Daneel's (1971:143) less complicated distinction of two different types of traditional healers: the diviner and the herbalist. In fact the Shona make no linguistic distinction between the two, for any male or female 'doctor' may be called *n'anga, murapi or chiremba*. Very few n'angas who divine with wooden divining slabs (*hakata*), divining shells or through their *shavi* spirits, practice this art without distributing medicine of any sort, and many herbalists provide medicines without practising any form of divination. But it seldom happens that a n'anga, whether he/she is a diviner-herbalist or merely a herbalist, claims to practise his/her profession without some kind of spiritual inspiration. His/Her medicinal insight is never derived from his/her own talents; it is the ancestors, *mashavi*, or a combination of both, who enable him to interpret the *hakata*, to 'read' the divining-mirror or to find 'strong medicine'. Some contemporary Shonas have however argued unconvincingly that you can be a herbalist and yet have nothing to do with the spirit world.

Apart from the basic functional distinction of diviner (-herbalist) and herbalist, there are numerous varieties of n'anga. Some specialise in curing barrenness, others driving out spirits, curing chest or stomach ailments, detecting and curing an illness caused by witchcraft or simply providing people with 'good-luck' charms. None of these varieties are mutually exclusive. There is actually no end to the scope of a n'anga's activities (Daneel 1971:144). Gelfand (1964:55) aptly describes the n'anga as a 'kingpin' of Shona society, whose scope of activity embraces more or less everything affecting an individual or his/her family. He/She is a doctor in sickness, a priest in religious matters, a lawyer in legal issues, a policeman in the detection and prevention of crime, a possessor of magical preparations which can increase crops and instil special skills and talents into his clients. He/She fulfils a great need in African society and his presence gives assurance to the whole community.

The medicine used can be protective/preventive or it can be a cure for specific natural diseases. In general protection is against witchcraft, magic and sorcery (Mbiti 1975:88-90). Chavhunduka (1977:2. 136-142) explains that Shona holistic cosmology accounts for both supernatural and natural causes of illnesses, and that whereas the herbalist is sufficient to deal with the latter, the former is the prerogative of the *diviner or diviner-therapist*. He adds that the importance of the *n'anga* is seen in the bipolarity between Shona's use of Western medicine and traditional medicine.

The ambivalent status of the *n'anga* is however underscored by the apparently derogatory name, witchdoctor. The term does not only reflect Western/early missionary negation of African medicine, but also reflects the ambivalent effects of the *n'anga* in being able to bring about good as well as harmful effects on clients. Chavhundula (1977:2.143), citing Gelfand, claims that a good *n'anga* may become a *muroyi* (witch) because of the desire to become rich, or when angered by the clients defaulting in payment.

#### 1.5.2.3. The belief in witchcraft

All the spiritual beings discussed so far are benevolent. When evil befalls the Shona, two sources of this evil are identified: vengeful spirits (*ngozi*) which I have already looked at and witches or sorcerers (*varoyi*) (Daneel 1971:156).

According to Bourdillon (1976:199), the Shona explain virtually all types of disease and misfortune from minor ailments, conflict to death in terms of witchcraft. There is some distinction in Shona belief between natural and invisible causes. Natural causes can answer the question of how something happens. But there is the further question of why, why to this particular person and why at this time and place. The Shona find a ready answer in terms of witchcraft (Evans Pritchard 1937:63-83). So the Shona belief in witchcraft deals with the realm beyond the more natural series of events; especially when the natural causes are inadequate to explain sickness.

The first and worst kind of witch is a person who wanders about at night performing weird and horrible deeds. Such witches are almost always thought to be women who would have inherited their witchcraft from the mother or some maternal ancestor. The second kind are called **sorcerers** and even though they are called by the same name (*muroyi*), are less



bizarre and evil (Bourdillon (1976:207). Sorcerers are usually men. They are understood to have a more deliberate purpose for their witchcraft. The Shona believe that sorcerers usually buy their powers from a corrupt herbalist who is prepared to sell harmful 'medicines'. The belief in witchcraft is very real and strong among contemporary Shona. Many homes, both in rural and urban areas, are protected against witchcraft by ritual and charms. Persons often wear charms and take medicines to protect themselves from witchcraft. It can be argued that the Shona believe there is a continual threat from persons endowed with evil.

#### **1.5.2.4. Sickness and personal misfortune**

In Shona culture people don't just get sick, a prolonged or serious illness is presumed to have some invisible cause and a diviner should be consulted to determine it and to state the necessary remedy (Bourdillon 1976:171). The belief is that serious or abnormal illness, is caused by spirits, perhaps angered spirits, or by witchcraft or sorcery. Until the ultimate cause of the trouble is discovered and appeased or overcome, there remains the frightening possibility of further trouble, and it is hopeless to expect complete relief from the present affliction.

The underlying belief here is that a person's fate or misfortune is associated with the general relationship supposed to exist between a man and the spirits who control his world and who to some extent take responsibility for his life out of his own hands (Bourdillon 1976:173). The Shona believe that their well-being depends on their relationships with spirit guardians who control their lives. Any persistent trouble or anxiety is likely to be interpreted in terms of this relationship and in terms of tensions and ill-will within the local community. Sickness is the most common such trouble, but by no means the only one. Whenever there is unease concerning the spirits, a diviner in touch with the spiritual powers is consulted in order to resolve it.

#### **1.6. Conclusion**

From the above consideration of the Shona culture and religion, there is no doubt that this ethnic group literally live with their ancestors. For the Shona the ancestor cult constitutes ultimate spiritual reality. Ancestors are family elders who are known to the living community and who understand their problems. They are community together - the living and the living-dead, a community in which the institution of spirit mediumship provides for concrete contact



with spiritual powers that are believed to control one's environment. A spirit to whom one can speak and who answers back through a medium. The emphasis on empirical events (sickness and trouble) as the reason for many religious practices further provides for a very real experience of the influence of the spirits.

According to Daneel (1971:101) this is all about survival. The only way this community can be perpetuated is by maintaining the unity between the living and the living-dead that is interwoven into the kinship system. The ancestors play this role by timeously taking action when this unity is disrupted.

As we have observed they do this by causing some illness among family members and this will in turn draw the family together to find out the cause and this way the ancestors will correct whatever is causing disunity. Communication between the living and the ancestors takes place through the spirit mediums who are a vital part of this culture and religion. Thus the ancestors uphold a set of moral imperatives, the observance of which is important for an ordered society. Their authority is binding. Due to their mystical powers they should not be opposed by the living, and there is little else one can do to safeguard one's future existence than to follow the directions of the ancestors.

The relationship between the living and living-dead is reciprocal in that the loyalty of the living descendants to a large extent determines the effectiveness of the ancestor's protective powers. This is why neglecting or forgetting them provokes serious anger of the ancestors. Their wrath can turn them into dangerous tormentors, which adds to the relationship of dependance and the element of fear. In other words ancestors are kept alive by their living descendants as they acknowledge their existence in the community through ritual. In turn the descendants are guaranteed guardianship.

Some modern Shona, especially the educated have broken away from traditional beliefs, either through conversion to some new religion or because of skepticism acquired through their contact with the western world. There are two very strong forces that seem to continuously push the modern Shona back to Shona traditional religion.

One is fear of the ambiguous powers of the spirit. When a member of the family is seriously

ill, or if a number of adverse events take place socially or financially, a man is likely to fear that the reason may be his neglect of his ancestral spirits. He may be influenced not so much by a positive belief in their powers as by a fear that these powers might be real. A return to traditional religion may thus be a kind of insurance against insecurity.

The second force inducing a return to traditional religion is that of family ties. We have seen how a kinship group is supposed to participate in ritual for the benefit of all. If a member of a family of traditionalists were to stand out and refuse to take part in traditional rituals, he might easily incur strong resentment. And if the ritual were occasioned by serious illness in the family, a refusal to attend is tantamount to witchcraft and murder; it is viewed as an indication that the abstainer does not want the sick person to be cured. Thus a person who refuses to take part in traditional rituals may find himself ostracized by his kin. Clearly this is socially and emotionally extremely undesirable in a society based strongly on kinship ties.

There is therefore no doubt that Shona traditional religion has a strong foothold in contemporary Zimbabwe as an integral part of the everyday lives of many Shona people. It has already been acknowledged that the African is incurably a believer, a religious person. Religion in this view, constitutes an element within culture, as religion is seen as a way of life, the basis of culture, identity and moral values. The two are so interwoven as to be inseparable. The religious influence goes way beyond what can be termed religious in a narrow sense: it is seen to be evident in culture, literature, politics, medicine, everything. It is all encompassing, in all life.

Religion enfolds the whole of life, and there is no dichotomy between the secular and the religious, the sacred and the profane, the visible and the invisible. These distinctions are to them artificial. A completely secular world does not exist for them. There is no borderline between this life and the life after. In fact life itself is cyclic, going from birth to death and to rebirth. The emphasis on a person's enduring happiness is not concentrated on the after-life but rather on the totality of his or her well-being in this life and in the after-life. For the Shona, man is not just religious in the classical sense, he eats, drinks, sleeps, works and does practically every thing religiously.

For the Shona evangelical Christian, a consideration of the impact of evangelical Christianity in such a religious culture is a very important exercise. In this regard some of the important questions for the Shona Christian would include the following: (1) What does my new found faith say about my culture? (2) What is the impact of my faith on my culture? (3) Does my culture influence faith and in what way? (4) Now that I am a Christian, how do I live out my faith in my community? These and other questions are the subject of my research.

## CHAPTER TWO

### EVANGELICAL CHRISTIANITY AND THE CROSS OF CHRIST – A TYPOLOGY OF THEMES

#### 2.1. Introduction

John Stott (1992:305), in his book “The Contemporary Christian” presents an argument for the uniqueness and finality of Jesus Christ and he calls three witnesses to endorse his argument. First he calls, Professor John Mbiti of Kenya who wrote in his “African Religions and Philosophy”: “the uniqueness of Christianity is in Jesus Christ.’ Second witness is Sadhu Sundar Singh, the Indian Christian mystic and evangelist who was brought up in a Sikh home and converted to Christ as a teenager. Visiting a Hindu college one day, he was asked by an agnostic professor of comparative religion what he had found in Christianity which he had not found in his old religion. ‘I have found Christ,’ he replied. ‘Yes, I know,’ said the professor. ‘But what particular principle or doctrine have you found that you did not have before?’ ‘The particular thing I have found’, he replied, ‘is Christ.’ The third witness is the Anglican scholar, the late Bishop Stephen Neill who wrote: ‘The old saying “Christianity is Christ” is almost exactly true. The historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth is the criterion by which every Christian affirmation has to be judged, and in the light of which it stands or falls.’

If, as confidently stated by the three witnesses, Christianity is essentially Christ himself, and if he came (as he claimed) to seek and save the lost, then the question of how he saves them is, in the strictest sense, the crux of the faith. It follows therefore that one of the most important questions of all time is the question: Why did Jesus die and what did his death achieve? The first question is about the central truth of the atonement and the second redemption. And so for many Evangelical Christians the central issue about the death of Jesus Christ is not the cause of it, but the meaning of it.

What makes it almost impossible to ignore this question is the incredible impact of Christianity in the last three centuries, especially on the African and Asian continents. The kind of impact theologians and Missiologists have described as, “nothing less than a complete change in the centre of gravity of Christianity” (Stinton 2004:3). Evangelicals have attributed this incredible impact to only to Jesus Christ as founder of the Christian religion but to what happened on the cross of Calvary. In fact history points to the crucifixion and resurrection of

Jesus Christ as two critical events that created, aroused and shaped the Christian faith (McGrath 1985:17).<sup>29</sup>

Referring to the death of Christ on the cross, Malcolm Muggeridge<sup>30</sup> (1967:50) candidly writes, ‘It was manifestly the most famous death in history. No other death has aroused one-hundredth part of the interest, or been remembered with one-hundredth part of the intensity and concern’ as the death of Jesus of Nazareth. Martyn Lloyd-Jones (1957:111-12) says of the cross of Christ, ‘It was the most momentous hour since the beginning of the world, it is indeed the turning-point which determines everything – it is the greatest even, the most . . . climactic event that has ever taken place in this world. Everything leads up to that hour, everything eventuates from that hour. That is the hour to which the whole of prophecy is looking forward, and to which the whole of the church, and her doctrine and history look back. It is the central, focal, point which determines and controls everything’. David Peterson<sup>31</sup>(2001:1), is therefore not surprised by the Evangelical argument that there can hardly be a more important topic for the ongoing cause of God and truth today than the theme of the cross of Christ, especially as it is understood in the context of Africa with all the challenges that she faces as a continent.

We see the critical significance of the cross in the way the early church held onto it at all odds, in total defiance to their pagan environment that viewed it as offensive. The significance is also evidenced in the New Testament where the cross of Christ is absolutely central to its core teaching. In fact, one cannot read much of the New Testament without being impressed with how its authors exulted in the greatness of salvation through that cross. Leon Morris<sup>32</sup> (1988:1) pretty much summaries the New Testament in terms of this message when he says, “The Gospels all lead up to the cross and find their climax. The book of Acts tells how the first preachers proclaimed what God had done in the cross of Christ, while the Epistles with greater or less emphasis bring out the meaning of this great act of atonement.” In fact, in Acts and the Epistles, we come face to face with the intensity of this simple message, and in the post-resurrection discourse at Emmaus the risen Christ himself explained

<sup>29</sup> Professor Alister McGrath is a lecturer at Harris Manchester College, Oxford University.

<sup>30</sup> The late Malcolm Muggeridge was a leading Christian apologist, and was cited as the G. K. Chesterton of the latter twentieth century.

<sup>31</sup> David Peterson is the current principal of Oak Hill College in the United Kingdom.

<sup>32</sup> Leon Morris retired as Principal of Ridley College, Melbourne in 1979. He has written more than twenty-five books, among them, *The Cross in the New Testament* and *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*.

that this message held together the entire Old Testament preparation through Moses and the prophets (Luke.24:25-27). Derek Tidball<sup>33</sup> in his 'Message of the Cross' demonstrates this point in his systematic exposition of the cross of Christ in the whole bible where he identifies all the key texts that speak to this fundamental subject.

It is noteworthy that when the New Testament speaks of 'God' it does not have an anonymous concept in mind, but it directs our attention and our concentration to the crucified Christ who is now risen. In McGrath's (1985:19) argument about the centrality of the cross in evangelical Christianity, he strategically places the cross of Christ as the criterion of what is Christian and what is not. In other words it is the point of reference for Christian faith; it is based upon it and judged by it. McGrath goes as far as saying that Christian theology, worship and ethics are essentially nothing other than an attempt to explore and develop the meaning and implications of the crucified Christ in every area of life. The cross is therefore not only the heart of what Morris (1983:5) calls 'the Christian way,' it is the way of salvation; it is the way of Christian living.

Martin Luther (1483-1546), the German theologian confronted Christendom with this truth and its consequences after the church had compromised with secular culture for fifteen hundred years. He called this truth 'the theology of the cross.' Theses 19-24 of Luther's Heidelberg Disputation<sup>34</sup> are especially pertinent to his theology of the cross. They maintain that: the great and glorious things of God are to be found in the cross; that the greatest works of God can only be seen through suffering and the cross; and that the great things God effects in and through believers are worked in and through the cross. Luther apparently used the phrase 'theology of the cross' for the first time in his lectures on Hebrews (1517-1518). Commenting on Hebrews 12:11, Luther drew the contrast between discipline as an alien work of God (God sending pain) and a proper work of God (the pain is for our benefit). "Here we find the Theology of the Cross," says Luther, because the fruit of righteousness is "hidden" by pain, just as salvation is "hidden" by the cross. Thus God's work among believers is

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<sup>33</sup> Derek Tidball has been Principal of London School of Theology and senior lecturer in Sociology of Religion since 1995. He has served as Head of the Mission Department at the Baptist Union of Great Britain. He is currently Chair of the Evangelical Alliance Council and is the author of twenty books, especially on the Bible and in Pastoral Theology. With John Stott and Alex Motyer he is an editor of the Bible Speaks today series (IVP) and has written *The Message of the Cross* and *The Message of Leviticus* for the series.

<sup>34</sup> Martin Luther wrote the *Heidelberg Disputation* for the meeting of the Augustinian order in the city of Heidelberg on April 26, 1518.

hidden in the cross they carry, and God's work of salvation is hidden in the cross of Christ. In other words, Luther saw the theology of the Cross as the only correct way to view God and the only way to correctly view the life of the believer. God came to the cross for man. God comes to man through the cross and man, in turn, comes to God through the cross.<sup>35</sup>

For Luther, Christian thinking about God comes to an abrupt halt at the foot of the cross (McGrath 1985:13). In fact the cross marks a dead end for much thinking about God, and opens the way to an authentically Christian understanding of the 'God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ'. Walther von Loewenich (1976:17-18) articulated the centrality of the cross in Luther's thinking thus:

For Luther the cross is not only the subject of theology; it is the distinctive mark of all theology. It has its place not only in the doctrine of the vicarious atonement, but it constitutes an integrating element for all Christian knowledge. The theology of the cross is not a chapter in theology but specific kind of theology. The Cross of Christ is significant here not only for the question concerning redemption and the certainty of salvation, but it is the centre that provides perspective for all theological statements.

The 2004 (1) Magazine of the Sovereign Grace Union in an article entitled "Peace and Truth", highlights how John Calvin spoke of the cross of Christ in most exalted terms: "There is no tribunal magnificent, no throne so stately, no show of triumph so distinguished, no chariot so elevated, as is the gibbet on which Christ has subdued death and the devil." Our salvation therefore consists in the doctrine of the Cross, it is here that all wisdom of believers is comprehended and the inestimable goodness of God is displayed before the whole world.

Henry Thiessen<sup>36</sup> (1979:265), in his 'Lectures in Systematic theology' is only short of saying that Christianity is non-existent without the cross of Calvary. He wrote:

"The death of Christ is the essential thing in Christianity. Other religions base their claim to recognition on the teaching of their founders; Christianity is distinguished from all of them by the importance it assigns to the death of Christ as interpreted by the scriptures, and you reduce Christianity to the level of the ethnic religions. Though

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<sup>35</sup> Luther further clarified his theology of the cross in his Explanation of the Disputation Concerning the Value of Indulgencies, 1518.

<sup>36</sup> Henry Thiessen taught at Dallas Theological Seminary and served as Chairman of the Faculty of the Graduate School at Wheaton College. He is the author of Introduction to the New Testament.

we would still have a higher system of ethics, were we to take away the cross of Christ, we would have no more salvation than these other religions. Napoleon said when banished to St. Helena, that Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne, and he had founded mighty kingdoms on force, but that Jesus Christ had founded His on love. This is true, if we mean love expressed in His substitutionary death.”

For Evangelical theologians and Christians alike the cross is therefore what McGrath (1985:12ff) has very aptly called an ‘enigma’ which lies at the heart of the Christian faith. So central is the cross that the identity and relevance of Evangelical Christianity are both irrevocably tied up with the crucified Christ. McGrath has even gone as far as to say that the Christian faith stands or falls with the identification and involvement of God himself with the crucified Christ. The cruciality of this according to McGrath (1995:18) is that if God is not revealed in and involved with the crucified Christ, then the Christian faith must be recognised as a delusion – a profound and deeply satisfying delusion, it is true, but a delusion none the less.

It is for this reason that Evangelical scholars are all agreed that the cross lies at the centre of the historic, biblical faith. Dr J. I. Packer<sup>37</sup> (1974:3) has rightly written that this belief ‘is the distinguishing mark of the world-wide evangelical fraternity; it takes us to the heart of the Christian gospel’. According to Tidball (2001:20), the cross stands at the very heart of the Christian faith, manifesting the love of God, effecting salvation from sin, conquering the hostile forces of evil and inviting reconciliation with God (2001:20). Francis Turretin<sup>38</sup> (1623-1687), who has been called, the greatest of Calvinistic theologians, speaks of the doctrine of Atonement as ‘the chief part of our salvation, the anchor of Faith, the refuge of Hope, the rule of Charity, the true Foundation of the Christian religion, and the richest treasure of the Christian Church (cited in Dale 1902:3).

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<sup>37</sup> Packer is a British-born Canadian Christian Theologian in the Calvinistic Anglican tradition. He currently serves as the Board of Governors’ Professor of Theology at Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia. He is considered to be one of the most important evangelical theologians of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>38</sup> Turretin was the grandson of an Italian Protestant who emigrated to Geneva and the son of a leading Swiss theologian in the early seventeenth century. Francis Turretin's theology is generally what became known as Calvinist orthodoxy in the tradition of Theodore Beza and the Dutch theologians who opposed Arminius. In addition, it reflected the idea of verbal biblical inspiration as written into the Helvetic Consensus Formula of 1675. Turretin's contribution to this theology was to create precise and complete doctrinal positions. Calvin's theology provided the framework, and Turretin developed carefully worded dogmas based on scripturally derived principles.



It is therefore no surprising that for the early disciples, the cross was a puzzle to be contemplated, a paradox to be explored, a question on which to reflect (Green & Baker 2000:16). The same should be true for the modern day Christian. The object of this chapter is to explore the evangelical understanding of the cross of Christ through the eyes of John Calvin and Derek Tidball.

## **2.2. John Calvin and the Cross of Christ**

Whilst many theologians would not associate Calvin with modern day evangelicalism, having read his work on the Atonement it is not difficult to see how he has shaped present day Evangelical thinking, especially amongst those who consider themselves Reformed Evangelicals. I have argued in Chapter One that there is an undeniable theological link between the concepts, reformed and evangelical, especially as understood in the sixteenth century and that it is not too far fetched to imagine that John Calvin could have quite easily considered himself an evangelical. This explains my choice of Calvin as one of those who have contributed towards the development of evangelical thinking particularly at foundational level.

It also appears that most evangelical theologians who have also made a contribution to evangelical thinking have in some way benefited from and interacted with Calvin's ideas on the work of Christ. Theologians like Emil Brunner, Leon Morris, John Stott and not the least Derek Tidball have in fact relied on him in order to do so and for that reason his teaching should be appreciated as one of the most comprehensive presentation of the work of Christ in the history of Christian doctrine (Peterson 1995:10).

John Hesselink (1997:124-125), the author of a valuable commentary on Calvin's First Catechism sums up this matter well:

It should be clear that Calvin's understanding of the atonement is very complex. There is a breadth and sophistication in his treatment of this theme beyond that of Aquinas or Luther. Consequently, Robert Culpepper, who is not altogether

sympathetic to Calvin's view, still concludes that 'Calvin's doctrine of the atonement is truly a milestone in Christian theology.'<sup>39</sup>

It is therefore not surprising that most evangelical theologians trace the roots of evangelicalism back to the reformation of the sixteenth century. John Stott (1999:14-15) pushes this further back to the fifteenth century and even earlier when he acknowledges all those other Christian leaders who attributed ultimate authority to Scripture and salvation to Christ crucified alone. The point Stott makes so categorically in his argument is that evangelical Christianity is not a deviation from Christian orthodoxy but it is the original, apostolic, New Testament Christianity – indeed a noble word with a long and honourable pedigree.<sup>40</sup>

Although Calvin sees the cross as the heart of the atonement, he does not confine the work of Christ to the cross. The incarnation, the life of Christ, the crucifixion, the descent, the resurrection, the ascension, and the second coming of Christ are all components of one grand redemptive plan, the centre of which is the cross. Calvin is not alone in this understanding; even Ronald Wallace<sup>41</sup> (1981:92) sees the same components as all together making up one redeeming act or movement of God.

Robert Peterson (1999:14),<sup>42</sup> in his book, 'Calvin and the Atonement' identifies the free love of God in Jesus Christ as the starting point for Calvin's doctrine of the atonement. Calvin himself discusses this free love of God in his commentary on John 3:16 where he describes Christ as the source of salvation and the free love of God in Christ as the starting point for redemption. Calvin connects the love of God and the person of Christ and expresses the idea that God's love is in Christ and the only way it comes to us is through him. His logic is that, if Christ is inseparable from the love of God, it means that that through Christ God became a man and thereby took what was ours (humanity) in order to impart to us what was his

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<sup>39</sup> John Hesselink was President of Western Theological Seminary from 1973 to 1985. He gained a reputation as a Calvin scholar of renown with his dissertation, "Calvin's Concept of the Law."

<sup>40</sup> John Stott is the founder of John Stott Ministries, now Langham Partnerships International. One of Stott's major contributions to world evangelization was through the 1974 International congress on World Evangelization held at Lausanne, Switzerland. He acted as chair of the drafting committee for the Lausanne Covenant, a significant milestone in the evangelical movement.

<sup>41</sup> Ronald Wallace is former Professor of Theology at Columbia Seminary in the USA.

<sup>42</sup> Dr Robert Peterson Sr. is on the faculty of Covenant Seminary in St. Louis. Apart from his book, Calvin and the Atonement, he has also written on the biblical nature of hell and the major themes of the gospel of John.

(salvation). In Calvin's expression, Christ, the Son of God, became a Son of man that we, children of men and heirs of Gehenna, might become sons and daughters of God (1999:16-17). He calls this the biblical concept of adoption and Christ is the source of adoption.

Here it is important to note the importance of the incarnation in Calvin's thinking. In Institutes, 11,12,3 Calvin argued that only the 'God-man' could obey God on our behalf. Calvin attributes the value of Christ's atoning sacrifice to his being both divine and human. His obedience and atoning death are both dependant on who he is. The chapter title of Institutes II.xii also bears this out: 'Christ Had to Become human in Order to fulfil the Office of Mediator.' The next chapter title is just as important: 'Christ assumed the true substance of human flesh'.

The Heidelberg Catechism (1563)<sup>43</sup> argued along the same lines in its questions 15 to 17. In asking what nature the mediator should have, it replied that he must be true and sinless man and yet at the same time true God. A less than human Christ could no more be the saviour of human beings than a less than divine Christ could be the true revelation of God. In other words who Christ is determines what he can do.

This argument places the incarnation as the essential precondition for the atonement; without it no atonement could have been accomplished (Peterson 1999:25) In fact, according to Bloesch<sup>44</sup> (1997:145) the incarnation sets the stage for the atonement, though the work of redemption already begins in the decision of Christ to incarnate himself in human flesh. Jesus' sacrifice should be seen as beginning with his incarnation, with the "self-emptying", with the "coming" of Christ (Wallace 1981:93).

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<sup>43</sup> The Heidelberg Catechism, the second of our doctrinal standards, was written in Heidelberg at the request of Elector Frederick III, ruler of the most influential German province, the Palatinate, from 1559 to 1576. This pious Christian prince commissioned Zacharius Ursinus, twenty-eight years of age and professor of theology at the Heidelberg University, and Caspar Olevianus, twenty-six years old and Frederick's court preacher, to prepare a catechism for instructing the youth and for guiding pastors and teachers. Frederick obtained the advice and cooperation of the entire theological faculty in the preparation of the Catechism. The Heidelberg Catechism was adopted by a Synod in Heidelberg and published in German with a preface by Frederick III, dated January 19, 1563.

<sup>44</sup> Donald G. Bloesch is professor of theology emeritus at Dubuque (Iowa) Theological Seminary. He has written numerous books, including *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*, and *The Future of Evangelical Christianity*.

In this regard Thiessen (1979:230) in agreement with Calvin, views the incarnation not as an end in itself but a means to an end, and that end is the redemption of the lost through the death of Christ on the cross. The incarnation and the atonement are therefore, not only indispensable the one to the other; they are also mutually definitive - they are part of the one great movement of God's grace to humanity in Jesus Christ and it is only in the light of the cross and resurrection that we come to appreciate and understand the mystery of the incarnation (Bloesch 1997:145). In other words Calvin affirms Christ's genuine human nature within a redemptive context and his commentaries bear ample witness that he views Christ's humanity as essential for our salvation.<sup>45</sup>

### **2.2.1. Christ's threefold messianic office.**

Calvin explains the saving work of Christ by employing the concept of Christ's threefold messianic office or *munus triplex*. According to Berkouwer (1965:61), it is generally admitted that the elements of the *munus triplex* date back to long before the Reformation, but the concept was developed by Calvin for the purpose of bringing out the greatness of the work of Christ. This has merit of following the three great offices or functions in Old Testament Israel. According to Letham<sup>46</sup> (1993:19) this is a very appropriate way of looking at what Jesus did for us because Jesus was a Jew and Christianity has Jewish roots. But not only that, it is virtually impossible to understand what Christ did if we abstract him from the background history of Yahweh's struggles with his covenant people, Israel. This, as F.F. Torrance (1983:221) indicates, was not only the context of Christ's coming but also the key to understanding why he came and also the effect of his coming.

In the Geneva Catechism (1541), Calvin asks the question, "What force has the name Christ?," and he gives the answer: "By this epithet his office is best expressed; for it signifies that he is anointed by his Father to be king, priest, and prophet."<sup>47</sup> Jesus is therefore the holder of the *munus triplex* and in him the royal, priestly, and prophetic functions among the people of God have been united under a single Head for the work of salvation. Calvin

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<sup>45</sup> Cf. Calvin's commentaries on Rom. 8:3, 2 Cor. 13:4, Heb. 2:11 and 2:17.

<sup>46</sup> Robert Letham is former senior lecturer in Christian doctrine at London Bible College, and is now pastor of Emmanuel Presbyterian Church, Wilmington, Delaware. In his book 'The Work of Christ' Letham shapes his discussion around the threefold office of Christ as prophet, priest, and king.

<sup>47</sup> Calvin's exposition of the messianic name appears in the Geneva Catechism (1541), the 1545 Institutes, the Catechism of 1543, and the final (1559) edition of the Institutes.

presents the fullest exposition of the Redeemer's work under the titles of Prophet, King and Priest in the final edition of the Institutes.<sup>48</sup>

Calvin uses the *munus triplex* to teach the unity of the person and work of Christ. Geoffrey Wainwright<sup>49</sup> (1997:100) in his book, 'For Our Salvation-Two Approaches to the Work of Christ' explains how in the Reformed tradition the *munus triplex* helps to give a comprehensive account of the redemption. He points to the Heidelberg Catechism and how it illustrates the confluence of sound doctrine and practical application in Question 31:

*Why is he called Christ, that is Anointed?*

Because he is ordained of God the Father, and anointed with the Holy Ghost, to be our chief Prophet and Teacher, who fully reveals to us the secret counsel and will of God concerning our redemption; and our only High Priest, who by the one sacrifice of his body has redeemed us, and ever lives to make intercession for us with the Father; and our eternal King, who governs us by his Word and Spirit, and defends and preserves us in the redemption obtained for us.<sup>50</sup>

Calvin is not alone in this treatment of the threefold messianic office of Christ. The German preacher and philosopher, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) (cited in Wainwright 1997:100-01) takes the threefold office as the necessary and sufficient description of "the achievements of Christ in both continuity and difference with God's kingdom in Israel. The Princetonian Charles Hodge (1797-1878) (1929:459-609) insisted upon the perfect execution, by the one Person in his two natures, of all the three offices diversely adumbrated by "the ancient prophets, priests, and kings" and needed for a salvation that "includes all that a prophet, priest, and king in the highest sense of those terms can do."

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<sup>48</sup> The 1559 edition is quoted from the two-volume English translation in Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion, ed. John T. McNeill and Ford Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960). The key passage occurs in book 2, chap. 15 (in the translation, vol. 1, pp. 494-503).

<sup>49</sup> Geoffrey Wainwright is the British Methodist theologian. Since 1983 he has taught at Duke University where he occupies the Cushman Chair of Christian Theology.

<sup>50</sup> The Westminster Shorter Catechism sets its own accents within the same structure. In displaying Christ as the Mediator of the covenant of grace under the New Testament, questions 23-26.

### 2.2.1.1. The Prophetic Office of Christ

In 'The Cross of Christ' John Stott (1986:204) describes the achievement of Christ's cross in terms of revelation and salvation. God revealed himself in and through the cross. This is Calvin's understanding of the prophetic office of Christ - Christ as a revealer of God. According to Leanne Van Dyk <sup>51</sup>(1999:6), the prophetic perspective on the cross is that the cross proclaims the true nature of God – a God of love and compassion – a revelation of the heart of God.

Calvin's comment on Luke 4:16-21 is that Christ "was anointed by the Spirit not only to be herald and witness of the Father's grace, but the perfect revealer of divine truth, the great prophet who proclaimed the Good News on earth (McNeill and Battles 1960:496)." As the *Logos*, He was the true light, which lights every man that comes into the world (John 1:9). In the Old Testament, He spoke through angels, through theophanies, through types and by means of the prophets. As the incarnate Word, He faithfully and fully revealed to men the saving will of God (Culbertson 1946:214).

The centre of this doctrine, according to Peterson (1999:51) is the gospel – the Good News that Jesus Christ died for sinners. It was the concern of Calvin to affirm that the application of the gospel to sinner's hearts is a redemptive work performed by the great and final prophet, the Lord Jesus Christ, through his Spirit.

Wainwright (1997:123) gives particular emphasis to Calvin's argument when he describes Jesus as the very *dabar* of God and that this way He climaxes the prophetic line. In Hebrew, *dabar* means not only word, but also action and event. Jesus is the word, action, event of God made flesh. He is the personal address of God to humanity, coming to manifold expression in his individual sayings, his significant deeds (healing, forgiving, eating with sinners) and the events of his life and death. In other words the prophetic office conveys the word and work of

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<sup>51</sup> Leanne Van Dyk is the academic dean and professor of Reformed theology at Western Seminary, in Holland, Mich. She is a graduate of Calvin College, Western Michigan University, Calvin Theological Seminary, and Princeton Theological Seminary. Before her appointment at Western Seminary, she taught at San Francisco Theological Seminary and at the Graduate Theological Union, in Berkeley, California. She is the author of several books, including *Believing in Jesus Christ* (Geneva Press).

God to the world and it is only in Christ that this saving truth of God is to be found (Calvin, Institutes II.15.2. ET, 1:496). What Christ has revealed is both the character and the mystery of God, the saving purpose of the loving God who invites his fallen human creatures back to share in his life. Commenting on Acts 3:22, Calvin makes it clear that because we have ‘the full and perfect manifestation of all things in Christ,’ God’s revelation is no longer incomplete because Christ is the end of the prophetic revelation from God and he continues his prophetic ministry through his ministers (Peterson 1999:49). As Prophet, Jesus represents God to men, faithfully proclaiming his truth to them.

#### **2.2.1.2. The Kingly Office of Christ**

In Calvin’s understanding, the kingly office of Christ is about his activity at the right hand of God, ruling over all things in heaven and in earth for the extension of His kingdom. The obvious emphasis in the synoptics is the mediatorial kingdom of Christ. According to Letham (1993:197), Christ is seen to exercise the royal prerogatives of God, and he does so as our mediator, as the one who was slain on the cross for our sins. The redemptive force of this royal office is shown by the fact that for the sake of his people he was anointed king by the Holy Spirit and he gives of this same Holy Spirit to believers to help them in their spiritual need (Peterson 1999:52). Christians receive eternal life itself from the Spirit sent from the King, Jesus Christ. In Institutes II.xvi.5, Calvin says:

For it is only in this way that we are invigorated. Especially with regard to heavenly life, there is no drop of vigour in us save what the Holy Spirit instils. For the Spirit has chosen Christ as His seat, that from Him might abundantly flow the heavenly riches of which we are in such need. The believers stand unconquered through the strength of their king, and His spiritual riches abound in them. Hence they are justly called Christians.

Christ is therefore the messianic king who maintains the salvation of his people by protecting them from their foes. He leads Christians in victory even in the midst of life’s hardships. The king is the ‘eternal protector and defender of His church who assures the godly of the everlasting preservation of the church (Calvin in Peterson 1999:51). Calvin describes the nature of Christ’s saving work in terms of a mighty victory over the enemies of humankind. He disarms principalities and powers, triumphing over them in the cross (Wainwright



1997:161). There is corporate protection and victory for the church. And there is also individual blessing for the Christians derived from Christ's kingly office (Peterson 1999:54)

Christ's royal office toward us also extends to his continued protection and equipment of us for our salvation (*Institutes* II.15.4 (et, 1:498f.). It includes judgement and the judge is also our Saviour. Taking off from Romans 8:1 and 2 Timothy 4:8, Charles Wesley anticipates the scene:

No condemnation now I dread;  
 Jesus, and all in him, is mine!  
 Alive in him, my living Head,  
 And clothed in righteousness divine,  
 Bold I approach the eternal throne,  
 And claim the crown, through Christ, my own.<sup>52</sup>

It will not be the works of believers that will save them; but, being "created in Christ Jesus for good works," we shall not be saved without the works which "God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:8-10); for works are the sign and fruit of a living faith (cf. James 2:17f). Christ must, therefore, rule in us if we are to persevere to the end.

Calvin (in Peterson 1999:53) viewed the Last Judgement as the final act of Christ's rule before he would, as the loyal Son, deliver the kingdom to the Father. In expecting the Last Judgement, the church expresses its confidence that the divine kingdom will finally come in all its fullness. All, that presently opposes its achievement will be removed, whether by conversion or by destruction. Given the length to which God has gone to redeem the world in Christ, we may hope in God's patience and mercy toward ourselves and toward others, while waiting "with eager longing" for the day when God will be "all in all" (cf. Rom. 8:19-25; 1Cor. 15:24-28) (Wainwright 1997:163).

### 2.2.1.3. The Priestly Office of Christ

In his exposition of Calvin's teaching on the priestly office of Jesus Christ, Peterson (1999:54) points out the critical place of both the Old and New Testaments in understanding the

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<sup>52</sup> The hymn "Free Grace," from John and Charles Wesley, *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (London, 1739)



priesthood of Christ. Christ's priestly office must be understood in the light of Old Testament prediction and New Testament fulfilment. In the Old Testament, the high priest was selected from among men and appointed to represent them before God (Heb.5:11). According to Letham (1993:105-106), that meant offering gifts and sacrifices for sins both for himself as well as the community, interceding for those he represented, teaching the people, and pronouncing the blessing of Yahweh on them. He was appointed to this task by Yahweh himself. He was able to empathize with the people, since he himself was one of them, experiencing the same sufferings and temptations as they did.

Calvin begins his exposition of the priesthood of Christ in the letter to the Hebrews. This is not surprising because the burden of the letter is to show how Christ is the complete fulfilment of Old Testament predictions and types, how he is better than his Old Testament foreshadows (Peterson 1999:54). According to Hebrews, Christ is the end, the fulfilment and completion of the Old Testament. This is what makes Old Testament rites invalid. Jesus is presented not just as a priest, but as a high priest. What qualifies him to be the High Priest is his uniqueness as both divine and human.

According to Letham (1993:110ff) Calvin begins in Hebrews because it is here that Christ's qualifications as high priest are highlighted the most. He is himself fully human, having shared our flesh and blood. He has suffered endured temptation and experienced death (2:11-18). He was one with us in human weakness. He learned obedience through suffering (5:7-8). Therefore he is equipped to represent us before God and is able to sympathize with our own struggles (4:14-15). Even more prominent in Hebrews is the fact that Christ, as priest, offered a sacrifice for sins as the then Aaronic high priests did (5:1; 8:3; 10:11) except that his was once-for-all and theirs continual and ineffective. (1993:112). Wainwright (1997:138) uses the same verses to highlight how the letter to the Hebrews gives the title of "great high priest" to Christ.

The most crucial difference of all is that theirs were only animal sacrifices which had no intrinsic power to atone for human sins, whereas his was the sacrifice of himself, the Son of God, who was simultaneously sinless man. According to Calvin this is a necessary requisite of the office of the Priesthood of Christ, God's high priest had to be both divine and genuinely human (Peterson 1999:55). It is with this understanding that Calvin describes the

work of Christ in terms of both priesthood and sacrifice, emphasizing at each stage how different the work of Christ is from that of the ancient priests of Israel, how infinitely his achievement surpasses theirs (Bruce 1979:77).<sup>53</sup> Van Dyk (1999:7) describes the priestly perspective on the cross as where the classic themes of sacrifice, propitiation, substitution, representation, and satisfaction all find voice.

And so the clear message of Hebrews is that Christ is our great high priest to the exclusion of all others. He has no rival. He is supreme. According to Letham (1993:122), His is the sacrifice, the intercession and the benediction; his is the faith and worship acceptable to God. Of all priests, Christ is the only one to be both priest and sacrifice for sin, a concept that highlights the unity of Christ's person and work in Calvin's theology. His death on the cross was his ultimate consecration into priestly service. Christ is therefore the great high priest who accomplished reconciliation for his people by offering himself to God on the cross. Consequently, any doctrine of priesthood should begin and end with Christ.

In this discussion on Christ's threefold office Calvin has a very clear understanding of the predicament of fallen humanity and it is in that context that he sets out the saving work of Christ in his sacrificial death and his ministry as heavenly intercessor and describes the benefits that accrue to believers. He combines the two parts of Christ's priestly office to point that salvation depends upon Christ's high priestly work of reconciliation.<sup>54</sup> He also makes Christ's person (prophet, king, and priest) and work (proclamation, protection, and reconciliation) inseparable (Peterson 1985:124). In the Institutes, Calvin also explains that Christ's accomplishment of reconciliation is the prerequisite for his work of intercession (Institutes II. xvi. 16). The point Calvin makes here is that each of the offices implies the other.

Jesus Christ is prophet, priest and king. As prophet he fulfils the law as well as heralds the gospel. As priest he makes a once-for-all sacrifice, the offering for sin. As king he conquers the powers of darkness and delivers mortals from their bondage to these powers (Bloesch 1997:159). Christ, the great High Priest functions both to intercede for human beings in the presence of God as well as represent them before God (Letham 1993:105). Culbertson

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<sup>53</sup> Professor F.F. Bruce is emeritus Professor in the University of Manchester.

<sup>54</sup> See Calvin's commentary on Is. 53:12 and I Tim. 2:6.

(1946:214) calls it objective mediation, which includes both sacrifice and intercession. According to Macquarie (1966:321), Christ, the king, who wins his victor over the enslaving forces, is also Christ the prophet who gives us the “example” of obedience, but still more he is the priest who utterly gives of himself as sacrificial victim and thereby brings right into human history the reconciling activity of God in a new and decisive manner. In other words the threefold office coheres in the one work of Christ. According to Letham (1993:24), during his earthly ministry he did not simply perform a prophetic role in revealing God and his purposes, then switch to a priestly mode for his sacrifice on the cross and finally become king at his resurrection, each function being jettisoned when the next one took over. There is a historical and soteriological progression and not a separation of functions by chronological order.

In short, the threefold office of Christ as prophet, priest and king highlights his role in (1) speaking and teaching the word of God which ultimately focused on himself; (2) offering himself as a vicarious sacrifice to God; and (3) reigning over his church and the world as risen Lord.

### **2.2.2. Six Biblical Themes of Atonement**

The Christian church has always expressed its understanding of the atonement with the help of a number of metaphors. Besides using the threefold office of Christ, Calvin also employs six metaphors to depict the nature of Christ’s saving work. It can be argued that the six are not original of Calvin because others used the same pictures of reconciliation. For example, Irenaeus emphasized Christ’s obedience in his doctrine of recapitulation (Peterson 1985:124). Athanasius wrote of Christ’s saving as a victory. But here Calvin is unique in that he summarizes the Christian doctrine of the atonement arguably better than anyone before him. Jesus is the victor, the legal substitute, the sacrifice, our merit, an example in his death on the cross and the obedient second Adam.

#### **2.2.2.1. The *CHRISTUS VICTOR* Model**

Peterson (1999:69) identifies the *Christus Victor* model to be one of Calvin’s favourite themes of atonement. This is also called the ‘classical view’ of atonement. Joel Green and Mark Baker, in ‘Recovering the Scandal of the Cross’ describe the background in which this model was developed in terms of conflict with the powers of the day (2000:118ff).

Theologians today commonly follow the Swedish theologian Gustaf Aulen, who in a series of lectures delivered in 1930 labelled this the *Christus Victor* (*Christ the Conqueror*) model of the atonement. In his famous study, *Christus Victor*, Aulen claimed that the ‘classic’ way of conceiving the atonement was that in which Christ is viewed as the victor over demonic forces holding human life in thrall.

In *Christus Victor* Aulen gives two summary statements of what he calls the classic theory of Atonement. First:

This type of view may be described provisionally as the ‘dramatic’. Its central theme is the idea of the Atonement as a Divine conflict and victory; Christ – Christus Victor – fights against and triumphs over the evil powers of the world, the ‘tyrants’ under which mankind is in bondage and suffering, and in Him God reconciles the world to Himself (Aulen 1970:4)

According to Colin Gunton<sup>55</sup> (1989:54-55), what lies at the heart of this paragraph is a contrast between atonement conceived as transaction – for example, of a legal kind – and as a drama, in which something decisive happens to change the relations between God and humankind. Aulen stresses that it is a divine victory. In the second summary of the theory, a further point is made:

God in Christ overcomes the hostile powers which hold man in bondage. At the same time, these hostile powers are also the executants of God’s will. The patristic theology is dualistic, but it is not an absolute Dualism. The deliverance for man from the power of death and the devil is at the same time his deliverance from God’s judgement. God is reconciled by His own act in reconciling the world to Himself (1970:59)

The pattern is very clear. Aulen claims that, according to the classic theory the cross of Christ is conceived as a divine victory over certain powers of evil which are both evil and within divine control. Reconciliation is achieved because after the incarnation and death of Christ their power to do harm is taken away by God.

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<sup>55</sup> Professor Colin Gunton was Professor of Christian Doctrine at King’s College, University of London. He is also the author of *Becoming and Being, Yesterday and Today* and *Enlightenment and Alienation*.

In his New Testament commentaries, Calvin reflects Aulen's thinking when he sees the work of Jesus portrayed as a battle against the demons that afflict the life of man<sup>56</sup>. His finished work on the cross is complete triumph over these demonic, enslaving powers, death, fear, sin, the sinful world (Peterson 1999:70). The model of struggle, victory, and triumph comes through clearly in Calvin's thinking and the point he makes is that it is into this desperate situation of conflict that Christ the victor comes.

Bloesch (1997:148) gives the main outline of man's desperate situation apart from Christ. Man has fallen into the grip of dark powers; Christ comes into this situation, and battles against these powers; with his cross comes overwhelming victory, bringing deliverance and new life to man. In other words God takes the initiative and in Christ's death on the cross, he carries through. He himself performs the sacrifice in the person of his Son. In His commentary on Isaiah 53:12, Calvin identifies Christ as a valiant and illustrious general who triumphed over the enemies and therefore Christ has subdued death, the world and the devil (Peterson 1999:70).

In developing this theme, Calvin lays great emphasis on the deity of Christ: the fact that Christ, the Redeemer had to be true God and true man in order to accomplish the task of conquering the devil, death and sin. Calvin's line of argument is that the only way to deliverance for God's people is God's undertaking to deliver his people. To do this, Jesus Christ must be both God and man. He must be man if the victory is to benefit his people and become their victory. Peterson (1999:72) gives insight to this: First his humanity underscores the reality of the battle. Secondly, it serves to accent the substitutionary nature of his victory. According to Bloesch (1997:149) the humanity of Christ is significant, for Christ's victory was a victory for the human race because he was a real man. It is therefore in Christ as a man that God carries out his work of deliverance.

To the Hebrews the cross was accursed; to the Romans the cross was an instrument of condemnation, but Christ transformed the hated cross into 'a triumphal chariot' by taking the curse upon himself (1999:75). Christ's death is a great victory because on the cross he triumphed over his enemies and ours. This is what makes the cross not only central to Calvin's *Christus Victor* theme but also the decisive event which is the sum of all previous

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<sup>56</sup> See, Commentary on 2 Cor. 4:4; Heb. 2:15; Eph. 2:1; 1John 2:15.

conquests. According to Calvin, in this one event man's sin has been dealt with, atoned for, washed away and forgiven.

#### 2.2.2.2. The LEGAL Model

It is generally acknowledged that Calvin is not the first person to formulate the legal/penal view of atonement. Both Luther and Zwingli before him had taught it but Peterson (1999:89) argues that Calvin is the one who gave a compelling statement to this doctrine, explaining how Christ perfectly fulfilled the law on behalf of his people and in doing so took the condemnation sinners deserve in his death. The relationship between the law and the law-giver is an important one in Calvin's explanation of this theme.

The law as the expression of God's character, according to Calvin, is not only 'a perfect pattern of righteousness', but also contains the 'knowledge of the divine will' (Peterson 1985:79). Unfortunately, the law only offers conditional salvation and because none of us can ever keep the law we can never merit salvation. Thus the Ten Commandments, which accurately reveal God's will and the way to salvation, become for sinners an instrument of condemnation as the law exposes their sins.

In his commentary on Galatians, Calvin explains that if the sentence of the law is that all who have transgressed the law are accursed, then every individual is condemned because no one has ever satisfied the law.<sup>57</sup> In Institutes II. xvi. 1, Calvin explains why sinners need another to keep the law in their place:

No one can descend into himself and seriously consider who he is without feeling God's wrath and hostility toward him. Accordingly, he must anxiously seek ways and means to appease God – and this demands a satisfaction. No common assurance is required, for God's wrath and curse always lie upon sinners until they are absolved of guilt. Since he is a righteous judge, he does not allow his law to be broken without punishment, but is equipped to avenge it.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Calvin's commentary on Gal. 3:10

<sup>58</sup> T.H.L. Parker sums up Christ's positive and negative fulfilment of the law: 'The law has been fulfilled on earth by a man – by the man in whom the law-giver himself has entered into a union with all men; fulfilled positively in that he has obeyed it perfectly, negatively in that he has suffered the punishment for breaking the Law incurred by all men' (T.H.L. Parker, *John Calvin: A Biography* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975], p. 38).

To this end Calvin's commentaries on the Gospels repeatedly affirm that Christ kept every detail of the law as his people's legal substitute. In fact Calvin goes to great lengths to maintain his position that Jesus fulfilled the law down to the smallest detail and he did it as his people's substitute (Peterson 1999:81). Christ was his peoples' legal substitute not only in fulfilling the law perfectly throughout his life, but also by taking their condemnation on the cross of Calvary.

Calvin uses the ideas of penalty and punishment when he speaks of Christ as our legal substitute. Commenting on Isaiah 53:6, Calvin refers exclusively to guilt and punishment when explains how the heavy load of our sins is laid on Christ and how Christ takes upon himself the filthiness of our iniquities, in order to rescue us from everlasting destruction.<sup>59</sup> The implication of what Christ has done through his death is that believers should not fear judgement.

In his commentary on 2 Corinthians 5:21, Calvin describes the curse of the cross as the curse of the law and that Christ, through his death redeemed sinners from this curse and rescued us from the tyranny of sin, Satan, and death (Peterson 1985:86). Calvin is emphatic that Christ our legal substitute bore the full weight of divine judgment against sin. And so Christ is our legal substitute who perfectly fulfils the law in his life and takes the condemnation law-breakers deserved in his death on the cross.

Luther referred to the "happy exchange". Christ's righteousness is imputed to us; our sin is imputed to him. His righteousness covers our sin; our sin is hidden in his righteousness. Our justification is grounded in his sacrifice; his sacrifice is the altar on which our sins are laid (Bloesch 1997:159).

### **2.2.2.3. The SACRIFICE Model**

The sacrificial theme is one of Calvin's most important ways of viewing Christ's death on the cross. In this regard, Calvin emphasizes the importance of the Old Testament background in developing this theme. There is great variety in the forms of sacrifice in the Old Testament and the modern scholars usually find it impossible to put all sacrifice under any one heading

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<sup>59</sup> Calvin's commentary on Isa.53:6



as though to say, 'Sacrifice is this' or 'Sacrifice is that'. According to Morris (1983:43), there is no idea in sacrifice, no common source for all the varieties. Some of the Old Testament sacrifices were offerings of cereals or of liquid (wine mostly), but this class of offering does not feature prominently in the New Testament. In the New Testament the references are mostly to the animal sacrifices and of these the Old Testament speaks of four main types: the burnt offering, the peace offering, the sin offering and the guilt offering. These are not often mentioned by name in the New Testament, though sometimes specific sacrifices are used as descriptions of the offering of Christ. For example, Paul speaks of God as 'sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering' (Rom. 8:3). Hebrews quotes Psalm 40, a passage which includes the words, 'with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased' (Heb. 10:6; cf. verse 8). The Passover sacrifice is spoken of once (1 Cor. 5:7) and, while the term 'Day of Atonement' is not actually mentioned, the Day of Atonement sacrifices are clearly in mind on at least one occasion (Heb. 9:7).

But this kind of specific reference is rare. It is more usual to have a general reference, such as when we read that 'Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God' (Eph. 5:2). Again, Christ 'has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself' (Heb. 9:26). We can scarcely doubt that sacrifice is in mind when we read the words of John the Baptist, 'Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!' (Jan. 1:29) or those of the Seer in Revelation: "Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain" (Rev. 5:6). We should also see sacrifice behind many of the passages which refer to blood, such as "to him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood" (Rev. 1:5).

There cannot be the slightest doubt that sometimes the authors of the New Testament used 'sacrifice' as a helpful category when they wanted to bring out something of what Christ's death meant. There is no doubt that the sacrifice that matters in the New Testament is the death of Jesus on Calvary's cross. According to Morris (1983:63), it is with this Old Testament background that Calvin develops the thesis that Christ is the only true and unique sacrifice and therefore his death is the sacrifice which accomplishes in reality everything that Old Testament sacrifices pointed to but could not do. Commenting on 1 Peter 1:19, Calvin speaks of Christ as the perfect fulfilment of all the Old Testament predictions and types and



therefore in him we have everything that these predictions and types foreshadowed.<sup>60</sup> Peterson (1985:3) commenting on Calvin's doctrine of Atonement explains the difference between the Old Testament types and Christ by arguing that Christ was offered but once and that one sacrifice accomplished whatever was necessary to recover the Father's favour, obtain forgiveness of sins, righteousness, and salvation. In other words, His death is the great and final sacrifice for sin.

Calvin's commentary on Matthew 16:16 highlights three aspects to Christ's sacrifice: God-ward (appeasing his wrath-propitiation); human-ward (wiping out his guilt-redemption) and toward God and human beings (reconciliation) aspects. What Calvin means by this is that Christ's death, his sacrifice, is a propitiation that satisfies the wrath of a Holy God and therefore turns it away. This, according to Peterson (1985:96) happened when Jesus, the Son of God stepped into the place of sinners and bore the brunt of God's wrath against their sins. God is not only angry at sinners because of their sins; their sins constitute a barrier between God and them. Christ through his sacrificial death removed the barrier from God's side, reconciling him to his people. So those who were once alienated from God, enemies of God are received into God's favour because God, appeased by the death of Christ has become reconciled to them.<sup>61</sup> On the other hand believers are reconciled to God through Christ when they personally trust in him as their sacrifice. Reconciliation, therefore, operates in two directions - sinners are reconciled to God through the death of Christ and God is both reconciled to sinners and propitiated through the sacrifice of His Son (Peterson 1985:96).

Sinners are not only enemies of God, apart from Christ they are 'enslaved to sin' they are in bondage and therefore they need redemption. Christ made himself the price of redemption and therefore he redeems his people - delivers them from bondage to sin.<sup>62</sup> In other words redemption involves the payment of a price. According to Calvin redemption involves the payment of a price and the price was the death of Christ whom God put forward as propitiation through faith which is in his blood (Peterson 1985:97).

So what does the cross achieve for the Christian? Christ offers himself as a sacrifice on the cross in the place of sinners to propitiate God's wrath and reconcile him to them, and to

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<sup>60</sup> See Calvin's commentary on 1Peter. 1:19

<sup>61</sup> See Calvin's commentary on Col 1:21

<sup>62</sup> See Calvin's commentary on 1Cor. 1:30.

redeem them from bondage to sin and reconcile them to God (Peterson 1985:99). In other words Atonement contains both ideas of propitiation and expiation, the appeasement and satisfaction of God and the covering over of sin (Santmire 1964:299ff).

#### 2.2.2.4. The MERIT Model

Calvin's theme of Christ our merit points out that God the Father is the ultimate fount of saving grace and Christ Jesus is the source of grace for his people. According to Peterson (1985:102) God's love is the first cause of salvation and Christ's merit of grace is God's ordained means of bringing his love to believers. Christ therefore merited this grace for all believers and bestows upon them something of what he has acquired (Institutes II.xvii.2.). He acquired reconciliation and righteousness by undertaking to pay what we could not pay (Ibid. II. xvii. 5). The point Calvin makes here is that it is by his death that Jesus Christ merits grace for believers. He makes this very clear throughout especially in the Institutes II. Xviii. 4-5.<sup>63</sup>

Calvin uses this motif to stress the positive achievement of salvation by Christ on behalf of his people. Calvin affirms that Christ is the author of salvation – he is the material cause of salvation – he actually rescues believers by his righteousness (Institutes II.xvii.2.).<sup>64</sup> The negative aspects of Christ's redemption includes the condemnation Christ received as our legal substitute and that he offered himself as the atoning sacrifice for sin.

#### 2.2.2.5. The EXAMPLE Model

Christ as an example in his death forms an important part of Calvin's doctrine of the Christian life. In his commentary on Matthew 16:24 Calvin paraphrases the words of Christ:

“If any one wished to be mine, when he has denied himself and taken up his cross, let him follow me’, or, ‘let him conform to my example’ – meaning that none can be considered Christ's disciple who is not a true imitator of Him and prepared to run the same course.

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<sup>63</sup> Calvin affirms substitution when he speaks of Christ our merit.

<sup>64</sup> Van Buren accurately presents Calvin's view when he says, “Christ is correctly and fittingly said to have merited the grace of God and salvation for us.” It is the word “merit” that he wishes to stress, for it excludes every attempt to make the work of *Christ merely instrumental to our salvation*’ (Paul Van Buren, *Christ in Our Place*, p. 61.)

Calvin calls Christians to an exercise of caution as they look about for models to follow. He does not deny that believers are to imitate the lives of other godly Christians. Yet there is a higher standard to which Christian models must conform if they are to serve as examples for God's people (Peterson 1985:107; cf. Ronald Wallace 1959:42.). Calvin holds that Jesus Christ is an example in his death in many different areas especially as both the one through whom we return favour with God as well our pattern for Christian living. In his exposition of 1Peter 2:23 Calvin highlights three things about Christ as our example: by His death Christ has given us an example of patience; by His death He has redeemed and restored us to life; by his death we ought to live in righteousness.<sup>65</sup>

As believers face temptations they can bolster their hearts with the knowledge that the Lord was tempted when 'He endured a bitter death'. In his exegesis of 1Peter 2:21ff, the *textus classicus* for the exemplary theme of the atonement, Calvin presents Jesus in his death as an example of patiently bearing unjust suffering. He is also the model of humility for believers and a pattern of love.<sup>66</sup> In addition, Calvin holds forth Christ's praying for his enemies on the cross as an example of moderation.<sup>67</sup>

If someone were to ask John Calvin to summarize the Christian life in one word, his answer would be obedience. Jesus Christ in dying is an example of obedience and a demonstration of a life that glorifies God as the goal of the Christian life. Christ is therefore our example and Christians are called to imitate him in all they think, say, and do.<sup>68</sup>

#### 2.2.2.6. The OBEDIENCE Model

In his exegesis of 1 Corinthians 15:45, Calvin finds fundamental similarity between Adam and Christ, the first Adam and the second respectively (Peterson 1985:61). They are, as it were, the two origins, or roots of the human race.<sup>69</sup> Calvin presupposes solidarity between Adam and his descendants and between Christ and his. As such their actions exert a tremendous effect upon the race. Adam fell into sin and thus brought all men and women

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<sup>65</sup> Calvin's commentary on 1Peter. 2:23

<sup>66</sup> Calvin's commentary on 2 Cor. 8:9

<sup>67</sup> Calvin's commentary on Luke 23:34

<sup>68</sup> This chapter must be placed within the larger context of Calvin's doctrine of the Christian life. Calvin maintains that the dynamic for following Christ's example and obeying the law is the power of God working in Christians.

<sup>69</sup> Calvin's commentary on 1Cor.15:45

under God's curse. Death, both spiritual and physical, was the tragic result. Christ through his actions brought righteousness, grace, and life to his people.<sup>70</sup>

Calvin explains that when Christ came forth as true man, he partook of 'the human condition', took the person, name and place of Adam in order to rescue Adam's descendants (Institutes II.xii.7.). As to how he did this, Calvin, in Institutes II.xii.3 correlates Christ's obedience to his saving work. Christ took Adam's place in obeying the Father and to present our flesh as the price of satisfaction to God's righteous judgment, and in the same flesh, to pay the penalty that we had deserved.

Calvin often spoke of Christ's work as the obedient second Adam in terms of restoration. The fall brought about conditions in which restoration was needed. The fall is mankind's 'catastrophic downfall'<sup>71</sup> by which everything was 'brought to ruin in Adam'. Christ as the second Adam, through his death restores to us what we had lost in Adam. Christ is the 'Heir of all things' who enables believers to 'begin to enjoy the good things of God', which had been forfeited by Adam's sin.<sup>72</sup> More specifically, our restoration consists of a 'better state',<sup>73</sup> even 'the life of heaven'.<sup>74</sup> Calvin's comments on the *textus classicus* for Christ's redemptive obedience, Romans 5:12-21, sum up well the Saviour's role as second Adam:

The meaning of the whole passage is that since Christ surpasses Adam, the sin of Adam is overcome by the righteousness of Christ. The curse of Adam is overturned by the grace of Christ, and the life which Christ bestows swallows up the death which came from Adam.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Calvin's commentary on 1Corinthians 15:21f. summarizes the respective effects of Adam and Christ upon the human race.

<sup>71</sup> Calvin's commentary on 1Cor.15:45

<sup>72</sup> Calvin's commentary on Heb. 1:2

<sup>73</sup> Calvin's commentary on 1Cor.15:45

<sup>74</sup> Calvin's commentary 1Cor.15:47. Cf. Calvin's commentary on 1Cor.15:21f.

<sup>75</sup> Calvin's commentary on Rom. 5:17

Christ is therefore the second Adam, who by his voluntary obedience in life, especially in death countered Adam's disobedience and restored eternal life and all good things to his people.<sup>76</sup>

### 2.3. Summary

There is a lot of debate with regard to Calvin's view of the extent of the atonement. According to Peterson (1985:116), there are three positions in this debate. Many insist that Calvin teaches unlimited atonement. Others are equally insistent that Calvin holds to a limited atonement and a few maintain that we cannot know for certain. Whilst this debate might never be resolved, what is clear from Calvin's work is his profound understanding of the atoning work of Christ. Rather than fall into the trap of insisting on one 'theory' of the atonement, Calvin recognised that the biblical teaching presents us with a multi-faceted jewel. He therefore stresses the many-sidedness and the profundity of the work of Christ. By using the concept of Christ's threefold office, Calvin teaches the unity of the person and work of Christ as mediator. By employing the six biblical themes of the atonement to depict Christ's saving work, Calvin combines the various themes and very ably summarizes the Christian doctrine of atonement. Jesus is the obedient second Adam, the victor, the legal substitute, the sacrifice, our merit, and lastly, an example in his death on the cross. Calvin unites the threefold office and these biblical themes to present the atonement.

Calvin's basic argument is that Christ is the manifestation of God's love for sinners who deserve only his wrath. As a demonstration of that love Christ died for sinners and through his death he accomplished salvation for them. And so Calvin's message is one of God's judgement against sin, His redeeming love in Christ, and the forgiveness of sins available to all who believe in Christ. The only antidote to sin according to Calvin is the Holy Spirit's application to us of the death and resurrection of the Son of God.

### 2.4. Derek Tidball and the Cross of Christ

Derek Tidball is what I would call a contemporary Evangelical theologian. He is contemporary in the sense that in his thinking about the cross and salvation, he has allowed his present to be enriched both by his knowledge of the past and his expectation of the future.

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<sup>76</sup> Calvin's use of the term "restoration" clearly underlines his emphasis on the idea that God, in his redemptive activity, is not creating a new order, but rather providing the way by which his original creation is being restored.

He brings in the best of both worlds in terms of theological understanding on the subject and yet does so by re-stating the fundamental Christian conviction that God continues to speak through what he has spoken. In other words God's word belongs, not to the museum but the market place and through it he addresses the modern world.

Tidball brings out this historical-contemporary balance in his wide-ranging exploration of this magnificent theme and very ably brings out the implications of the cross for Christian living, community and spirituality. Apart from his Calvin, Derek interacts and reflects the thinking of some of the great minds in Christian theology, theologians like C.H. Spurgeon, J.I. Packer, John Stott, Martin Lloyd-Jones, Leon Morris, Ronald Wallace but to name a few.

Derek Tidball walks through the pages of the Bible, stopping to look for portraits of the cross that it presents. He begins with sketches drawn by the Old Testament writers and then the eye-witness masterpieces in the Gospels where the death of Christ is the fundamental theme, the reflective pieces in Pauline epistles and then the rest of the New Testament interpreters of the Cross of Christ. For purposes of this thesis I will not consider everything that Tidball has written on the cross of Christ but aspects of his book 'The Message of the Cross' that will be most helpful in painting an accurate picture of what evangelicals believe about the cross of Christ.

In this wide-ranging exploration, Tidball develops the thesis that the cross of Christ stands at the very heart of the Christian faith, manifesting the love of God, effecting salvation from sin, conquering hostile forces of evil and inviting reconciliation with God. Tidball, just like Calvin and others before him, acknowledge that the cross is a wonderfully wrought and complex work of God and cannot be captured in its fullness from one standpoint alone, and even less in one theory.

#### **2.4.1. The Cross in the Old Testament**

There is no doubt that the death of Christ is the subject of many promises and prophecies in the Old Testament. A survey of the promises of the cross logically falls into three categories:

the Law of Moses, the Psalms (or Writings) and the Prophets (Ellsworth 1997:41).<sup>77</sup> Thiessen (1979:229f) traces a scarlet cord through the whole Bible, all of them pointing to the one great offering to be made by Christ. Further, there are prophecies that point forward to the death of Christ, making clear the point that the death of Christ is an important part of the teaching of the Old Testament.

The first five books of the Old Testament is more rich in types of Christ than in promises, but there are still several promises to be found. The most prominent of these is found in Genesis 3:15. This is followed by the promises God made to Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3; 17:1-7; 22:15-18), to Isaac (Gen. 21:12), to Jacob (Gen. 28:14) and the promise he made through Jacob regarding Judah (Gen. 49:10-12). In Genesis 22, Tidball (2001:36-38) finds sketches of the cross in the story about Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. Isaac was one of Abraham's two sons and was special in that he was the child of promise – the child on whom the future fulfilment of the promise that Abraham would be 'the father of many nations' (17:4-6) depended. The significance of this story for Israel is that it presents to them a perfect model of obedience in that Abraham obeyed God in an exemplary manner. But for Christians, this event has had meaning that foreshadows the work of the cross.

To unpack this Tidball (2001:42) refers to Sidney Greidanus' book, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, where Greidanus looks at the progressive unfolding of redemptive history in terms of promise and fulfilment, typology, analogy, longitudinal themes, New Testament references, and contrast.<sup>78</sup> In his examination of Genesis 22, Greidanus applies the way of contrast, 'a blend of the typology of the substitute offering (ram-Christ), of the longitudinal theme of substitute offerings (ram, Passover lamb, temple sacrifices, Christ), and the New Testament references regarding God himself offering his only Son (John 3:16; Rom. 8:32).'

According to Greidanus' examination, Isaac in this text is a picture of Christ (cited in Tidball 2001:42-43). The link with the cross of Christ is therefore with the Father of Jesus Christ sending him to the cross, just like Abraham willingly goes to sacrifice his son as an offering

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<sup>77</sup> Roger Ellsworth is the pastor of Immanuel Baptist Church, Benton, Illinois, USA. He has several books in print, including *Strengthening Christ's Church* and *A Promise is a Promise* published by Evangelical Press.

<sup>78</sup> In the definition of Typology, Types can mean persons, institutions, or events of the Old Testament which are regarded as divinely established models or presentations of corresponding realities in the New Testament salvation history. Analogy relates the Old to the New Testament and to the Christian life.



that will make atonement. The obvious difference between the two fathers is that at the last moment Abraham was not required to kill his son, but there was no such reprieve for the father of our Lord Jesus Christ. And so glimpses of Calvary can be seen repeatedly in Genesis 22 where complex connections about the death of Christ seem to emerge which New Testament writers want to trace back to this story. The cross is anticipated in that the father gives his son to be sacrificed, the son surrenders, the Lord provides, the ram dies and the people profit. This Old Testament sketch is then fully unveiled centuries later, on a mountain called Golgotha.

#### **2.4.1.1. Exodus-Passover and the Cross**

For the first Christians the Old Testament story of the Passover was the divinely given account of the way their God had delivered their ancestors from Egypt and made them into a nation. According to Morris (1983:92), it was primarily the commemoration of a great deliverance. Tidball (2001:51) puts the Exodus and Passover together and points to the inevitable, inseparable link between liberation and blood, salvation and sacrifice, freedom and the cross. The one would not have happened without the other.

Tidball locates the initiative for both events firmly in the hands of God and describes it as a self-disclosure of God.<sup>79</sup> In the Exodus, God is revealed as faithful to his word, compassionate to his people, just among the nations and powerful among the nations (2001:52-53). Referring to Walter Brueggemann (1982), Tidball (2001:53) points out the variety of verbs of deliverance used of God in Exodus. He ‘brings out’,<sup>80</sup> ‘rescues’ (3:8), ‘delivers’, ‘saves’ (14:30) and ‘redeems’ (6:6) his people. What is remarkable about this is that God ‘is the subject of all these verbs’, meaning that the exodus was his initiative, and he carried it through successfully to completion.

#### **2.4.1.2. The Significance of Passover**

Tidball (2001:57-64) identifies four distinct yet related outcomes which were accomplished by God through the Passover event and he links all of them to the cross of Christ. The first outcome was that God judged Pharaoh by striking down every firstborn person and animal

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<sup>79</sup> In *The Cross of Christ* (1986:139), John Stott limits himself to God’s self-disclosure as Judge, Redeemer, and Covenant God, whereas the story reveals God in other roles too.

<sup>80</sup> Exod. 13:3 and a further seventeen occasions.



not sheltered by a blood-marked house. The second was God's judgement on the Egyptian gods. Tidball (2001:58) argues that the contest between Egypt and Israel, Pharaoh and Moses, was a contest not only of strength but of spiritual power. It was a contest between the living God of Israel and the impotent gods of Egypt. So if God was to set his people free, he not only had to defeat Pharaoh but also had to show that the gods who held up his regime were impotent as well. The third outcome was the redemption of God's people in the face of the judgement of God (Motyer 1996:45-51).<sup>81</sup> The blood of the lamb prevented the righteous judgment of God from falling on those who deserved it. Except for the blood of the lamb, their lives would have been forfeited to God alongside those of the firstborn in Egypt. God the judge is also God the redeemer and protector. The sacrifice of a perfect offering drew the sting of his wrath and the death of the substitute guaranteed the life of the firstborn. The fourth outcome was the deliverance of God's people from oppression. The God who promised to redeem them 'with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment' (6:6) does so through the Passover meal, through the visit of the angel and by changing the mind of Pharaoh.

The application of Passover symbols to the death of Christ is found in the New Testament. Young (1975:67) identifies references in 1 Corinthians 5:7, 'Christ our Passover is sacrificed'. In the Gospel of John (19:31), it is clearly implied that Jesus died at the moment when the Passover lambs were being slaughtered in the Temple. These hints were taken up in later Christian literature and developed in greater detail. A carefully worked out parallel was drawn: Israel was delivered from Egypt by God, and the means of escape was the saving blood of the Passover lambs which protected the Israelites from the angel of death. Just so, Christ delivers us from the Egypt of sin and evil, and the means of escape is his own blood, protecting us from the Angel of Death, the devil. In other words Passover lamb sacrificed in Egypt on that fateful night is in fact a forerunner of the Christ sacrificed at Calvary and therefore what happened through the Passover lamb in Israel's experience happens now through Jesus in our experience (Tidball 2001:64). His sacrifice on the cross brings sinners to judgment, principalities and powers to destruction, those under sentence of death to redemption, the oppressed into freedom and its participants into membership of a consecrated people (McGrath 1994:197).

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<sup>81</sup> Motyer points out 'that on Passover night there was death in every house in Egypt without exception'. It was the death either of the firstborn or of the lamb that afforded protection to those who sheltered beneath the victim's blood.

In the Passover, the image of Christ as a sacrificial lamb is intended to build a bridge between Jesus and the Passover. For example, 1Peter 1:18-19 reveals the blood of the lamb as the purchase price of redemption – the price paid to secure the freedom of those who are in slavery, just as the original Passover lamb did. Then, too, the Lamb mentioned in Revelation 5:6, 8, 12, 13, and 12:11, fits the Passover lamb in a fairly obvious way.<sup>82</sup> This lamb, though slain, is a figure of power that purchases people for God with his blood and defeats the dragon by his death. Two vital achievements of God's activity through the Passover lamb are therefore attributed to Christ as well.

Further indications that the early Christians readily understood Jesus to be the new and greater Passover lamb are found in the timing and words of Christ himself at the last supper, the Christians' Passover meal (Tidball 2001:66). The last supper is called a Passover meal in all three synoptic Gospels (Mt. 26:17-18; Mk. 14:14-16; Lk. 22:11-15). Jesus calls the last supper a fulfilment of the Passover. His reference to the cup as his 'blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many',<sup>83</sup> similarly echoes the language of the Passover, while at the same time transforming it, as Jesus claims that he himself is the lamb whose blood was being spilled (McGrath 1994:198). According to Morris (1983:101) the transformation is in that the Lord's Supper has us looking back to God's great act at Calvary and it has us looking forward to the time when Christ will come again to bring his saving work to its consummation.

And so in various ways, Tidball (2001:66-67) contends that the early Christians saw in the Passover lamb a foreshadowing of the work of Christ, what Culbertson (1946:220) has described as the great Antitype – the Lamb of God, whose blood alone could take away the sin of the world. Just as, through the shedding of the blood of the original lamb, God was able to move in judgment on Egypt and to provide salvation for Israel, so, through the death of Christ, God acts to destroy sin and Satan and to bring salvation to all those in slavery (Tidball 2001:67). The Passover lamb was therefore an early pattern for Christ - a model for the Lord's Supper of bread and wine and a paradigm of the cross. It emphasizes the thought of deliverance from a powerful enemy and because Jesus died as a Passover sacrifice those who

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<sup>82</sup> Rev. 1:5 also speaks of Christ as having 'freed us from our sins by his blood', without specifically referring to the lamb.

<sup>83</sup> Mark 14:24.

trust in him are no longer subject to the forces of evil. They have been delivered – they are free. More than this, the Passover reminds us that God’s salvation is not purely individual experience. The deliverance from Egypt marked the birth of a nation and so did the deliverance on the cross. It marked the emergence of the true Israel, the people of God in more than a merely national sense. According to Morris (1983:105), the people of God are plainly seen as all those who have been delivered by Christ, from whatever nation they may come, they belong to God and to one another in the fellowship of the redeemed people of God, for ‘Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us’ (1Cor. 5:7).

#### **2.4.1.3. The Day of Atonement and the Cross**

The Day of Atonement was a day of supreme importance in the history of Israel even though it was celebrated once a year (Tidball 2001:68). It was the annual occasion on which special sacrifices for sin were offered, and the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies with the blood of the sin-offerings to purify the very heart of the sanctuary. Instructions about it are placed at the very centre of Leviticus, underlining its pivotal importance for the whole book.<sup>84</sup>

Tidball (2001:69) points out that every element of the sacrifice is meant to demonstrate the awesome holiness of the God of Israel. His majestic presence has to be entered with extreme caution, and his offended righteousness has to be propitiated with blood sacrifices (2001:69). And so there are clear directions as to how Aaron the High priest should prepare not only himself for the task but also the materials needed in the ceremonies. Another striking thing is the necessity of protection on the part of Aaron bearing in mind that on this day alone, the high priest is to enter the Most Holy Place. All the instructions point to the problem the Day of Atonement was designed to address and that is, this holy God has been offended by his people and the offence cannot simply be ignored, for that would compromise his purity and his character. The offence must be removed; it must be taken away (2001:71).

The offence the ceremonies are designed to cleanse is sin. The careful performance of rites must have impressed on the worshippers the truths that sin matters and that something must be done about it if it is not to separate people from God (Morris 1983:72). Tidball (2001:74), in his description of sin uses the four words used in Leviticus 16 to express the offence caused

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<sup>84</sup> The fullest account of the Day of Atonement is found in Leviticus 14. It is also mentioned in Exod. 30:10; Lev. 23:26-32; 25:9; and Num. 29:7-11.

by human beings to God: spiritual pollution that needs cleansing; wilful disobedience that needs putting right; explicit wrong that needs pardoning, and manifold failure that needs forgiveness. John Hartley (1992:241) points out that all four words for 'sin' are used in the plural, to indicate 'the frequency and totality of humans' sinning'. Together they provide a remarkably comprehensive analysis of human wrong and the cleansing, righting, pardoning and forgiving we need.

In the Epistle to the Hebrews, the Day of Atonement is given prominence as a way of understanding the work of Christ. The writer to the Hebrews introduces his treatment with a reference to access to the presence of God and so he speaks of the tabernacle and points out that high priest was the only person permitted to enter the Holy of Holies and he on one occasion only in the whole year. He then draws a conclusion: 'The Holy Spirit was showing by this that the way into the Most Holy Place had not yet been disclosed as long as the first tabernacle was still standing' (Heb. 9:8). The approach, according to Morris (1983:83) is that, 'This is the way the high priest may enter the Holy of Holies.' The logic of Hebrews is that if it is sin that inhibits access to the presence of God, then sin must be dealt with in order to obtain access and the purpose of the access into the Holy of Holies on this day was that sin should be dealt with.

Christ is understood as the true High Priest who entered heaven itself, the true Holy of Holies, and sprinkled his own blood there, performing a single effective act of purification. This purification was accomplished once for all, not repeated daily or annually and it produced forgiveness not only for ritual infringements and unintentional sins, but cleansed even the consciences of sinful men (Young 1975:66).<sup>85</sup> The contrast between the blood of Christ and the blood of animals is important, for 'it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins' (Heb. 10:4). Just as it was impossible for animal blood to take away sin, so it was impossible for it to secure access. The significance of the atonement is therefore that where the Old Testament sacrifices could not remove sin, God takes the initiative for overcoming the problem of sin. Tidball (2001:74-80) describes the sacrifice of Christ as sacrificial, substitutionary in approach, atoning in significance and sufficient to accomplish the task. His basic argument is that because the Old Testament rituals were not all this, they were only

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<sup>85</sup> Dr Frances Young is Lecturer in Biblical Studies in the University of Birmingham. In her book, *Sacrifice and the Death of Christ*, she probes the relevance of sacrifice and atonement to the experience and needs of people here and now. She finds that there are corresponding responses and expressions in modern life and literature.

shadows of the reality to come and that reality is Jesus Christ. He is the great high priest who offered the perfect sacrifice once for all, the lamb of the burnt and the guilt offerings whose life would be surrendered to death (2001:81-85). Therefore his sacrifice fulfilled the old Day of Atonement, and also surpassed and annulled it, being a far more effective means of dealing with sin (Young 1975:66). Everything was cleansed under the old law by means of blood rituals, and the writer of Hebrews argues that the blood of Christ is a far more efficacious agent for purification, or expiation. Tidball (2001:81-84) demonstrates this superiority by way of comparisons and points of contrast with the Old Testament types.

The other ritual characteristic of the Day of Atonement was the scapegoat ceremony, in which the sins of the people were laid on the goat and banished into the desert, to Azazel, the prince of the Demons. According to Tidball (2001:85), the Epistle to the Hebrews does not mention this aspect of the Day, but Young (1975:66) refers to the Epistle of Barnabas<sup>86</sup> where the scapegoat is a type of Christ and is depicted as the accursed, bearing away the sins of men into the desert. In other words the Old Testament rituals are made to fit the mocking and crucifixion of Christ.

At different times, then, Christ's saving activity was understood in terms of different aspects of the Day of Atonement ritual. One interpretation clearly understood his sacrifice in an expiatory sense, the other in the sense of aversion. However the comprehensive effect of Christ's atoning death is that every believer now has direct and unimpeded access into the presence of God because Christ died (Morris 1983:84). In this way, the letter to the Hebrews is only making explicit what the Gospels had stated implicitly as they recorded the events around the death of Christ. The Day of Atonement is therefore far exceeded by the day of Calvary because by that one event the Disciples of Christ are made clean from all their sins forever. Tidball (2001:84) would therefore argue that Jesus is both priest and sacrifice, both the lamb that dies as the sin offering and the scapegoat who goes into the wilderness bearing away sin.

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<sup>86</sup> The Epistle of Barnabas is a Greek treatise with some features of an epistle containing twenty one chapters, preserved complete in the 4<sup>th</sup> century *Codex Sinaiticus* where it appears at the end of the New Testament. It is traditionally ascribed to the Barnabas who is mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles, though some ascribe it to another father of the same name, a "Barnabas of Alexandria," or simply attribute it to an unknown early Christian teacher. The epistle contains no clue to its author nor to those for whom it was intended. New Testament writings are used neither explicitly nor tacitly in the epistle.

#### 2.4.1.4. Man of Sorrows

The promises of Christ reach their fullest expression in the latter prophets, particularly in Isaiah's prophecy. Ellsworth (1997:45) notes that in this prophecy, Isaiah predicts the virgin birth of Christ (7:14), the nature of his work (9:6-7), his lineage (11:1), his anointing with the Holy Spirit (11:2), his forerunner (40:3) and his effect on the Gentiles (60:3). It is Tidball's (2001:101) opinion that Isaiah's portrait of the suffering servant gives us the richest understanding of the work of Christ to be found in the Old Testament. Paul Hanson (1995)<sup>87</sup> gives the same impression in his commentary on Isaiah 40-46, 'of the four servant songs in Isaiah,<sup>88</sup> this final one (Isaiah 52:13-53:12) is more poignant than the others and has an urgency and passion about it that exceed the others'. In Culbertson's (1946:220) words, 'Perhaps the highest reach of spiritual truth in the Old Testament is to be found in this remarkable prophecy concerning the suffering Servant'.

According to Tidball (2001:101), this text takes us to the heart of the human problem and the heart of the divine mind in that it offers the answer to the question of sin and how God deals with it. The answer 'revolves around the servant of the Lord whose surrender to God's will was so total that he took the consequences of the sin of the community upon himself, even though he was innocent of any wrongdoing' (Hanson 1995:156-157). Tidball (2001:158) calls it 'an audacious approach', because the solution it proposes involves a 'perversion of justice', since the human being is innocent of any transgression. The answer therefore tells us something of God's willingness to take whatever steps were necessary to achieve the solution the sacrificial system had failed to provide and to pay whatever it cost to do so himself (2001:101).

Tidball (2001:102) argues for the traditional view that this song speaks of the shameful and unjust death of a suffering individual through whom justification and life are brought to many. Only one person fits the role of the suffering servant exactly: Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus himself saw the relevance of the figure for his work and saw his mission as that of the Servant of Yahweh, that he predicted that in fulfilment of the role he must suffer and die, and that he regarded his suffering and death as, like that of the Servant, vicarious and redemptive' (2001:103).

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<sup>87</sup> Paul Hanson, Lamont Professor of Divinity, and OT in the Divinity School and in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at Harvard University.

<sup>88</sup> Is. 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12.

And so throughout the Old Testament the Bible emphatically affirms that all the promises and prophecies of Christ in the Old Testament were fulfilled by Christ. According to Ellsworth (1997:42), he was the seed of Abraham (Gal. 3:16), the seed of Isaac (Luke 3:23,24), the seed of Jacob (Luke 3:23,34) and he came from the tribe of Judah (Luke 3:23, 33). He is the prophet of whom Moses spoke (Matt 21:11; Luke 7:16).

#### **2.4.2. The Gospels and the Cross**

Without doubt, the death of Jesus casts its shadow back from the crucifixion onto almost every page of the Gospels. According to Joel Green (1998:24-37), this is because of all the opposition he attracted from early on in his ministry – opposition that leads to important scenes of conflict as well as plots against his life. An exploration of the death of Christ in the Gospels indicates the great variety of ways in which the cross is regarded as meaningful Christian experience and practice.<sup>89</sup> In his discussion of the conception of the cross in the gospels, Tidball (2001:117) highlights this variety but also the particular emphasis of the gospels on the meaning of the death of Christ. According to Tidball, the gospels offer us an interpretation of the cross in the choice of words, detail and in the emphasis they each bring to the writing of their accounts (2001:118). Each gospel brings a distinctive picture of the crucified Christ and when put together they give us a complete and multi-faceted view of what happened.

It is noteworthy that in the Gospels, while it is true that Jesus spoke of his impending death, rarely does he speak of it as salvific or atonement. There is however only two occasions in the Synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke – when Jesus speaks of his own death clearly in terms of atonement theology: (1) Mark 10:45 and its parallel in Matthew 20:28, and (2) Mark 10:22-25 and its parallels in Matthew 26:26-29 and Luke 22:19-20). According to Green & Baker (2000:38), these are the so called ransom sayings: “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Mk 10:45); and the saying at the Last supper: “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many” (Mk 14:24). For lack of space I’ll only highlight Tidball’s exposition of the Gospels of Matthew and Mark and will only refer to the rest if need be.

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<sup>89</sup> See, for example, John T. Carroll and Joel B. Green, *The Death of Jesus in Early Christianity* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1995).



#### 2.4.2.1. Matthew

It is worth noting that Matthew has a special interest in the relationship between the Christian faith and the Jewish faith. Gundry (1982:5-10) explains this in terms of the questions Matthew grapples with in his account of the crucifixion. Questions of how faith in Jesus Christ fulfils the Old Testament Scriptures, the place of the law, the nature of the church, and the place of Gentiles. Interesting though, is the use of Old Testament images and promises in explaining the meaning of the cross.

Matthew's main interest is in setting out a full understanding of Jesus as the Christ, the one that was crucified on Calvary (Tidball 2001:120). The gospel says it in no uncertain terms that the one who was crucified on the cross is none other than the Son of God, the Son of Man, the King of the Jews, and the Christ (26:63-64; 27:37-44). Tidball (2001:121-132) highlights five themes that emerge in Matthew's passion narrative, each of which sheds light on the person of the crucified one. First, Jesus is the anticipated Messiah in whose death history comes to a climax – he fulfils prophetic Scripture. Secondly, he is the sacrificial victim who sheds sacrificial, innocent, covenant, cleansing blood and in this event there is the possibility of forgiveness. Thirdly, he is the innocent servant who accepts unjust suffering and in doing so bears the sins of others by suffering the death they deserved. Fourthly, Jesus Christ is the sovereign king who through his words demonstrated supreme control over what happened leading to the cross. And finally, he is the epoch-maker who inaugurates a new era, a new beginning, for all men and women by defeating the powers of sin and death through his death on the cross.

Matthew's primary emphasis is therefore the cross of the crucified Messiah. He wants our attention to be gripped by the fact that the man on the cross is the true Son of God, the heavenly Son of Man, the real king of the Jews, the anointed one, the Christ, the fulfiller of prophecy, the Saviour of men and women (Tidball 2001:121-134).



#### 2.4.2.2. Mark

Robert Gundry<sup>90</sup> (1993:1, 15), describes the Gospel of Mark as a straightforward apology for the Cross, for the shameful way in which the object of Christian faith and the subject of Christian proclamation died, and hence for Jesus as the Crucified One. The cross therefore dominates the portrait Mark paints of Christ and according to Tidball (2001:137-150) he emphasises four significant themes: Jesus is the suffering servant who bears away the sins of the world (10:45); the conquering king who defeats the oppressing powers that threaten our fallen world (15:2); the rejected son who enters the darkness of our lives and in a strange and mysterious way brings light to them (15:34); and the exemplary disciple who encourages us to go on carrying the cross until his new community is complete and we see him coming on the clouds of heaven (8:34-35).

With regards to the ‘suffering servant’ motif, the consensus among New Testament Scholars is that Jesus is referring to Isaiah 53 and casting himself in the role of the suffering servant who gives himself in redemptive suffering (2001:137). Redemptive suffering describes how the servant suffers to bear away the iniquities of others and gives his life as a ransom. His death therefore accomplished, achieved and effected salvation.

The conquering king motif speaks of power and victory. According to P.T. Forsyth in ‘Cruciality of the Cross’ (1997:38), Jesus is the crucified king who does not find his fate in the cross, but judges the world from it and brings his new kingdom into existence through it. When Jesus died on the cross, his resurrection vindicated him and his second coming will be his final vindication (2001:144).

The rejected son motif points to a Christ who is able to identify sympathetically with the darkness of human situations. In the cross of Christ, God enters into our human experience of darkness and for that reason there are no depths of experience to which men and women can sink to which God has not already plunged (2001:147). McGrath (1996:102) explains this in terms of how the cross illuminates experiences of suffering abandonment, powerlessness and hopelessness, culminating in death. Christ is able to share with us the pain of desertion, the

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<sup>90</sup> Professor Robert H. Gundry is a scholar-in-residence and professor emeritus of New Testament and Greek at Westmont College in Santa Barbara. Among his books are *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross*; *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church Under Persecution*; *Soma in Biblical Theology*; and *Jesus the Word according to John the Sectarian*

loneliness of suffering, the darkness of depression, and the bewilderment of circumstances and the agony of death because he has been there (2001:147). According to Nicholas Thomas Wright<sup>91</sup> (1992:45), Jesus not only shares our pain and enters our suffering; he in fact transforms it by his love, bringing light out of the darkness and life out of death.

Tidball (2001:148) explains the death of Jesus as a model for believers – an exemplary disciple. New Testament scholars believe that the Gospel of Mark was intended, at least in part, to encourage Roman believers to stay faithful to Christ in spite of the persecution they were experiencing. Mark does this by demonstrating to them that what they were experiencing is the norm for disciples of Jesus, and by presenting him in his sufferings as their pattern and example. The cross is therefore central to what it means to be a disciple. In fact, disciples are called to ‘deny themselves and take up their cross’ to follow Christ (8:34-35). According to the Pastor and Theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer<sup>92</sup> (19:79), disciples of Christ are to be cross-bearers.

### **2.4.3. Paul and the Cross**

There is no doubt that the cross dominates Paul’s theology in such a way that it becomes the defining reference point from which all else takes its cue (2001:184). As rare as talk of the salvific significance of the cross might be in the Gospels, the opposite is true of the Pauline letters. Paul turns repeatedly to the cross, often interpreting its significance as atoning (Green & Baker 2000:46). He recognized the death of Jesus on the cross as the saving event, not just for Jews but for the whole world. His death was therefore an event of momentous significance for all humankind. In his writings, Paul not only explores but also explains this event by employing different metaphors to describe the benefits of the cross. Paul never seems to tire of adding new images to his repertoire, each time tailoring his presentation of the significance of the death of Jesus to the needs of his audience in particular circumstances (Green & Baker 2000:58).

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<sup>91</sup> Professor Nicholas Thomas Wright (1948) is the Bishop of Durham in the Church of England and a leading British New Testament Scholar.

<sup>92</sup> His book *The Cost of Discipleship* attacks what he calls "cheap grace," meaning grace used as an excuse for moral laxity.

#### 2.4.3.1. The Cross as Undeserved Righteousness

In order to demonstrate how Paul unlocked the meaning of the cross in his epistles, Tidball (2001:184) identifies key passages where Paul teaches on the cross beginning with Romans 3:21-26. Martin Luther (in Tidball 2001:185) called this text ‘the chief point, and the very central place of the Epistle, and of the whole Bible’.

In this text, Paul speaks of the wonder of our salvation as it relates to the righteousness and grace of God. It tells us that as a result of Christ’s death sinful human beings are justified freely by God’s grace and are therefore brought into right standing before him (Tidball 2001:185-199). Tidball identifies the need for justification as twofold. Human sin has to be overcome, and divine anger has to be appeased, if God is to be reconciled to his people and live in harmony with them. The solution lies in the redemption that came through Jesus Christ dying on the cross (24). Paul uses three metaphors to describe the nature of this justification through the cross of Christ. The sinner is justified *freely, through ... redemption* and by the offering of *a sacrifice* of atonement.

Righteousness as understood by the Old Testament writers is closely connected with justice that makes the basic meaning legal and not ethical (Morris 1983:183). The Old Testament gives the procedure that ought in justice to be followed: ‘When men have a dispute, they are to take it to the court and the judges will decide the case, acquitting the innocent and condemning the guilty’ (Dt. 25:1). According to Morris (1983:184), the verb translated ‘acquitting’ could be rendered ‘they will justify. In other words justification and condemnation are set over against one another as contrasting legal terms.

In the context of the justification and condemnation of God, he is both accuser and judge and as judge he has devised a way to ensure that we who are rightly accused and therefore guilty of wrongdoing can be restored to a right relationship with him and declared free from all accusations without cost to ourselves (2001:193). Our acquittal can only take place because someone has stood in our place and met the demands of righteousness and Jesus did exactly that by offering his perfect life of obedience in exchange for our lives of sin (Tidball 2001:194).

The means by which God justifies is explained by the concept of redemption. First-century Christians knew what literal slavery was and some of them were literally slaves. Once purchased, the slaves became the property of their new owners. Their freedom could be obtained but only on payment of a ransom price, by which they could be redeemed (Tidball 2001:194). It is for freedom that Christ has set you free,' Paul wrote (Gal. 5:1). One of the ways the Christians spoke of freedom was to use the concept of redemption. Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us,' Paul writes, 'for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree" (Gal. 3:13). Paul is saying that Christ's death on the cross meant that he bore the curse that would otherwise have rested on us. He suffered in our stead. He took what was coming to us. He bore the curse that sinners incurred and this is viewed as a paying of the price, an act of redemption (Morris 1983:121).

From redemption, Paul also uses the concept of atonement, by which Tidball (2001:195) means, propitiation and not expiation. By propitiation, Morris (1983:152) writes, we are saying that God is angry when people sin and that, if they are to be forgiven, something must be done about that anger. We are saying further that the death of Christ is the means of removing the divine wrath from sinners. Only propitiation deals adequately with the wrath of God, which has been justly provoked by our sin (Tidball 2001:196).

Paul applies these concepts to the Christians by saying that: Our righteous status comes through faith or trust in Jesus (22). Our atonement comes through faith in his blood (25) and our justification depends on having faith in Jesus (26) (Morris 1988:182). In other words only faith in Christ enables us to appropriate justification personally. John Stott (1986:187) describes this faith as the eye that looks to Christ, the hand that lays hold of him, and the mouth that drinks the water of life.

#### **2.4.3.2. The Cross as Reconciliation**

Tidball (2001:216-17) links the parable of the prodigal son (Luke. 15:11-24) with Paul's teaching on reconciliation. Paul fills in the gaps and expands its horizons by emphasizing the critical importance of reconciliation in the parable. Tidball's point though is Paul's understanding of the cross of Christ as a work of reconciliation. The parable gives us in story form what Paul states and explains in his letters, that God the Father, longs for reconciliation, and, although he has good reason to do otherwise, he makes it possible. On this basis, Morris

(1983:132) contends that the concept of reconciliation is the best way of understanding the atonement.

In 2 Corinthians 5 where Paul expounds the theme of reconciliation most fully, it is clear that he does not unfold the theme in isolation from other perspectives on the cross (Tidball 2001:217). Even though reconciliation is at the center of this passage, clearly other categories are mentioned as well, for example, the work of Christ leads to a new creation (16-17). It is a vicarious substitution; he ‘died for all’ (14-15). He died as our ‘representative’ (14, 21), conveying what Mornar Hooker<sup>93</sup> (1990:13-41) contends is Paul’s key concept of the atonement, our interchange in Christ. His death was a sacrifice, namely, a sin offering (12). It leads to our forgiveness (19) and justification (19, 21).<sup>94</sup> But the idea of reconciliation is clearly centre stage, with others playing only supporting roles.

By reconciliation, Tidball (2001:220) has in mind the full and exact meaning of it, reconciliation that deals effectively with sin and does not side-step the issue of offence. It is always sin that arouses the wrath of God and that is a barrier in the way of good relations between God and man (Morris 1983:139). Paul’s reasoning here is that, if the cause of our broken relationship with God is sin and the result is alienation from God, then reconciliation can only be achieved by overcoming the obstacle of sin. Paul’s diagnosis of our condition makes it clear that we are incapable of doing anything to resolve the situation ourselves and therefore God takes the initiative in reconciling himself to us (2001:221). According to Howard Marshall<sup>95</sup> (1981:122), God’s act of reconciliation takes place prior to, and independently of, any human action: it was while we were still sinners that we were reconciled to God.’ All this he concludes, suggests that the act of reconciliation is primarily something done by God. Reconciliation was wrought on the cross before there was anything but evil in the hearts of sinners (Morris 1983:139).

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<sup>93</sup> Professor Mornar Hooker, a distinguished New Testament Scholar retired, until her retirement in 2002 was Professor of Divinity in the University of Cambridge.

<sup>94</sup> Tidball, p. 217.

<sup>95</sup> Dr Howard Marshall is Professor emeritus of New Testament exegesis at the University of Aberdeen in Scotland. He is a series editor of *The New International Greek Testament Commentary* and has also served in editorial roles for *The Book of Acts in Its First-Century Setting* and the *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*. Among his many scholarly books and commentaries are the volumes on the Epistles of John in the *New International Commentary on the New Testament* series, *Luke: Theologian and Historian*, and *I Believe in the Historical Jesus*.

What reconciliation is saying is that the root cause has been dealt with; it is not saying how. But the cross means that sin has been taken away, there is no longer any barrier to fellowship between man and God (Morris 1983:139). In other words God accomplished this reconciliation in Christ. According to Tidball (2001:222), God reconciles the world to himself in Christ and it was the cross that brought about this situation. Paul explains how the cross brings about reconciliation in terms of transference and substitution. According to Paul Barnett<sup>96</sup> (1977:307), as far as sinful people are concerned, the cross means that ‘God does not post to their accounts debts that are rightfully theirs, but instead charges the liability for them to the account of Jesus Christ – that is transference. Substitution is Christ becoming a sacrifice for sin – the sin of unrighteous people being laid upon him and his righteousness transferred to us. In other words, what Christ gives in exchange for sin to those whom he relieves of it is the right standing before God which he alone deserved, through his perfect obedience. In this way reconciliation is effected.

According to Tidball (2001:218) this reconciliation is effected not just from those who come to believe in him but for the whole cosmos. In other words, the cross brings about personal, ethnic and cosmic reconciliation. It is the one means by which God brings the total creation into harmony with himself. It is in this respect that Reconciliation defines the heart and the circumference of atonement. Tidball (2001:219) explains this in terms of restoration of both sinful human beings to a relationship of friendship with God and the universe to its right relationship with God. Both are affected by a gracious plan and act of God to reconcile the offending parties to him, the offended one. He never reconciles himself to us. We are always reconciled to him and by him. But this marvellous act is a fatal reconciliation, for it is brought about only through the death of his beloved Son (Tidball 2001:231).

The sheer diversity of interpretive categories or images used in these Pauline passages to describe the significance of Jesus’ death heralds something of the plethora of images you’re likely to come across in Pauline letters. Paul makes use of a rich variety of metaphors by way of comprehending the cross and encouraging both understanding and response among his

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<sup>96</sup> Professor Paul Barnett was the Anglican Bishop of North Sydney from 1990 until 2001. Before then he was Head of NT and OT of the Divinity Faculty, University of Sydney. He is author of many books including ‘The Two Faces of Jesus (1990).

varied audiences. According to Baker and Green (2000:62), this multiplicity raises a caution against moving too quickly to positing for Paul a single (or any one as the central) theory of the atonement or interpretation of Jesus' passion.

#### **2.4.3.3. The Cross as Victory**

Tidball, just like the rest of evangelical theologians, also makes use of Gustav Aulen's 'classic' idea of the atonement to explain the victory that is found in the cross of Christ. Whilst he agrees with the criticisms of Aulen's views, he also acknowledges how he has succeeded in resurrecting a neglected insight that has some secure basis in the New Testament (2001:249). That insight is the New Testament perspective of the cross as a triumph and victory. Stott (1986:227) argues that this was what the early Christians claimed of the Christ of the cross.

Tidball identifies Colossians 2:8-15 as a key text with regard to the theme of victory in the New Testament. In this letter Paul warns the Colossians of the hostile forces that seek to enslave them and then introduces Jesus and what he accomplished on the cross as God's answer to those hostile forces (9-15). Paul described the hostile forces as 'thrones or powers or rulers or authorities (8).' Tidball (2001:251) on account of the historical context of the letters takes these powers to mean the devil and all his minions, including demons, fallen angels, and evil and astral spirits. Not that this rules out the ability of these powers to work through corporate institutions and to organize structural evil in order to achieve their aims. What is clear in Paul's argument is that these powers are not only enslaving God's people but they are in opposition to God and must therefore be defeated.

In trying to explain how the work of Calvary delivers us from hostile powers that enslave us, Paul resorts to two images: First he speaks of the cross as cancelling our debts and, secondly, of it routing our enemies. Sin is pictured as a debt we owe and the cross not only addresses the problem of debt but cures it (Tidball 2001:253). And so on the cross, Christ cancelled our debt of sin, he took away the written code that was against us and nailed it to the cross (14). The debt we owe to God has been eradicated once and for all by being nailed to the cross (Tidball 2001:257). When Christ was nailed to the cross, so was our bond of debt. God declared it irrevocably cancelled.



According to Ronald Wallace<sup>97</sup> (1981:29) the cross not only had to cancel out the works of Satan, but dealt with Satan himself and his subordinates too. In other words not only was our sin dealt with but our enemies also. So Christ, *having disarmed the powers and authorities . . . made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross* (15). In the death of Christ, hostile powers that enslave us have been rendered powerless, reduced to being captives themselves, and totally defeated (2001:258-59). The picture is that of Christ as a victorious Roman general leading his troops into the city on a victory parade. The cross is like the chariot on which the victor rode in triumph.

Stott (1983:231-239) explains this victory in terms of Christ, having defeated the powers that imprison us, opening the prison doors and letting the captives go free. It is in this sense that the gospel is about announcing the triumph of Christ to unbelievers and believers alike, so that the former may come into an initial experience of the liberating power of the cross and the latter may continue to experience the fullness of the liberation Christ brings (2001:260).

#### **2.4.3.4. The Cross as Sacrifice**

According to Tidball (2001:264), the letter to the Hebrews is known to be the most sustained piece of writing on the subject of the atonement in the New Testament. Here the cross of Christ is presented as displaying the perfect/superior high priest, providing the ultimate sacrifice and creating a new and superior covenant. The main concern of the letter is the fact that Jesus was a sacrificial victim whose blood was shed and that the difference between the death of Christ and the rituals of the Day of Atonement accounts for the superiority of the sacrifice offered by Christ.

According to the writer of Hebrews Jesus' death not only meets but surpasses the standard set by the blood sacrifices of the Old Testament, which became the yardstick by which all other sacrifices were measured (Tidball 2001:267). In order to show the effectiveness of the Christ's sacrifice, the writer establishes the inadequacies of the blood sacrifices as epitomized by the Day of Atonement.

In his commentary on Hebrews, Philip Edgcumbe Hughes (1977:389-394) draws out four facts that make the Old Testament system ineffective and inadequate. Firstly, the law that

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<sup>97</sup> Ronald S. Wallace is the former Professor of Theology at Columbia Theological Seminary in the USA.



embodies the ceremonial regulations of the Day of Atonement is only a shadow of the good things that are coming – not the realities themselves. The Day of Atonement points to the reality revealed in the sacrifice of Christ. Secondly, the Day of Atonement was inadequate because it had to be repeated endlessly year after year. Thirdly, its achievement is inadequate, instead of transforming individuals; they're simply an annual reminder of sins. And fourthly, the sacrificial element of the old covenant was the blood of bulls and goats and was unqualified to serve as a substitute for man.

When these four negative comments on the Day of Atonement, and by default, all the other sacrifices of the Old Testament era are put together, they are just as ineffective as has been already demonstrated. The cross is far more superior in its effectiveness. The writer of Hebrews (Tidball 2001:270) offers a fourfold case for the superiority of Christ's sacrifice. His is a superior and effective sacrifice because of how he lived – he offered a life of total moral obedience to God, what he established – he inaugurated a new covenant, whom he affected – he creates a holy people, cleansed from sin, sanctified in Christ and set apart to serve as God's exclusively owned people. And finally his sacrifice is effective because of what characterises it – he completed an unrepeatable act, once and for all. The sacrifice of Christ needed to be offered only once.

Shifting from the imagery of the sacrifice offered, to the priest who offers it, the writer of Hebrews describes Jesus as both the perfect sacrifice and a superior high priest. His superiority is painted against a background of the ineffective priests of the Old Testament. They were ineffective because they could never claim to have dealt with sin or to have finished their task. Jesus only ever offered one sacrifice and it was the sacrifice to end all sacrifices. F.F. Bruce (1964:241), in his commentary on Hebrews gives a much defined summary of the effectiveness of Christ's sacrifice:

Three outstanding effects are thus ascribed to the sacrifice of Christ: by it his people have had their conscience cleansed from guilt; by it they have been equipped to approach God as acceptable worshippers; by it they have experienced fulfilment of what was promised in earlier days, being brought into that perfect relation to God which is involved in the new covenant.

The shift here is from presenting the cross as a sacrifice of atonement, to one that inaugurates a covenant. In other words, the cross performs an indispensable role in the inauguration of the new covenant, the type that brings about inner transformation in God's people, enabling them to fulfil their side of the agreement – willing and voluntary submission to God's law (Tidball 2001:276). The cross therefore atones for past sins and at the same time initiates a new covenant that keeps us in a place of relationship with God, what Tidball (276) calls a 'state of forgiveness before God'.

And so viewed from the perspective of sacrifice, priesthood and covenant, the crucified Christ is an effective sacrifice which abolishes the need for any other sacrifice, a superior high priest who eclipses all priestly predecessors and initiator of a new covenant that surpasses all other covenants. The sacrifice offered by Jesus is understood by Paul to entail the final solution to the problem of the human bias toward sin. What is at stake, according to Baker & Green (2000:63), is the mediation of restored relationship, the mediation of God's Holy presence among those whose holiness is lacking. In Israel's Scriptures, one formidable medium for accomplishing restoration was sacrifice, and it is within the matrix of the Old Testament conception of sacrifice that Paul develops the substitutionary nature of the cross of Christ – his substitution for humanity before God and in the face of God's justice, and also his substitution for God in the face of human sin

## **2.5. Summary**

Derek Tidball does a very detailed survey of the cross from the Old Testament to the New Testament and in doing so develops the thesis that the cross of Christ stands at the very heart of the Christian faith, manifesting the love of God, effecting salvation from sin, conquering hostile forces of evil and inviting reconciliation with God (2001:20). In developing this thesis he acknowledges that this very complex work of God cannot be captured in its fullness from one standpoint alone, and even less in one theory.

Tidball however, contends for the classic evangelical position of atonement (penal substitutionary view) as the only adequate basis for Christian spirituality. He argues that the atoning work of Christ lies at the heart of Evangelical Christianity and for that reason alone, evangelical spirituality is primarily life that finds its origin in the cross and is lived in grateful response to it. Derek makes it very clear that as sinners we deserve to die as the penalty for

sin and to bear God's wrath against sin and for that reason we are separated from God and in bondage to sin. God's solution is in that Christ died as a sacrifice for us in order to pay the penalty of death that we deserved. To remove us from the wrath of God that we deserved, Christ died as a propitiation for our sins. To overcome our separation from God Christ provided reconciliation for us and brought us back into fellowship with God. To deliver us from bondage to sin and to the kingdom of Satan, Christ died to deliver us from this dominion.

## **2.6. Conclusion**

What is obvious from the exposition of Calvin and Tidball is that, even though the pages of the New Testament and the landscape of historical theology are replete with many and diverse metaphors for rendering plain the meaning of the cross both in and outside Christian communities, the affirmation that "Christ died for our sins" has, in the last two centuries, increasingly been articulated in the form of the doctrine of "penal substitution" or "satisfaction": Jesus satisfies the wrath of God by enduring the punishment we deserved on account of our sin. In fact, for many evangelical Christians "penal substitutionary atonement" interprets the significance of Jesus' death fully, completely, without remainder. It is the very heart of this many-sided atonement. Calvin acknowledges the complexity of the cross by blending the different images and motifs and allows the different themes to overlap.

The central metaphors used by the two theologians are all contextual, drawn from the battlefield (Victory), the altar (Sacrifice) and the law court (Justification), all of them, expressions of the meaning of the life, death and resurrection of Christ. In other words they have been drawn from the immediate context in which the understanding of the cross is sought because metaphors work within cultures where a shared encyclopaedia can be assumed. George Carey (1986:79), a former Archbishop of Canterbury, identifies in Paul's theology of the cross a diversity of metaphors and describes them as: (1) Religious metaphor (Sacrifice), (2) Commercial metaphor (Redemption), (3) Political metaphor (Reconciliation), (4) Legal metaphor (Justification).

The application of all this is that each culture and generation needs to contextually identify or create metaphors or ways of conceptualising and communicating the message of the cross. This must be done not because the message of the cross has changed but the context has. The

obvious challenge for the African context where this message has come packaged in a foreign culture is to carefully identify metaphors that will effectively help the African Christian to conceptualise the meaning and significance of the cross of Christ. Our task is therefore to faithfully and with Biblical integrity consider African images that will represent the work of Christ in our context and effectively bring others into a more full awareness of the saving significance of Jesus' death.

And so, far from emphasising one model at the expense of all others, Evangelical Christianity paints an all inclusive understanding of atonement with the idea of substitution constituting the core. One image or model is simply inadequate to communicate all that God has done and continues to do through the cross. The various doctrines and theories must be viewed as complementary to one another rather than as exclusive alternative. In this regard no theology is final and irreformable, not even that of the New Testament writers. Like the church itself, Christian theology is always in process.

This is important to highlight considering the emergence of new theories of atonement during the twentieth century, especially those that question evangelical thinking on the subject. The most important to the African context, especially African realities of poverty, disease, starvation etc, is obviously liberation theology (Gutierrez) which calls for the application of theological truths to human situations to improve them, the realisation of love for God in one another and the salvation as wholeness (Webster 1994:637)

My objection to liberation theology is because of its reorientation towards social and political liberation, Gutierrez's commitment to a single world history and the way he minimises the role of Christ on the cross and at the same time exaggerates the part we play in salvation by our involvement in the task of humanising the world. Nevertheless Liberation theology forces evangelicals to admit to having isolated the cross of Christ from contemporary situations and problems. According to Archbishop Carey (1986:171), Evangelicals are known to have thrown a cultural cloak of privatisation around the cross and have not allowed its radical message to affect all we do and say. Evangelicals are therefore challenged to formulate a doctrine of the cross which includes within it a commitment to the world and to the task of bringing Christ's healing grace to the poor, starving and oppressed.

In his article *Salvation or Liberation*, Nürnberger (1990:106) confirms Carey's sentiments when he expresses his discontent with some of the theological traditions:

The fact that I deal with this theme at all, is a symptom of my frustration with evangelical theology, with liberation theology and with the seeming impossibility to get the message of the Bible across in a situation of social conflict.

This quote presupposes inadequacy in the theories of salvation put forward by both evangelical and liberation theologians. David Bosch shares this dissatisfaction and calls for a new reflection on our perception of salvation even if it means revisiting our biblical view of salvation. This common unhappiness indicates that there is a need for a new concept of salvation which is more versatile and comprehensive; so as to respond to concrete human needs whatever form they take.

The classical theory of salvation has been challenged because of its alleged inadequacy to respond to all human needs. For Bosch it is inadequate precisely because it focuses either on the pre-existence and incarnation of Christ, or on his death on the cross, or on his ethical life and ministry. The emphasis is rarely put on all the three (1995:399). For liberation theologians it spiritualises salvation and privatises the work of Christ on the cross. Salvation is confined to a personal relationship between God and the sinner. Consequently, it does not solve the concrete problems experienced in concrete situations. It is dualistic, other-worldly and irrelevant (Maimela 1987:88ff). They call for "salvation as total-wellbeing in community with others" (Sutphin 1977:41).

A relevant concept of salvation for Africans must of necessity be wide in scope so as to be able to liberate them from their fear of evil, as personified in witches, sorcerers and wizards etc. It must be capable of liberating Africans from the consequences of sinful acts such as inferiority complexes, poverty, oppression, exploitation, sickness, social disharmony, social tensions, the dependence syndrome and death, particularly premature death. It must be a salvation which liberates African people from all kinds of material and psychological misfortunes in this world for a better life here and now and not only for the world on the other side of the grave.

The consequences of the Christ-event must become a reality in the present life of Africans and Christ's words in Luke 4:18ff must become true in their concrete situations of incompleteness. The redemptive work of Christ must bring shalom, a total wellbeing in body, mind and spirit to the African. It must affect the life of the individual and of the community.

For me this is a call to return to the scriptures because the problem seems to be our selective use of scriptures on the one hand and our disregard of some aspects of human problems on the other. In the words of Nurnberger:

The most intractable problem which we face in soteriology today is the failure of the Christian faith to see the comprehensiveness of the problem. We tend to isolate certain aspects of the human predicament and absolutize them at the expense of others. Spiritual salvation, for instance, is pitted against political liberation and vice versa. As a result we find it difficult to come to grips with the great dilemmas and challenges of our times. (1995:10-11)

This challenge is the basis of my application of the cross of Christ to the African (Shona) context in chapter five. My concern will be to take seriously what both Calvin and Tidball seem to be saying about the complexity of the cross of Christ and how one image or model is simply inadequate to communicate all that God has done and continues to do through the cross.

## CHAPTER 3

### Christ and Culture – A Western contribution.

#### 3.1. Introduction

History reveals that one of the constant struggles of Christianity, both individually and corporately, is with culture. Where should we stand? Inside the culture? Outside? Ignore it? Isolate ourselves from it? Should we try to transform it? The church has struggled to identify with contemporary culture without becoming either isolated from it or identical to it. This struggle is an obvious result of the distinction between Christianity and culture necessitated by the universality of the gospel. Christianity can exist in any culture, but each culture will have certain beliefs, values and practices which contradict Christianity.

Scripture portrays God not only as the creator of physical culture but also originator of social culture. He instituted the foundations of marriage, work and government. God realized that it was “not good for man to be alone, so he made a helper suitable for him” (Gen 2:18, 20-24), thereby God instituted the marriage relationship. He gave man responsibility to take care for the garden (Gen 2:15), and even after the fall, man was commanded to work by the sweat of his brow (Gen 3:19), thereby laying the foundations for work. God created man to rule over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, all livestock, and all the earth (Gen 1:26), thus establishing government.

God therefore placed humanity in a cultural context right at the beginning of human events when he gave to our first parents a ‘cultural mandate’ not only to procreate but also have dominion over all creation. It therefore goes without saying that culture has been and remains integral to all human experience and God as creator, must be acknowledged as sovereign over every aspect of culture. Since the main interest of this thesis is to critically assess the salvation significance of the cross of Christ in Shona culture, the general relationship of Christ and culture is key to that assessment. This is especially so because in the previous chapter, evangelical Christianity is described as nothing but the outcome of the response of faith of the early church to the saving presence of God in Jesus Christ.

In the Christian church and amongst theologians much has been said about the relationship of Christ and culture, especially the demands thereof but there has never been any universal agreement with regard to the answer. What has been generally accepted is that there is not

one but many answers and responses. Conflict between the demands of Christ and culture is neither new nor rare. From the early Christian martyrs of Rome to the Confessing Church<sup>98</sup> of Nazi Germany, Christians have paid the price of rejecting the State's pretensions to supreme authority.<sup>99</sup>

The focus of this chapter is therefore the relationship of Christ and culture as understood by two western theologians, Richard Niebuhr and Charles Kraft. In 1951, Yale professor Richard Niebuhr outlined five positions Christians have historically taken on the issue. Thirty years later, Fuller Theological Seminary Missiologist Charles Kraft said that the religion versus culture debate was not unique to Christianity. He reduced Niebuhr's positions to four, combining two of the categories.

For both theologians, the investigation is not just about religion in general but specifically the Christian faith. This is because where ever Christianity has been accepted it is engaged in constructing norms for the social order of the believers in community. That therefore concerns the relationship between the generative symbol of the Christian faith and the ambient culture that forms the framework in which believers practice the faith. Niebuhr (1951:29-30) defines the issue even more succinctly:

Christians living with Christ in their cultures . . . are forever being challenged to abandon all things for the sake of God; and forever being sent back into world to teach and practice all the things that have been commanded them. Given these two complex realities – Christ and culture – an infinite dialogue must develop in the Christian conscience and the Christian community. In his single-minded direction toward God, Christ leads men away from the temporality and pluralism of culture. Yet the Son of God is himself a child of a religious culture and sends his disciples to tend his lambs and sheep, who cannot be guarded without cultural work.

So either Christ is represented as distinct from culture and in opposition to the world, or he is represented as engaged by culture or both. The question of Christ and culture fits Christianity with its rich tradition of differentiation between components and institutions of culture and

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<sup>98</sup> See Veith, *Modern Fascism*, chapter 4.

<sup>99</sup> Of course, oppression has also gone in the opposite direction, when Christians have wrongly taken up the sword and tried to convert non-Christians by force.



faith. For example, between emperor and pope, between church and state or between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness. Niebuhr and Kraft are therefore addressing an age-old, yet very relevant question. However, the central question is: How are Christ and culture related in the life of the Christian and the church at large?

### 3.1.1. Background to Niebuhr's Typology.

Richard Niebuhr (1894-1962) has been described by many scholars as one of the leading Christian thinkers of the last century and his remarkable work on Christ and culture as a kind of summing-up of many decades of theological reflection.<sup>100</sup> George Marsden,<sup>101</sup> in his paper 'Christianity and Cultures: Transforming Niebuhr's Categories', sets Niebuhr's work on 'Christ and culture' in the context of a debate that has since been forgotten. After the debacle of Nazism, the holocaust, fascism, the horrors of World War II, and the rapidly rising threat of international communism, American and British cultural leaders were engaged in intense debates over the future of Western civilization. Was there any way of strengthening its moral base so that it could meet the challenges of the technological age? How would the civilization avoid falling back into barbarous tribalism or succumbing to pseudo-scientific Marxist moralism?

Marsden goes on to describe how prominently Christianity featured in these debates. While some cultural leaders argued for liberal, secular science as the only way to build a civilization free from prejudice and irrational tolerance, prominent spokesmen pushed Christianity and the Judeo-Christian tradition as the best basis for a truly tolerant and liberal civilization.<sup>102</sup> For people like Niebuhr, so argues Marsden (1999:3), totalitarianism abroad and racism at home provided the most immediate context for thinking about reforms that a progressive Christianity might bring to civilization. Tolerance was therefore a central issue. While Niebuhr had no illusions about building the Kingdom of God on earth, he favoured a unified civilization to which Christian influences could make positive contributions.

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<sup>100</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (London: Faber and Faber, Ltd., n.d.), reproduced in expanded form the series of lectures the author gave at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Austin, Texas, in January, 1949.

<sup>101</sup> George Marsden is the Francis A. McAndrey Professor of History at the University of Notre Dame and the visiting prof of Church History at St Mary's College, University of St Andrews.

<sup>102</sup> See for example C.T. McIntyre, *God History, History, and Historians.* 'An Anthology of Modern Christian Views of History' (New York: Oxford University Press. 1977).

It is in the context of this debate that Niebuhr responds to accusations that Christianity has no positive contribution to make to civilization or culture (he uses the two terms more or less interchangeably). In the final analysis, it was the secular proponents of a healthy tolerant civilization that set the terms for Niebuhr's analysis. Those who despised Christianity elevated culture as supreme and Christianity was a threat to its health. They accused Christians for being so heavenly minded that they were of no earthly good (irresponsible citizens) and intolerant. The solution, according to the critics of Christianity was that Christianity should be subordinate to cultural ideals and allow progressive cultural ideals to reign supreme.

Niebuhr responds to this secular culturalist critique by developing his famous typology. He identifies five distinct motifs that describe how Christians typically have related to their cultures. The five motifs form a sliding scale from total rejection – Christ against culture – to total acceptance; a commitment to Christ subsumed within a prevailing culture, with three middle positions coming to a peak with Christ transforming culture. Each type is discussed with sympathetic but also critical balance, clearly reflecting a lifetime of reading and reflection on his own religious tradition and dialogue with other Christian theologians<sup>103</sup>.

### 3.1.2. Methodological Framework

At least officially,<sup>104</sup> Niebuhr's approach to the problem of Christ and culture is one of methodological pluralism. That is, he thinks there is a range of typical answers to the question, but he does not claim they are exhaustive, or that they are mutually exclusive (Niebuhr 1951:231). Rather, each of the answers is sometimes necessary, but also incomplete, and the final truth of the matter resides in the interaction of all the views:

Christ as living Lord is answering the question in the totality of history and life in a fashion which transcends the wisdom of all his interpreters yet employs their partial insights and their necessary conflicts (Niebuhr 1951:2).

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<sup>103</sup> In discussing Niebuhr's work I have also consulted the book of the Reformed Ecumenical Council on Facing the Challenge of Secularism (1991), Leslie Newbigin's Foolishness to the Greeks (Eerdmans, 1994) and the work of Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh, Truth is not what it used to be (InterVarsity Press, 1996)

<sup>104</sup> Officially, because as we shall see, Niebuhr seems to regard one of the five answers as an inclusive synthesis of the other four, retaining their strengths but avoiding their weaknesses, and thus, in fact, closer to the real truth.

Niebuhr (1951:232) claims it would be a “usurpation of the Lordship of Christ” to think that one had found the one true answer, yet at the same time argues that each individual Christian has the duty of finding his or her own answers when making specific decisions.

### 3.1.3. Christ and culture?

Niebuhr identifies Christ and culture as two points of reference that Christians make in relating faith and ethics. By making this distinction, Niebuhr makes a very important assumption, that Christ is to some degree an independent, culture-transcending element that can become one pole of a dialogue. The problem for Niebuhr is therefore handily stated in terms of Christ and culture or the enduring problem of Christ and culture (Niebuhr 1951:1-44).

In his article, ‘H. Richard Niebuhr Revisited and Revised’ Kenneth Cauthen<sup>105</sup> (1996:1) summarises Niebuhr’s logic as follows:

If Christ is in the past and yet every subsequent generation of believers lives in a moving cultural present, a distinction has to be made between Christ and culture. And so on the one hand, Christ is available to us in the New Testament and in trajectories of interpretation that constitute the Christian tradition. In deciding how they shall live in the world today Christians can consult those authoritative sources that witness to the person, the words, and the deeds of Jesus, the Biblical Christ. On the other hand, reflection upon the beliefs, values, and practices that prevail in the contemporary social order in which they find their worldly citizenship yields another point of reference, “culture”, which can be brought into conversation with “Christ.”

The important point that Cauthen (1996:1) is making here is that the conversation is between part (Christ) and whole (culture) or as he puts it, between Christ and not-Christ within a larger cultural totality that contains both. Christ, though an identifiable component in the dialogue, exists wholly within culture. In other words, culture is the all-inclusive reality that contains a sub-dialogue within itself among those of its members who have a loyalty to Christ

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<sup>105</sup> Kenneth Cauthen is the John Price Crozer Griffith *emeritus* Professor of Theology, Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School, Rochester, New York. He is the author of eighteen books, including *The Impact of American Religious Liberalism*, which was the standard text in the field for a quarter of a century.

(Niebuhr 1951:39). Hence, the dialogue between “Christ” and “culture” is not so much between two independent factors outside of each other or at opposite ends of a polarity. Christ is one element within culture that affects how believers relate to their social environment in so far as it may contain Christian influences, other-than-Christ elements, or what they take to be contrary-to-Christ values. According to Cauthen (1996:3), the problem is not one of Christ and culture because the only Christ is a Christ within some culture, known, believed in, and followed by selves and communities who exhibit various ways of relating themselves to the social and cultural milieu that inescapably affects them. Reference to Christ by believers takes place within and is part of the larger cultural reality.

The evidence of Cauthen’s argument about Niebuhr’s logic lays the basis for the ‘contextualization’ debate as we will see further in this thesis. All access to Christ is mediated through culture. No direct perception is possible that transcends either the culture in which Jesus appeared or the cultural context of the believer. Christ always walks among us in some cultural garment. While we never encounter a culturally unclothed Christ, it might nevertheless be argued that Christ is not identical with the apparel that we can distinguish between them (Cauthen 1996:2). An argument can however be made that while in some limited sense that distinction can be made, efforts to do so not so much reveal a naked Christ as dress him in another outfit looking like the one worn by the interpreters. Furthermore, the reality of Christ and the interpretation of that reality are far more interwoven, organic, indissoluble, and far more difficult to distinguish than are Jesus and his attire.

#### **3.1.4. Jesus Christ?**

In explaining what he means by ‘Christ’ Niebuhr (1951:11-21) has already argued that Christ is an identifiable point of reference who can easily be distinguished from all others. He is the Jesus of the New Testament and cannot be confused with “a Socrates, a Plato or an Aristotle, a Confucius, or a Mohammed, or even with Amos or Isaiah.” The Christ of the New Testament is a particular “person with definite teachings, a definite character, and definite fate (Niebuhr 1951:13).” In this debate, Niebuhr therefore speaks of the normative character of one cultural person (Jesus) whose essential character is given by His radical theocentrism, the fact that His love, hope and humility are all primarily directed to God the Father in heaven:

As Son of God He points away from the many values of the our social life to the One who alone is good (Niebuhr 1951:28).

Yet at the same time, Christ is mediator between God the Father and humanity:

Because he loves the Father with the perfection of human Eros, therefore he loves men with the perfection of divine agape, since God is agape (Niebuhr 1951:28).

This duality in Christ grounds a corresponding duality in Christian response. Robert Kolb (1999:449),<sup>106</sup> speaking for Lutherans says that Lutherans express this by saying that our faith has both a vertical dimension (directed toward God) and a horizontal dimension (directed toward neighbour). Thus, any adequate account of the question of Christ and culture needs to emphasize both the fact that Christ thaws us beyond this world so that, in the biblical sense, He hates the world (and requires us to do likewise), and the fact that He loves us and enjoins us to love others here and now in the world (Menuge 1999:4).<sup>107</sup>

### 3.1.5. Culture?

Niebuhr realises the importance of defining “culture” in a way which has universal applicability. In other words nothing should enter the definition that restricts it to a particular range of times or places. That explains why his definition is very abstract. He defined culture as that total process of human activity and the total result of such activity. It is the “artificial, secondary environment” which man superimposes on the natural and it comprises language, habits, ideas, beliefs, customs, social organization, inherited artefacts, technical processes, and values (Niebuhr 1951:32).

A contemporary of Niebuhr, T.S. Eliot (1949:100) wrote that culture “may be described simply as that which makes life worth living.” Emil Brunner (1948:62), a theologian, stated “that culture was materialisation of meaning.” Donald Bloesch (1987:54), another theologian,

<sup>106</sup> Robert Kolb, “Luther on the Two Kinds of Righteousness: Reflections on His Two-Dimensional Definition of Humanity at the Heart of His Theology,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 13:4 (Winter 1999), 449-466. Robert Kolb (Ph.D., University of Wisconsin, Madison) is Missions Professor of Systematic Theology at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis. He is the author of numerous books and essays and served as the co-editor of *The Sixteenth Century Journal* from 1994 to 1997.

<sup>107</sup> Dr Angus Menuge. *Christ and Culture in Dialogue*. St Louis: Concordia Academic Press. 1999. Dr Menuge is a professor in philosophy and computer science at Concordia, a Lutheran school in Wisconsin. Through the Concordia Theological Seminary, he is a member of the Cranach Institute, which aims to show that “Christian ideas, emerging out of a Biblical World View, can challenge the weakness of secularism and offer constructive alternatives grounded in the truth of God’s Word.”

says that culture “is the task appointed to humans to realize their destiny in the world in service to the glory of God.” An anthropologist, E. Adamson Hoebel (1966:5), believes that culture “is the integrated system of learned behaviour patterns which are characteristic of the members of a society and which are not the result of biological inheritance.”

All of these definitions can be combined to include the world views, actions, and products of a given community. Taken together, the cultural acts and products of those acts constitute what Schrottenboer (1998:316)<sup>108</sup> has called “human civilization.’ This means that culture can only be a communal task and therefore no one person or generation alone can produce a culture. Culture is a product that brings together the work of past and present generations. Niebuhr (1951:48-49) suggests that culture in this sense is what the New Testament writers meant by “the world.”

According to Niebuhr’s (1951:32-34) summation, culture in its complexity consists of both human achievements and values of the past and present generations. While all human achievements are designed for an end or ends, the values with which they are concerned are predominantly those of the good for man (Niebuhr 1951:32-34). Culture in all its forms is in fact concerned with the temporal and material realization of values and for that reason cultural activity is almost as much concerned with the conservation of values as with their realization (1951:35-37).

Niebuhr argues that the values a culture seeks to realize in any time or place are many in number and so we deal with the continuities of civilization, the givens of the social order (1951:38). Now, the issue presents itself blatantly: how does Christ relate to the enduring artefacts of human society. It is within this framework of the given definitions of culture that Niebuhr proposes five models of the relation of Christ to culture.

In a now classic statement of this relationship Niebuhr argues for an infinite dialogue in the Christian conscience and the Christian community on the complex realities of Christ and culture. Niebuhr (1951:39) explains the two complex realities this way:

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<sup>108</sup> Dr Paul G. Schrottenboer, is a long term member of the Theological Commission, WEF, coordinates the Evangelical-Roman Catholic Dialogue and was formerly Executive Director of the Reformed Ecumenical Synod.

In his single-minded direction toward, Christ leads men away from the temporality and pluralism of culture. In its concern for the conservation of the many values of the past, culture rejects the Christ who bids men rely on grace. Yet the Son God is himself child of a religious culture, and sends his disciples to tend his lambs and sheep, who cannot be guarded without cultural work.

### 3.2. Niebuhr's Typology

Niebuhr uses the working definition of "Christ" and "culture" above to explore five answers which seem to have recurred through history, suggesting great representatives of each one, though he admits that none of these people fits neatly into just one of the categories.

#### 3.2.1. Christ Against Culture: Radical Tension.

The best place to understand Niebuhr's first category is in the context of the early post-apostolic church. On the one hand they had in their possession the New Testament canon. On the other hand they experienced oppression as a minority in a totalitarian empire with its impressive culture, its empire worship and its pervasive polytheism. During the same time there were four books, in addition to the New Testament writings that were in circulation: *The Teaching of the Twelve; the Shepherd of Hermes; the Epistle of Barnabas and The First Epistle of Clement* (Schrotenboer 1998:318)<sup>109</sup>. These books, according to Schrotenboer, presented Christianity as a way of life separate from contemporary culture. Considering what the church was going through, there was scarcely no time to think about culture, much less to engage in it. Christians often thought of themselves as a new race, distinct from the Jews and Gentiles and their expectation was for a speedy return of Christ. In other words, culture and Christ were viewed as incompatible. Their expectation was for a speedy return of Christ.

It is in this context that the "Christ against culture" view is presented as the most radical of all the Christ and culture answers. Niebuhr (1951:45) describes this type in terms of the opposition between Christ and culture. Culture is invariably anti-Christ, seduces Christians from a radical discipleship, and allies itself with society's power structures to assault the

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<sup>109</sup> The late theologian, Dr. Paul G. Schrotenboer (1923-1998) was for 25 years the first general secretary of the Reformed Ecumenical Council (then called the Reformed Ecumenical Synod).



faithful. Andrew Sandlin (2002), the President of the Centre for Cultural Leadership calls this ‘cultural abandonment.’<sup>110</sup> Whatever may be the customs of the society in which the Christian lives, and whatever the human achievements it conserves, Christ is seen as opposed to them. The world is seen as corrupt and the Church must do all that it can do to remain untainted. Christ, whose sole authority is uncompromisingly affirmed in this view confronts men with the challenge of an ‘either-or’ decision: for him and against culture, or for culture and against him (1951:40-41).<sup>111</sup> Culture is viewed as fallen and therefore separation from it is seen as necessary in order to give absolute loyalty to Christ.

According to Niebuhr (1951:51-55), historical proponents of this view have included Tertullian, Tolstoy, and the Mennonites. Tertullian (165-216), the North African upheld the absolute authority of Jesus Christ as Lord and rejected culture because sin resided in culture, it was inherently sinful. A servant of Christ should not be engaged in commerce. The philosophers of Greece had nothing in common with the ‘disciples of heaven’. Jerusalem and Athens had nothing in common. It is therefore not surprising that the early advocates of Christ against culture promoted monasticism to protect themselves against the evils of the world. Later, advocates would as far as possible flee from the world. Schrottenboer (1998:318) notes that, contrary to what one might expect, the monasteries, their places of refuge, became the preservers of culture at a time when wide-spread chaos reigned in Europe.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the great Russian novelist, Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910) is another clear-cut example of anti-cultural Christianity (Niebuhr 1951:56-65). Deeply impressed with the meaninglessness of life and the tawdriness of the values of the society in which he lived, he militated, as in *The Death of Ivan Illich*, against culture. The evil with which people contend, he said, is to be found in society, not in the individual and for that reason there is no such thing as good government, and the churches have become self-centred organizations that are far removed from the Christianity of Jesus Christ (Niebuhr 1951:60-62). Tolstoy (1984:211) therefore went so far as to claim that:

The Christian is independent of every human authority by the fact that he/she regards the divine law of love, implanted in the soul of every man, and brought before his/her consciousness by Christ, as the sole guide of his life and others also.

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<sup>110</sup> Andrew Sandlin in *Christian Culture*, A publication of the Center for Cultural Leadership, August 2002.

<sup>111</sup> See also, D. Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-culturally*, 79.



On the basis of this radical view, ‘Tolstoy (1984:230-31) consistently argued that:

“All state obligations are against the conscience of a Christian-the oath allegiance, taxes, law proceedings, and military service”.

These strong convictions forced Leo Tolstoy to leave his wife and nine children, sell his extensive property and seek to live a very simple, self-sufficient life, close to nature. According to Niebuhr, he not only stated this radical position as vehemently and consistently as Tertullian but he also became a ‘crusader against culture’ under the banner of the law of Christ (Niebuhr 1951:60)

This view encourages the separation of Christians from culture, either individually, as in Tolstoy’s case, or collectively, as in the case of monasticism. Niebuhr is quick to acknowledge the integrity of those following Christ against Culture in their courageous witness and sometimes martyrdom under evil governments, and in the social reforms they have thereby provoked (Menuge 1999:5). They are a reminder to the Christian community of the radical and total Lordship of Christ over and against all other lords, but they fail by restricting his Lordship to an arbitrarily limited sector of human life. The most radical Christianity has often led to an abandonment of the essence of Christianity, as in the Quaker enthronement of private conscience above Scriptural revelation, and Tolstoy’s substitution of the scriptural and historical Christ with a “spirit” immanent in Buddha, Jesus, Confucius, and himself (Niebuhr 1959:40-41, 45-82)

The most devastating objection of all comes from classic orthodoxy theology.<sup>112</sup> In order for culture to be radically rejected in favour of Christ, logic requires that Christ Himself is not a part of culture. This leads, however, to a purely spiritual understanding of Christ which denies His role in creation and His incarnation in history (Niebuhr 1951:81). In fact, Christ affirmed the world by making it and reaffirmed the fallen world including culture by becoming one of us, a specific cultural being (Hebrews 2:14-18). Since we are to follow Christ in all things, and Christ has a cultural dimension, we must follow him in that dimension as well.

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<sup>112</sup> Yoder, however, casts doubt on the orthodoxy of Niebuhr’s appeal to the Trinity. See especially Yoder, “How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned,” 61-65.

### 3.2.2. Christ OF Culture: Accommodation

This model is just as old as the ‘Christ against culture’ model, going back to the Gnostics of St John’s day. According to Schrotenboer (1988:320), both models remained until the 19<sup>th</sup> century somewhat on the periphery of the church. They point to two polarities, on the one hand, the segregation of religion from culture and on the other, integration of religion with culture. Niebuhr sees these first two types as extremes on a continuum with the following three types falling between them. Niebuhr (1951:41-42) calls the next three types “the church of the centre” - three mediating positions which in his analysis agree with each other in seeking to maintain the great differences between the two extremes and in undertaking to hold them together in some unity. They are distinguished from each other by the manner in which each attempts to combine the two authorities. If the advocates of Christ against culture posited their antithesis, the promoters of the Christ of culture accommodated Christ to culture. The former view stressed the difference; the latter the similarity.

Menuge (1999:7), in his re-examination of Niebuhr’s Christ and culture, calls the advocates of this position ‘cultural Christians’ and they tend to look past the parts of culture that are not in harmony with the gospel of Christ. This is basically what Niebuhr (1951:83) means about this position when he says, “on the one hand they interpret culture through Christ, regarding those elements in it as most important which are most accordant with his work and person; on the other hand they understand Christ through culture, selecting from the Christian doctrine about him such points as seem to agree with what is best in civilization.” In other words, Christ is reduced to a mere figurehead of one’s own culture, embodying all its values and invalidating any critique. Revelation is accommodated to reason, salvation is reduced to moral influence and the distinction between God and world becomes vague.

Such cultured people believe themselves to be sincere Christians, while reducing Jesus to (merely) another cultural hero; in him, it is believed, the aspirations of men toward their values are brought to a point of culmination; he confirms what is best in the past, and guides the process of civilization to its proper goal (Niebuhr 1951:41). In other words the advocates of ‘Christ of culture’ want Christ to be understood as both the highest aspiration and fulfilment of culture. In this way it is possible to affirm both Christ and culture and to deny any necessary opposition between the two.

This approach inevitably leads to accommodationism, the attempt to reconcile Christianity with what appear to be the greatest achievements of a culture. Thus, according to Menuge (1999:7), the early church had its Hellenizers and Judaizers of the Gospel and Gnostics who reconciled Christianity with their mystical philosophy. The Gnostics (Basilides, Valentinus) sought to understand the transcendent realm as continuous with the present life (Niebuhr 1951:84). They offered an esoteric knowledge (Greek: *gnosis*) to which only the initiated could attain, a mystical knowledge which enabled one to escape from the world and from the body. Redemption was therefore limited to people with such knowledge and was passed on from teacher to follower (Schrotenboer 1998:319).

Burkitt (1951:86) describes the work of the Gnostics as an attempt to reconcile the gospel to the science and philosophy of their time. Among their ideas, the prevalent one was the thought that the soul is the prisoner of the body and redemption is therefore for the soul from the body. According to Schrotenboer (1998:319) this Gnostic influence upon the church led to the depreciation of the body and to the depiction of Christ only as the teacher rather than the sacrifice. This thinking reached its climax in the latter half of the century; and Albrecht Ritschl (1882-1889), may be taken as the best modern illustration of the Christ-of-culture type.

In his theology he used Christ and culture as two foundation stones (Ritschl in Niebuhr 1951:95). His point of departure was the community of culture, with the principle that the will of man is to gain mastery over nature. And so the human situation is fundamentally a conflict with nature and its goal is in the victory of personal, moral existence; in the achievement of the Kingdom of God (Niebuhr 1951:96). Ritschl proposed a reconciliation of Christ and civilization by means of the idea of the kingdom of God. For him the church is the true form of the ethical community in which members of different nations are bound together in mutual love for the sake of achieving that universal kingdom. Christ is our example. To be true to him, one should engage in civic work for the sake of the common good in faithfulness to one's social calling. The kingdom of God was for him the synthesis of the great values esteemed by democratic culture: the freedom and intrinsic worth of individuals, social co-operation and universal peace (1951:99). After he had collected from culture those elements

which were most compatible with Christ, he interpreted Christ through culture. His may be called a ‘culture-Protestantism’ (1951:91).

Contemporary manifestations of accommodationism abound in the pronouncements of mainline Protestantism and the World Council of Churches.<sup>113</sup> They believe that, in some sense, the culture itself is religiously normative – it should set the standards of what Christians believe and how they should act (Sandlin 2002). In other words, Christ reveals Himself in the culture.

Cultural Christianity fails by accommodating Christ, abstracting some aspect from the biblical Christ (Niebuhr 1959:108-115). Under this motif the distinctiveness of the gospel are lost and Christianity can easily drift into a kind of humanism. Culture Christians sees little or no difference between loyalty to Christ and the best a particular culture has to offer. According to Yoder, Christ is merged with the best available human insights and the already acknowledged values of civilization (Yoder 1996:35). Advocates of this view seek to avoid the tension by maintaining harmony between Christ and culture and they do this by interpreting culture through Christ and Christ through culture (Niebuhr 1951:83). In other words Christ is wholly interpreted in cultural terms thereby eliminating all sense of tension between him and social belief or custom.

Most Christians, claims Niebuhr (1975:116-120), fall in between the two extremes of cultural and anti-cultural Christianity – constituting the so-called “church of the centre”. This view does not simply oppose Christ and culture. It holds a diversity of views, but nonetheless views closer to each other than those of the two extremes – views consonant with a broad Christian theological orthodoxy. In the “church of the centre”, Niebuhr distinguishes three tendencies: the synthesist dualists (Christ above culture), the paradoxical dualists (Christ and culture in Paradox), and the conversionists (Christ the Transformer of Culture).

### **3.2.3. Christ ABOVE Culture**

It is significant to note that the ‘Christ above culture’ model understands Christ’s relation to culture somewhat as the second type does; he is the fulfilment of cultural aspirations and the restorer of the institutions of true society. Yet there is in him something that neither arises out

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<sup>113</sup> See Benne, *The Paradoxical Vision*, 26-44.

of culture not contributes directly to it. He is discontinuous as well as continuous with social life and its culture (1951:44). In other words, he is a Christ of culture but at the same time is above culture. As the subtitle, 'Christ above culture' suggests, this view posits in reality higher and lower areas. The church is higher than the rest of society; faith is higher than reason; church teaching is exalted over reason's wisdom; the sacred is higher than the secular (Schrotenboer 1988:320). But both levels are joined, in this view, in the plan of God.

According to Menuge (1999:9), what is needed is not a blank affirmation or rejection of culture for Christ but a synthesis of Christ and culture. Culture cannot be all bad because it is founded on the nature created good by God, and that although nature and culture are fallen, they are still subject to God. We cannot therefore say 'Either Christ or culture,' because we are dealing with God in both cases," yet we must not say "Both Christ and culture,' as though there were no great distinction between them (Niebuhr 1951:122)." The synthesist opinion of Christ is high, seeing him as both Logos and Lord. Similarly, the synthesist sees culture as of both human and divine origin, and thus subject to both reason and revelation. This high view of both Christ and culture distinguishes the synthesist from both cultural and anti-cultural Christians.

The distinction between the synthesist and other traditions of the "church of the centre" is the particular way in which it attempts to combine the distinct elements of the perceived duality in the Christian life into a single structure of thought and conduct (Niebuhr 1975:120-141). It is an attempt that finds its ultimate expression in the scheme of Thomas Aquinas, and which continues to attract Christians of both Catholic and Protestant persuasion because of its comprehensiveness. It is lacking perhaps in view of its slight nostalgia for a previous age, which in some instances does not quite translate into an appropriate contemporary analysis and programme. As Niebuhr (1975:142-144) points out:

Apart perhaps from some exclusive believers, all Christians find themselves in agreement with the synthesists' affirmation of the importance of the civil virtues and of just social institutions. Augustinians and Lutherans regard these virtues and institutions in a different light, but join in acknowledgement of their importance for the follower of Christ and for every citizen of the commonwealth of God. What distinguishes the synthesist of Thomas' sort is his concern to discover the bases of right in the given, created nature of man and his world. His insistence that the "ought"

in God's mind, appeals with all its realism to all who are aware of the dangers of wishful thinking. There is an appealing greatness in the synthesists' resolute proclamation that God who is to rule now rules and has ruled, that his rule is established in the nature of things, and that man must build on the established foundations. He expresses in this way the principle that the Creator and the Saviour are one, or that whatever salvation means beyond creation it does not mean the destruction of the created, the synthesist offers to Christians an intelligible basis for the work they must do in co-operation with non-believers. The synthesis seems to provide for a willing and intelligent co-operation of Christians with non-believers in carrying on the work of the world, while yet maintaining the distinctiveness of Christian faith and life.

However valuable the synthesis approach may have been historically to Christianity, it is nonetheless beset by many problems. According to Niebuhr (1975:245), the very project of synthesis necessarily leads to the "absolutizing of what is relative, the reduction of the infinite to a finite, and the materialization of the dynamic." Synthesists by their very nature are provisional and symbolic, and thus they always tend towards cultural conservatism, an institutionalization of Christ and the gospel, and an attempt to establish grades of Christian perfection. Synthesis eventually fails because of its inability to recognise fully the radical evil of sin present in all human work (1975:145-148).

#### **3.2.4. Christ and Culture in PARADOX: Dualism**

Each view that has been discussed so far recognizes something important about the relation of Christ and culture. The first view recognizes the reality of spiritual warfare. The second recognizes that there is good in culture. The third recognizes that Christ is different from even what's best in culture. The fourth view, now, what Niebuhr calls "dualism," recognizes far more than the third, the intense sinfulness of culture. This view is usually associated with the Lutheran tradition, but it has been held by many Reformed people too, especially in recent years.

In all these views, the common overarching view of life is described by two concepts, nature and grace (sacred and secular). The differences that exist pertain to the primacy given to one

or the other and how these areas are further interrelated. For example, the Christ against culture gives such primacy to grace that the world and its culture almost fade from view. The Christ of culture places such a premium on culture that grace is largely absorbed into it. The Christ above culture makes a definite choice of the primacy of grace and of the favoured position of the church in society. Schrottenboer's (1998:321-22) description of the 'Christ and culture in paradox' view is that it is like the two storeys of a building, neither of which can exist without the other.

In this model, Niebuhr (1951:42) recognizes not only the duality and authority of both Christ and culture, but also the opposition between them. In other words this model agrees with the Christ above culture model in positing the two realms of Christ and culture and in attributing primacy to the realm of grace. Christ rules both in wrath and grace (Niebuhr 1951:120-121). Christ and culture are viewed as opposite natures – good and evil and therefore finds less continuity between culture and the Christian life. And so, while both Christ and culture claim our loyalty, the tension between them cannot be reconciled by any lasting synthesis (Menuge 200:11).<sup>114</sup> As Niebuhr points out (1975:184), paradoxical “dualism may be the refuge of worldly-minded persons who wish to make a slight obeisance in the direction of Christ, or of pious spiritualists who feel that they owe some reverence to culture.”

Supporters of this view hold that Christians cannot in this life escape the tension between these two authorities who do not agree yet must be obeyed” (1951:42). They strive to be in the world, but not of the world. They refuse to accommodate the claims of Christ to those of secular society and so they are like the “Christ against culture” believers, yet differ from them in the conviction that obedience to God requires obedience to the institutions of society and loyal to its members as well as obedience to a Christ who sits in judgement on that society (1951:43). In other words “the duality and inescapable authority for both Christ and culture are recognized, but the opposition between them is also accepted (Hopkins 2001:3). Hence men is seen as subject to two moralities and as citizens of two worlds that are not only discontinuous with each other but largely opposed. In the polarity and tension of Christ and culture, life must be lived precariously and sinfully in the hope of a justification which lies beyond history” (1951:42-43).

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According to Gene Veith<sup>115</sup>, the heart of this view is that God exercises a “double sovereignty.” He has “two Kingdoms.” He rules in one way in the church, a different way in the world in general:

In the church, God reigns through the work of Christ and the giving of the Holy Spirit, expressing his love and grace through the forgiveness of sins and the life of faith (1997:5-6).

In the world in general, God “exercises his authority and providential control through “natural laws” (of physics, chemistry, etc). Similarly, God rules the nations – even those who do not acknowledge him – making human beings to be social creatures, in need of governments, laws, and cultures to mitigate the self-destructive tendencies of sin and to enable human beings to survive (Veith 1997:6).

Veith also describes these two sovereignties or two kingdoms as Gospel vs. Law and spiritual vs. secular. The most important version of this view is Martin Luther’s (1483-1546) doctrine of the two kingdoms or realms, the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world, where culture is pursued (Niebuhr 1951:170). Luther uses the metaphor of the spiritual as God’s “right hand,” and the secular as God’s “left hand”. I prefer the term “realm,” to “kingdoms” because “two kingdoms” makes the erroneous suggestion that there are two kings.

In his pamphlet *Against Hordes the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants* Luther wrote:

“There are two kingdoms, one the kingdom of God, the other the kingdom of the world . . . God’s kingdom is a kingdom of grace and mercy . . . but the kingdom of the world is a kingdom of wrath and severity. . . Now he who would confuse these two kingdoms – as false fanatics do. . . would put God’s kingdom and mercy into the world’s kingdom; and that is the same as putting the devil in heaven and God in hell (cited in Niebuhr 1951:171-72).”

These two kingdoms, while they may be distinguished, may not be separated, for Christ is Lord of both. Culture, no less than Christian piety, is the arena in which Christ must be

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followed (Niebuhr 1951:172). But the rules which apply in culture must be set free from the church. Christ has given us the freedom to do faithfully what culture requires. Luther spoke in paradoxical terms. God uses wrathful means to accomplish his mercy. And even as God does such strange works, so too the Christian (Schrotenboer 1998:321).

Luther maintained that sin is universal and therefore remains inside the Christian throughout his earthly life, thereby vitiating any attempt to set up a holy society on earth (Niebuhr 1951:151). In other words there is a stark contrast between two realms: the left-hand realm of the world governed by law and the right-hand realm of God governed by grace. These two realms exist side by side in a paradoxical relation, never to be resolved in this life (Niebuhr 1951:151-53).

According to Menuge (1999:12), part of the explanation of this apparent contradiction is that all humans belong to the realm of the world, and are therefore subject to the Law, including the temporal law laid down by divinely instituted human leaders, which condemns the rebellion. Such laws are needed, not because they will make the ungodly acceptable to God, but because they are a means of limiting the consequences of sin in this world. Christians, by contrast, do not need the Law or the sword as an incentive to act; this is not because temporal powers have no authority for them, but because, in normal circumstances, they freely want to follow this authority.

However, it is an oversimplification to suppose that Christians are freed from the realm of the world. 'In fact, a single Christian is simultaneously subject to both realms, because each Christian contains an "inner man"<sup>116</sup> ruled by faith and not law, and an outer man (Ibid., 358-371)" that may stumble, ruled by the Law. Thus we are simultaneously saint and sinner. What Luther insist on is that we are saved by grace, not works, yet because we also remain sinful in this life, we need the Law to curb our sin. Thus each Christian is a subject of two realms – two "kingdoms," but one king, Christ.

Niebuhr (1951:171) correctly perceives a number of advantages in Luther's view. It is completely realistic about the extent of human sin and the continuing need of the law to control it. At the same time, Luther does not fall into separatism or self-righteousness,

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<sup>116</sup> See Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," 344-358

encouraging any honourable service to culture. While the Two Realms doctrine suggests to some a compartmentalization of faith and works, Niebuhr (1951:179) is aware that this misunderstands the interrelations between the realms:

“It is a great error to confuse the parallelistic dualism of separated spiritual and temporal life with the interactionism of Luther’s gospel of faith in Christ working by love in the world of culture”.

On the other hand, Niebuhr thinks there is something to be said for the charges against the paradox view (1951:187f). First it tends toward antinomianism: if we are justified by grace, not works, and sin inevitably persists in the Christian, why should he not sin all the more? Second, it leads to cultural conservatism: if we should accept the temporal authority of existing institutions and rulers, it would seem to be unmotivated, perhaps even wrong, to call for reform. Along with this is the idea that Luther views the role of the law in a purely negative fashion (as curb and mirror, the first two uses of the law), but does not support its positive role (as guide, the third use of the Law) in improving society. These factors have caused dualism to be largely a culturally conservative force, for better or for worse. This is the primary difference between the dualist and the conversionist approaches (1975:179-189).

### **3.2.5. Christ the TRANSFORMER of Culture**

This last model is in many ways similar to the preceding except that it is more optimistic about the ability of Christians to improve culture. In fact Niebuhr applies the term “conversion” in this position not only to the experience and decisions of individuals but to entire cultures (Niebuhr 1951:150). In other words, not only can individuals and communities but also values of culture can be converted or transformed for Christian purposes as confirmation of nature as God’s good creation. And so, the world is fallen, but can be sanctified personally and socially (1975:43). In other words Conversionists agree with anti-culturalists and paradoxical dualists about the fallen perversion of human nature, and the transmission of this perversion in and through culture. The brokenness of culture is recognized without recognizing any particular need for Christian separation from or mere endurance in human culture. Rather, Christ is seen as converting people within their cultures and societies, not apart from them.

According to Yoder (1996:40), in 'Authentic Transformation: A new vision of Christ and culture', whilst culture is seen as corrupted, it is convertible, usable, and perhaps even redeemable by God's grace and power. In other words it is perverted but not evil in essence. Nature is still usable and therefore the values of culture can be "converted" or "transformed" for Christian purposes. An important emphasis in this regard is therefore that nature does not exist without culture, and people turn from self and idols toward God only within society. Here Niebuhr's examples include Augustine, John Calvin and Jonathan Edwards.

Niebuhr (1975:190-229) identifies the conversionist approach as part of the great central tradition of Christianity. It rejects the path of anti-cultural isolation without attempting to ameliorate Christ's judgement of this world in the manner of the cultural Christians. At the same time it holds a more positive attitude towards culture than the paradoxical dualists, believing it to remain under God's sovereign rule even as he judges it, and understanding Christian obedience to include cultural action.

One of the fundamental theological reasons for this optimism is the view that the Fall of man as recorded in Genesis only perverted things which were created good, that these things remain inherently good and capable of reform, even though they have been misdirected (Niebuhr 1951:194). In other words this view stresses the goodness of creation that God made.

These convictions about creation and the fall combine with a view of history as not merely the course of human events but rather the interaction between God and men (Niebuhr 1975:195):

For the conversionist, history is the story of God's mighty deeds and of man's responses to them. He lives somewhat less "between the times" and somewhat more in the divine "Now" than do his brother Christians. The eschatological future has become for him an eschatological present. Eternity means for him the action of God before time and less the life with God after time, and more the presence of God in time. Eternal life is a Quality of existence in the here and now. Hence the conversionist is less concerned with the conservation of what has been given in creation, less with preparation for what will be given in a final redemption, than with the divine possibility of a present renewal.

For the conversionist the kingdom of God is transformed culture, a conversion of the human spirit from self-worship to the worship of God. This is a very real kingdom, since outside the rule of God nothing can exist, as he sustains everything every moment and as in every moment human beings deal with him (1975:228-29).

This double affirmation of nature and history explains the claim that the “Transformationists” position is more complete and balanced than any of the others. Rather doubtfully, Niebuhr associates this idea with St Augustine, Bishop of Hippo (354-430), though he admits that in various ways Augustine seemed to affirm all five answers (Niebuhr 1951:207). Augustine (1951) sought to give an appraisal of universal history in the City of God. History provides the stage for an ongoing struggle between the kingdom of God and that of darkness. But the struggle is not between matter and spirit, but rather between opposing spirits active through all human experience.

Certainly Augustine was impressed by the regeneration of Caesar-centred Rome as a Christian city, although Augustine was much more pessimistic than a typical transformationist about the fortune of any culture of this world. In the fifth century he stressed that Christ is the converter of culture. But this is possible, he said, only because the creation was ‘very good’. Evil is not an independent force and cannot exist on its own, but only from feeding on the good (Niebuhr 1951:209).

Throughout the centuries the churchman who perhaps most clearly advocated Christ as the transformer of culture was John Calvin (1509-1564). Following Augustine, Calvin emphasized the goodness of creation and held together its themes of fall and redemption in Christ. His was a positive emphasis of the use of the law as a guide to social reform, at least for the elect (although Calvinists have typically been more optimistic than Calvin himself, and sometimes even inclined to perfectionism), and various Christian utopians such as F.D. Maurice who championed a Christian socialist society (Menuge 1999:14). More than any other reformer, Calvin forced people to think about the social dimensions of the gospel. More than others he stressed the calling of the people of God, regardless of what work they did.

Niebuhr seems not to criticize the reformational or conversionist approach, except to notice that other approaches more clearly “image into the world” certain aspects of the common Christian faith (e.g. 1975:68-69, 107-108, 143, 185-186).

### **3.3. Evaluation of Niebuhr’s Typology**

Menuge (1999:15) describes Niebuhr’s typology as pluralistic and he identifies three main claims that Niebuhr makes. The first one is that all five types are sometimes appropriate. The second is that none of the five is simply and basically correct and lastly Niebuhr claims that it is impossible to find one correct answer (in this or any other typology) to the Christ and culture problem. Niebuhr’s first claim is considered to be the weakest and Phillip Yancey (1997:31-37), in his paper ‘A State of Ungrace’ confirms this intuition. It is the weakest because Niebuhr does not provide a principle for deciding when one of the five types is operative, and when it is not. The second claim is probably the stronger of the three but it is clear that it does not follow from the first one.

In “How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned,” John Howard Yoder (1996:41-42) is however convinced of Niebuhr’s preference for the ‘Transformation’ model. It takes into itself all the values of its predecessor types and corrects most of their shortcomings . . . a presentation following the pattern of thesis; antithesis and synthesis constitute an implicit argument in favour of the last option reported. This goes against Niebuhr’s professed pluralism as well as conflict with the third option, which, as Yoder (1996:72) points out, is inconsistent with the widely held orthodox assumption that Christians can know the will of God.

It should also be noted that some of Niebuhr’s objections to the rival answers are unfair. Yoder himself a separatist, rightly points out that some of Niebuhr’s objections to the Christ against Culture view rely on a question-begging definition of culture. On Niebuhr’s conception, culture is “monolithic,” an all-inclusive category covering everything man does to nature (Yoder 1996:54). Taken literally, this automatically makes rejection of culture absurd, since the rejection itself will be carried on by human activity and hence in culture.

Thus the real question is not whether we should accept or reject culture en bloc, but what is the correct principle of discrimination. According to Yoder (1996:60) the paradox view does provide a correct principle of discrimination, a way of telling which aspects of culture should

be affirmed, and which should be rejected, for God. It avoids self-righteous separatism on the one side and double-minded irresponsibility on the other, by affirming any earthly calling which is not in itself sinful. Like wise secular techniques are affirmed so long as they do not conflict with God's Word. Temporary authority is respected and even tyranny is endured provided it is instituted by God, though not without protest from within the vocation of suffering servant; but Government which in its nature directly opposes Christ must be resisted, even with force (Menuge 1999:22-23). The argument is therefore is that through the faithful preaching of the Word, individual Christians are equipped with the means to effect transformation of society for the better through their costly witness and protest and willingness to accept their appointed cross.

Apart from this necessary evaluation of Niebuhr's classification, other Western theologians like Colin Greene<sup>117</sup> (2002:13-33), have argued for a new classification, what he calls the critical interaction of Christ and culture. This is similar to, but critical of, Niebuhr's Christ the transformer of culture type. This new model includes the post-modern experience of fragmentation and multiculturalism, which Niebuhr's study could not address.

Green is not the only one who has suggested a new model. Most theologians in realising that this or that group does not fit any of Niebuhr's categories have expressed the need to construct new ones. My view in this regard is that emphasis should be given to the fact that actual historical groups will be characterized by combinations of dominant motifs. So, even though we start only with five unhistorical ideal categories, various combinations of these can help us understand a much larger number of actual historical types.

As to the possibility of adding categories, one of the most constructive suggestions comes from University of Chicago Law professor Michael McConnell (1992: 191-221). He suggests that if one approaches the question not on the basis of theological rationales, but rather on the basis of what Christians actually do, new categories will emerge. For instance, he thinks that "Christ against culture" could be divided into "Church apart from culture" and "Church in conflict with culture." On the other hand he thinks the third and fourth types could be

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<sup>117</sup> Colin Greene is head of theology and public policy at the British and Foreign Bible Society and visiting professor of systematic and philosophical theology at Seattle Pacific University. He is the author of *Christology and Atonement in Historical Context* and the forthcoming *Making Out the Horizons: Christ in Cultural Perspective*.

consolidated under “Church accommodated to culture.” Despite offering theological rationales, he argues, they do not make any difference in practice. “Christ transforming culture,” he suggests, might better be called “Church influencing culture.” He also thinks we should add two additional types. “Church controlling culture” and “Culture controlling church.”

Whatever we think about Niebuhr’s theological intentions when he put this typology together what is clear is that his examples all suggest that what he is really talking about are the various Christian efforts to follow Christ. I’m sure Niebuhr was aware that his various conceptions of what the Christian ought to do were themselves shaped by culture and therefore by speaking of Christ and culture he did not mean a culturally disembodied “Christ” as opposed to culture. Rather Niebuhr was simply adopting a language to juxtapose that which we see as duties shaped by Christian commitment and the dominant culture. According to Cauthen (1996:267-279), the only Christ is a Christ within come culture, known, believed in, and followed by selves and communities who exhibit various ways of relating themselves to the social and cultural milieu that inescapably affects them. In other words reference to Christ by believers takes place within and is a part of the larger cultural reality.

We cannot run away from the fact that Niebuhr developed his categories in a particular theological context for his own theological purposes, but that does not necessarily mean that we cannot appropriate them for other purposes or adapt them to other theologies. True, if we hold to another theology, we should not be taken in by the specifics of his theological formulations. But, as with anything else that may have origins in an ideology with which we disagree, once we recognize those origins we are in a position to selectively appropriate tools that may be employed in the framework of our own outlooks (Hauerwas 1981:246-47).<sup>118</sup>

Nevertheless, if we are to continue to use the Christ and culture language, we have to do it with a warning label that using the term “Christ” as opposed to culture can be misleading. The Christ and culture juxtaposition may reinforce the tendency of Christians to forget that their own understanding of Christianity is a cultural product. The importance of underscoring

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<sup>118</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, who has been one of the most vocal critics of Niebuhr for loading his account in favour of Transformationism, nonetheless concedes that the categories have heuristic value. *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame, Ind. University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 246-47.



this warning becomes clearest if we think of the cross-cultural exchanges involved within world Christianity. Western Christian missionaries inevitably bring with them the Gospel message, but it is already embedded in Western cultural forms. So missionary work is not simply a matter of bringing Christ to an alien culture, it also always involves a cultural dialogue and an exchange between two cultures. The two cultures learn from each other and the mission is shaped by “Christ” only as part of this cultural exchange.

### **3.4 Charles Kraft: Christ and Culture Typology**

Charles Kraft is one of the most controversial contributors to the Christ and culture debate. The seminal *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective* forms the primary source for my review of his thinking, though I will draw from his other writings as well.

The essential link of Christ and culture according to Kraft (1979:46) is that human beings are as immersed in culture as fish are in water and therefore culture constitutes the most fundamental aspect of human beings’ context. Kraft operates from within the fundamental premise that God is above culture, but has chosen to work within it to achieve his purposes.

Orlando Costas (1982:5) argues that the Gospel cannot be defined at all without reference to context, since:

The context is the stage where all comprehension takes place. It is the reality that ties together and therefore shapes, all knowledge. We participate in it, actively or passively. Not one of us can claim to stand outside it. The question is whether or not we can consciously and critically incorporate it into our efforts to interpret and communicate the gospel. This is what we do in contextualization.

Kraft (1996:38) defines culture as “a society’s complex, integrated coping mechanism, consisting of learned, patterned concepts and behaviour, plus their underlying perspectives (worldview) and resulting artefacts (material culture).” Kraft’s definition speaks specifically of only material products, he later elaborates to include non-material products such as customs and rituals. What is explicit in Kraft’s definition is that culture is learned and yet it never does anything. It is only a coping mechanism which is used by members of the society which has that culture.

Kraft (1996:52) defines worldview as the culturally structured assumptions, values, and commitments/allegiances underlying a people's perception of reality and their responses to those perceptions. Again Kraft's definition is static as opposed to active and used by people. It is on this basis that Kraft repeatedly insists that meanings are never in forms, but that meanings exist in people and are assigned by them to particular forms. Interestingly, Hiebert (1985:47), another Fuller Seminary theologian, not only defines both culture and worldview as active, but also argues contrary to Kraft that symbolic link between form and meaning is complex and varied and must therefore be understood within their cultural and historical context. He writes: "the link between form and meaning in some symbols is so close that the two cannot be differentiated." This is seen as especially true for historical symbols. For example, Mecca has a strong religious meaning for Muslims. The meaning can still be separated from the form. But a Muslim will assign to Mecca a completely different meaning. Maybe for certain people, there can be no separation of form and meaning, because the meaning is so deeply ingrained, but the meaning is not ingrained in the form itself, but in the people's mind in relation to that form. Hiebert does not make a clear distinction between symbols and forms. He writes that "symbols link meanings, feelings and values to forms" but then he seems to go on and equate symbols with forms.

Central to Kraft's exposition of the Christ and culture question are his reflections on the nature and perception of reality. Conceptual models of reality may be dynamic, focusing on process, or static, merely showing relationship. But whether a model is static or dynamic often depends on the interpretation of the model, for example, the body model of the church. Passages such as 1Cor. 12 focus on the fact that the body parts are to function (dynamic) as a unity, not simply to exist in a body-like arrangement (static).

Kraft suggests a series of thirteen models or grids in terms of which to view the dynamics of God's revelation, the cultural matrices in which it is received, and the interaction between the divine message and culture, as well as other interconnected realities. Kraft is convinced that contemporary Christianity can regain the dynamic of the early Christianity that turned the first century world upside down. His work suggests how this can happen. He argues for a return to a dynamic and apostolic faith, in which one's worldview and religion are integrated with and supportive of each other in a "healthy" culture. He hope that, among other results, it

will “help to release some evangelicals from the hold of reactionary, fear-based theological positions into the ‘dynamic obedience to a living God.’”

Kraft undoubtedly has made a contribution to the study of revelation and culture. His models, drawn from the human sciences, are not absolute. Yet they illumine one’s understanding of how God, who is above culture, becomes culturally present to humanity and saves us. It does not take much reading to realise that Charles Kraft is in many ways indebted to Niebuhr for his typology. Whilst there are obvious similarities between the two typologies, Kraft seems to chart a slightly different course at many points. For example, Kraft seems to go a step further than Niebuhr’s transformation position when he describes culture primarily as a vehicle to be used by God and his people for Christian purposes, rather than as an enemy to be combated or shunned (1979:103). God is therefore in constant interaction with human culture. Kraft’s typology is consistent with this understanding of the relationship of God and culture.

#### **3.4.1 The God-Against-Culture position**

Consistent with Niebuhr’s “Christ-Against-culture” position, Kraft has called this position “radical” because of its emphasis on the opposition between Christ and culture and the subsequent rejection of culture. According to Niebuhr (1959:145), this position uncompromisingly affirms the sole authority of Christ over the Christian and resolutely rejects culture’s claims to loyalty. This rejection is logical in that it follows directly from the common Christian principle of the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Kraft (1979:104-05) reckons that this negative perception of culture comes from a particular interpretation of passages of scripture such as 1John 2:15-16 and 5:19. Here culture is identified with “the world” and therefore under the power of the evil one. For that reason Christians are enjoined against loving “the world” (1979:104). God is therefore against human culture. The emphasis in the first letter of John is on loving God and neighbour and opposition to the world. The obvious counterpart to this is rejection of cultural society, the kind that draws a line of separation between God, the children of God and the world or cultural society (1John 2:48).

It is therefore not surprising that the answer that advocates of God-against-culture position typically recommend is for Christians to withdraw, reject, escape, isolate, and insulate

themselves from the world in order to develop and maintain holiness. In other words, the choice for commitment to God is by definition a decision to oppose culture.

The early Christians exhibited this position in their opposition and rejection of Jewish culture and then in their response to Roman persecution, toward Greco-Roman culture (Kraft 1979:104). This perception of culture has sometimes been the reason why some missionaries have alienated their converts (as did the first century Judaizers) from their own cultural systems as a prior requirement of their conversion to Christianity.

In his criticism of this position, Kraft acknowledges that Satan has just as much access to human culture as God and humans and uses it for his ends. He however criticises the negative use of the concept of “culture”. The interpretation in 1 John refers to a particular use of that culture by the forces of evil and not to the whole of culture.<sup>119</sup> In other words, to “love the world” is to pledge allegiance to a principle of cultural usage with a point of reference other than God (Kraft 1979: 105).<sup>120</sup> The Christian way is, rather, to pledge allegiance to God and to use culture for him.

The second criticism is the assumption in this position that culture is only an external thing and therefore it is possible to escape from it. According to Kraft human beings are inalienably bound to, and by, culture and therefore cannot escape it. It is possible however to innovate, replace, add to, transform, and in other ways alter our use of the culture that we have received (Kraft 1979:106).<sup>121</sup>

The third criticism is the assumption that all culture is evil. According to Kraft, what makes culture something to be shunned or regarded positively is not the cultural item itself or the total culture, but the use of a given cultural item. What we should all run away from is participation with Satan in his use of our culture. Christians pledge allegiance to God and to use culture for him. In fact God seeks to cooperate with human beings in the use of their

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<sup>119</sup> A good example is the use of the concept “culture”, *kosmos* in the Greek in John 3:16. Here it is used with a positive or neutral meaning in reference to the world as the object of God’s love.

culture for his glory. What God stands against is allegiance to the Satanic use of that same culture, not the culture itself (Kraft 1979:106).<sup>122</sup>

### **3.4.2 Two God-In-Culture Positions**

The opposite extreme of the God-against-culture position is that God is contained either within culture in general or within one specific culture. Kraft puts advocates of this position into two groups.

#### **3.4.2.1 Christ as a culture hero**

The first group sees God (or Christ) as merely a culture hero – an expression of a longing on humanity’s part to deify it (Kraft 1979:106).<sup>123</sup> This is an example of a culture-bound perception of God and there are many such perceptions. In fact each different cultures perceive deity in different ways and that explains differences between worldviews of different societies.

#### **3.4.2.2 God as contained within a culture**

The second group of God-in-culture advocates see God as contained within, or at least as endorsing, one particular culture. Hebrews are particularly identified with this view. God is seen as either creating, gradually developing, or endorsing a given culture or subculture, and ordaining that all people everywhere if they are to be Christian be converted thereto (Kraft 1979:107).

Christians often refer to this culture as “first-century Christian culture” or “new Testament culture”) or it may refer simply to “Christian culture” or employ a term like “biblical culture” (Kraft 1979:107). Quite often the recommended culture is conceived of in terms of a particular denominational (e.g., conservative or evangelical) subculture, at least with regard to its theological, ethical, and religious beliefs and practices.

Kraft (1979:108) criticises this position for failing to distinguish between the Christian use of the forms of a given culture to serve Christian functions and a whole culture. The Christianness of culture can only be interpreted in terms of the motives and functions which

these forms are put and motivations of those who employ them. That explains why in the New Testament, Jesus Christ always challenged the notion of a sacred Hebrew culture by pointing to the primacy of motive over form. Likewise the apostle Paul challenged the Judaisers, who insisted on the Hebrew culture as the only expression of Christianity. The account of Peter's being re-educated on this matter is recorded in Acts 10, while in Acts 15 we read of the decision of the Jerusalem church to no longer require that Gentiles convert to Jewish culture as a concomitant of their becoming Christian (Kraft 1979: 108).

### **3.4.3. Two God-Above-Culture Positions**

#### **3.4.3.1. God above culture and unconcerned**

This is the position held by Deists. Deism generally holds that God created the universe and is far greater than the universe (God is "transcendent") and therefore has no present involvement in the world, thus leaving no place for his immanence in the created order (Grudem 1994:270). Whilst Deism does affirm God's transcendence in some ways, it denies almost the entire history of the Bible, which is the history of God's active involvement in the world.

With regard to culture, Deists hold that God is above culture and outside culture and no longer really concerned with human beings in culture (Kraft 1979:108). God is viewed as a divine clock maker who wound up the "clock" of creation at the beginning but then left it to run on its own, for as long as the spring lasts but to disintegrate when the spring runs down. Others see God as having started something that he is no longer able to control (Kraft 1979:108).

A typical "Christian" version of this view is to ignore God more or less completely but to hold tightly to at least a selection of the teachings of Jesus Christ. This is how a lot of much theological and non-theological humanism has found a way to hold a belief in God, on the one hand, and in a human Christ, on the other, without accepting biblical Christianity's insistence on the deity of Christ. Much humanism has moved from unconcern with God into either denial of the existence of God, denial of our ability to know whether or not he exists, or depersonalization of God into some sort of "Eternal Principle" (Kraft 1979:109). The result of such a view is to turn our attention almost completely to humanity and to focus on the necessity for us to "go it alone" without realistic expectation of eternal assistance. Grudem

speaks of many “lukewarm” or nominal Christians who are practical deists, since they live their lives almost totally devoid of genuine prayer, worship, fear of God, or moment-by-moment trust in God to care for needs that arise (Grudem 1994:271).

In the diverse African context this view typically regards God as one who once was near, became alienated because of some human misdeed, and has become very distant (Kraft 1979:109). African communities explain this in terms of the evils that continuously plague them that God could do something about if they could only appease him. However, he is unreachable and people no longer know how to make contact with him. Perhaps that is one reason why African advocates of this position respond to the biblical presentation of the relationship of Christ to God by readily embracing him as the long-sought-for-missing link between themselves and God.

The only positive thing Kraft has to say about this position is its emphasis on God’s transcendence and the reconciliation that it leads to. Otherwise the perspective cannot be reconciled with the biblical portrayal of a concerned, communicating, interacting God.

#### **3.4.3.2. God-Above-Culture-But-Through-Culture Position**

In arguing this position Kraft aligned himself with the general God-above-culture perspective, the basis of which is that God is above culture but uses culture as the vehicle for interaction with human beings (Kraft 1979:113). He therefore sees cultural structuring as a vehicle, neutral in essence, though warped by the pervasive influence of human sinfulness. Neutral in the sense that culture, in and of itself is not either an enemy or a friend to God or humans. It is, rather, something that is there to be used by personal beings such as humans, God, and Satan (Kraft 1979:114).

When Kraft speaks of the neutrality of culture his focus is on the forms and functions of culture. He sees culture as a kind of road map made up of various forms designed to get people where they need to go. These forms are seen as neutral with respect to the interaction between God and man. In other words cultural patterning, organizing, and structuring of life, the functions they are intended to serve, and the processes cultures make available to human beings are not seen as inherently evil or good in themselves (Kraft 1979:113).



But human beings are pervasively infected by sin and for that reason their use of culture is always affected by sin. Sin affects both the meanings intended and the meanings received. Apparently, according to Kraft, no human motive is unaffected by sin (Kraft 1979:114). The good news is that Human beings are nevertheless redeemable and to a certain extent redeemed human beings change the usage of the cultural structures at their disposal.

The assumption in this position is that God chooses the culture as the arena of his interaction with people. In his communication with human beings He employs human, not divine language and this language participates fully in human culture. He uses human language with all its finiteness, its relativity, and its assured misperception of infinity (Kraft 1979:114).

One example of this dynamic is God's relationship with Hebrews. When he sought to communicate with them, he employed their linguistic and cultural forms and even went to the extent of endorsing at least major portions of Hebrew culture as it was (Kraft 1979:114). This appears to account for the fact that God chose to work with Hebrews in terms of a culturally known covenant relationship.

Another example is the incarnation. When God sought to reveal himself more completely, he employed a thoroughly human culture as a vehicle of his supreme revelation of himself to human beings (Kraft 1979:115). Furthermore, though Jesus and his disciples operated in Aramaic culture and language, when the events of the New Testament were recorded for the sake of Greek-speaking audiences, Greek was employed – and this in spite of the well-known difficulties inherent in the process of translation.

It is therefore not surprising that in the biblical record God shows himself as so determined to communicate himself to different people within their own linguistic and cultural contexts. To do this he has employed human languages and cultures as the media of his interaction with people.

However, this relationship between God and culture is not a required relationship in the sense that God is bound by culture. On the contrary, God is absolute and infinite. Yet he has freely chosen to employ human culture and at major points to limit himself to the capacities of culture in his interaction with people. Any limitation of God is only that which he imposes

upon himself – he chooses to use culture and he is not bound by it in the same way human beings are.

### 3.5. Kraft's Conclusions

Kraft chose the last type as the most biblically sound way to understand God's relation to culture. The question of course is what does 'God above but through culture' look like according to Kraft? 'God above but through culture' – "God as transcendent and absolute, completely beyond and outside of culture. I see cultural structuring, however, as basically a vehicle or milieu, neutral in essence, though wrapped by the pervasive influence influence of human sinfulness. Culture is not in and of itself either an enemy or a friend to God or humans. It is rather, something that is there to be used by personal beings such as humans, God and Satan (1999:113)."

Kraft's understanding of this type is helpful but needs to be qualified in one way. Culture is a 'friend' of God because God as a triune being – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – has created all things, including socially structuring tools like culture.

Whilst Kraft acknowledges that human beings are pervasively infected by sin, he is convinced that they are also redeemable. When they [human beings] do things differently, they change their usage of cultural forms, patterns and processes at their disposal. It is the use of cultural structures that is changed and not the structures themselves (1999:114). On the matter of 'God through culture' I would again add just one thing, God works through culture not just changing how Christians use culture but also how non-believers use culture because God's grace extends to all in a common way.

So through God is above culture he works as well within it, and when he seeks to change it he does so through renewing the way the human heart uses the cultures they are within. God is above but through culture, and this has implication for mission. As we enter various relationships with people we need to realize that their culture, no matter how godless it may seem at times, was created by God. He is both above culture since he transcends it and his person can not be reduced to it though he remains relevant to human cultures throughout time, and He is working through it by creating new hearts in Christians and by imparting His common grace upon all cultures everywhere at all times.

Kraft's conclusions demonstrate a number of presuppositions and commitments. Firstly, he takes a very high view of culture. God not only has ordained culture, but also is at work in the various cultures and endeavours to transform them and bring them ever closer to his reality and ideal. This means that the supra-cultural message of the Bible can speak directly to anyone in any era if it is set free from the historically conditioned forms in which it is clothed.

Secondly, he makes it clear that meaning is in persons who have content in mind and express it in language and not in words. It is "that which the receiver of a message constructs in his head and responds to (1978:359)." This brings into perspective issues to do with interpretation, translation and application. He speaks not only of translation and contextualization, but also transculturation. Kraft explains these concepts by adopting a cross-cultural perspective instead of the mono-cultural perspective of the west.

With regards to interpretation of Scripture in a foreign context, Kraft makes it clear that it is wrong to interpret Scripture in the light of your own cultural conditioning. Western mono-cultural interpretation should therefore never be the basis for applying the biblical message to a Third World culture. The important point that Kraft makes is that those who bring the gospel to other cultures must adapt themselves and the presentation of God's message to the culture of the receiving people. If we demand that they become like us in order to be acceptable to God, we, like most of the early Jewish Christians (see Acts 15:1), have misrepresented God. We, the witnesses, are to make the cultural adjustments, not they, the potential respondents (1996:2).

### **3.6. A critique of Kraft's Typology**

In 1989, Carl F. Henry, in his article, "The Cultural Relativizing of Revelation" in the *Trinity Journal*, Fall, 1980, pp. 153-164, offered a devastating review of Charles Kraft's *Christianity and Culture*. Henry begins by questioning Kraft's methodology, particularly his notion of a worldview. For Kraft (1989:20), a worldview is the "culturally structured assumptions, values, and commitments underlying a people's perception of Reality." In an explanation of cultural structuring, Kraft repeats the phrase "culture, including worldview" at least four times as he introduces his major points (1989:54-55). Worldview in other words, is repeatedly seen as subordinate to culture and is regarded virtually as a product of one's culture.

For this reason Kraft objects to Christian speaking of a Biblical worldview. Kraft believes that the notion of a particular worldview being Biblical “could easily be misconstrued to imply either that there is only one cultural worldview in the Bible (which there isn’t) or that God endorses one or another of those worldviews as normative for everyone (which he doesn’t).” (1989:103). Kraft goes on to explain,

The use of the term worldview in this way easily misleads Western people into believing that God endorses Hebrew culture perspectives on life. But there is nothing sacred about Hebrew perspectives, even though they are connected with the Bible. They simply make up a human culture that God was pleased to work through to reveal something much more important (1989:103).

Again a few pages later, Kraft adds,

A position that sees it necessary for people to totally replace their cultural worldview with something called a Christian worldview does not really understand the Scriptures. God is not against culture in this way, though he has plenty to say in opposition to many socio-cultural beliefs and practices (1989:106).

Though Kraft believes that Jesus had a worldview, he does not seem to want to say that all Christians should adopt Jesus’ view and make it the basis of Christian civilization. Instead we’re told that Jesus’ worldview “provides for us the clearest picture of how God’s ideals are to be combined with the human perspectives of a typical worldview (1989:106).” We are supposed to imitate this combination of God’s ideals with a human worldview because God wants to work in and through our own socio-cultural matrix.

The New Testament theologian N.T. Wright (1992:124) offers an introduction to the subject of worldview that is more perceptive and helpful than Kraft’s, one that offers correctives for his views. In Wright’s understanding, a worldview is a basically theological concept, for it answers questions about a person’s ultimate concern. It includes men’s beliefs about ultimate reality and therefore answers questions that could be called theological. Worldviews are, he explains, “the basic stuff of human existence, the lens through which the world is seen, the blueprint for how one should live in it and above all the sense of identity and place which enables human beings to be what they are.

Wright (1992:122-123) outlines “four things which worldviews characteristically do.” The first point is that worldviews “provide stories through which human beings view reality.” Second, worldviews answer basic questions that determine human existence: “who are we, where are we, what is wrong and what is the situation (1992:123).” Third, worldviews come to expression in cultural symbols, including both artefacts and events. Fourth, worldviews determine “praxis” which Wright defines as “ a way-of-being-in-the-world.” This means simply that “the real shape of someone’s worldview can often be seen in the sort of actions they perform, particularly if the actions are so instinctive or habitual as to be taken for granted (1992:124).

Wright also speaks of the relationship between worldview and culture. When expounding the second point, he writes, “All cultures cherish deep-rooted beliefs which can in principle be called up to answer these questions (1992:123).” The third point is explicitly stated as cultural in that “symbols” are said to be “cultural symbols”. But Wright’s exposition does not suggest that cultures determine worldviews in such a way that we should have to think of Abraham, Moses and Daniel as possessing significantly different worldviews. On the contrary they all share the same basic story of the world, though the story is a more fully developed one for Daniel than it is for Abraham or Moses.

Kraft (1971:49) indicates that no universal criteria are applicable to all cultures and that each culture is valid only for its own participants. None can be regarded as final, and no transcendentally absolute criterion is allowed to judge any. Kraft declares this belief in the validity of other cultures to be the equivalent in anthropology of the Golden Rule in Theology (1971:99). Yet cultural validity, Kraft says, does not oblige us to approve of customs like cannibalism, widow-burning, infanticide, polygamy and premarital sex (1971:50). On what basis can an emphasis on mere cultural validity identify any practices as universally wicked and sinful?

God limits himself to the capacities of “imperfect and imperfectible, finite, limited” culture, and has done so even in the incarnation of Christ (1971:115). God uses human language with all its finiteness, its relativity, and its assured misperception of infinity” (1971:114). If Kraft means what he says here, then all human understandings of God’s revelation and all

behaviour-responses are culture-conditioned and none is to be considered universally valid or true (1971:123).

While Kraft insists on evaluation of cultural behaviour, he holds that “meaning of that behaviour is derived entirely from within the other’s system, never from ours or from some ‘cosmic pool’ or universal meanings” (1971:124-25). The fact that God revealed some truths pertaining only to the Hebrews is invoked to justify the notion of the culture-relativity of all revelational information (1971:126).

Scriptural teachings are devalued as culturally conditioned while modern communication theories are assimilated to the revelation of the spirit (1971:169ff). Kraft warns us that the New Testament is largely phrased in “Greek conceptual categories rather than in supracultural categories” (1971:130). For Kraft, the “functions and meanings behind” the doctrinal forms hold priority. He leaves “largely negotiable” in terms of divergent cultural matrixes “the cultural forms in which these constant functions are expressed” (1971:118). There is I believe, no absoluteness to the formulation of doctrine, he says, but the meaning conveyed by a particular doctrine is of primary concern to God” (1971:118). Here Kraft deflates and relativizes the doctrines of the Bible and the creeds of Christendom. Meanwhile he presumes not only to articulate the supracultural mind of God, but to entrench his own debatable doctrine as the rule to which he accommodates all else. He ranges Jesus against the Pharisees and against evangelical doctrinal orthodoxy and contends that Jesus considered beliefs and practices “simply the cultural vehicles” through which “the eternal message of God” is to be expressed and which must be continually updated to fulfil this function (1971:119).

The radical cultural relativism of Kraft’s approach is apparent. Henry’s trenchant evaluation of Kraft should have more than enough of a warning to beware the quicksand of cultural relativism.

### **3.7. Implications for Evangelical Christianity**

When considering the implications of Niebuhr’s presentation for Evangelical Christianity and African culture, the real question should not be whether we should accept or reject culture en bloc, but what is the correct principle of discrimination?. Unfortunately Niebuhr’s approach

does not provide a principle for deciding when one of the five types is operative, and when it is not. I actually agree with his injunction that individual Christians should find the answer for themselves in each decision. What needs to be emphasised is that the categories are simply, as Niebuhr himself acknowledges, leading motifs. A motif should be seen as a dominant theme with respect to some specific cultural activity.

Many facets of African (Shona) culture may be thoroughly anti-Christian and need to be confronted and redeemed rather than transformed. Others, please God, may be thoroughly sympathetic with the gospel and don't need to be transformed at all, but merely given more energy and encouragement. A great deal will depend, therefore, on how we read our culture, and that reading will vary from place to place, moment to moment, and person to person.

Applied this way, the motifs stand out as important analytical categories to help us sort out complex attitudes. They provide a workable way to think about our attitudes toward the question of Christ and culture and to evaluate them. They are introductory tools, useful primarily for getting people to begin thinking more clearly about these issues.

With the understanding that we are utilizing a tool and not a perfect system, I believe that the "Christ the Transformer of Culture" view aligns most closely with Scripture. We are to be actively involved in the transformation of culture without giving that culture undue prominence. As the social critic Herbert Schlossberg (1983:324) says, "The 'salt' of people changed by the gospel must change the world." Admittedly, such a perspective calls for an alertness and sensitivity to subtle dangers. But the effort is needed to follow the biblical pattern

Evangelical Christians have recognized the need to shape and refine the personal life to make it conform to the gospel. Honesty, integrity, chastity and family values are all high on their list of priorities. The same cannot be said of their concern to change the world - to make the social structures of society conform to Christian norms. Mark Noll (1994) in a recent book complains that evangelicals have fallen far short in their calling to relate the gospel to culture. Their record constitutes a scandal.



The argument as presented by both Niebuhr and Kraft is that it is in this world, with its conflicts caused by principalities and powers that we are called to culture and to evangelization. It is therefore of prime importance that we assume an appreciative/critical approach to culture. If we draw together the threads of Niebuhr and Kraft's argument we can single out certain aspects of our cultural responsibility: 1) We should not take flight from the world of culture; 2) We should not simply affirm the world of culture; 3) We should engage creatively in culture as co-workers with God.

Neither world flight nor a flight from culture is an option for the Christian. For God has given us the exalted position of being managers of his creation. To flee from culture is to desert that office. Worldliness cannot be eliminated by world flight because it is basically a matter of the heart. Nor can we simply affirm the world and culture. To affirm the world without qualification means to claim that it is fundamentally good in its present state. That is an oversimplification; it cannot provide a basis for being active in society and participating in the governance of the world. The simple affirmation approach fails to take into account the devastation humankind through its revolt against God has brought on the creation. It fails to see the conflict of kingdoms and of worlds and of cultures.

Christians are therefore called to a twofold attitude to the world and human society. On the one hand, the world is God's great and good creation that continues to display the generosity and goodness of God, a creation that lives in the hope that one day it will be restored when the people of God are fully redeemed. At the same time, in recognition of the principalities and powers that rise up against the Lord, the people of God see the world as an evil kingdom that must be opposed.

### **3.8. Conclusion**

My personal preference as I reflect on these positions in the light of the African context is to use the different positions as useful analytical tools and apply each position as and when necessary. But I am particularly drawn to combine the best aspects of the "Christ and Culture in Paradox" (Dualist) and the "Christ the transformer of culture" (Conversion) positions.

The "Christ and culture in paradox" finds less continuity between culture and the Christian life. It keeps a critical distance from culture, and yet sees it as useful in the Christian life if

kept within its appropriate bounds. Culture therefore has a legitimate place in Christian life, but that place is not the Christian's heart or church; in those places Christ must rule. This position acknowledges that we are cultural beings, that God is sovereign over every sphere of life and that Christians must be both separate from the world and actively involved in it. God is therefore sovereign both in the church and culture, but he rules the two in different ways. In the church, God reigns through the work of Christ and the giving of the Holy Spirit, expressing his love and grace through the forgiveness of sins and the life of faith. God also exercises his authority and providential control through all of creation – upholding the universe. He rules the nations, even those who do not acknowledge him, making human beings social creatures, in need of governments, laws and cultures to mitigate the destructive tendencies of sin and to enable human beings to survive.

The “Christ transforming culture” is critical of culture but it also enters into alliance with what it finds in culture that is capable of becoming part of ongoing work toward the kingdom of God. Culture is seen as the raw material that can be shaped by Christians according to the Christian vision of human life. I'm convinced that ‘transforming culture’ is something Christians, led by the Spirit, should be rightly and deliberately aiming for. The transformation of the whole set of cultural assumptions, including the controlling narratives that people live by, the symbols which embody and encode them, the beliefs that sustain that worldview, and the habitual praxis that results. We only need to think of Wilberforce and the slave-trade. It wasn't enough to preach the gospel and hope that people would see the point. It was a matter of hard and costly work, against the grain and assumptions of the prevailing culture, to change people's assumptions, to transform the whole cultural ethos.

If these two positions are put together, I believe they are most representative of the biblical injunctions to be in the world but not of the world, to be salt, light and leaven to the earth.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Christ and Culture, an African contribution

#### 4.1. Introduction

It has been well established in the previous chapter that religion is always addressed to human beings who are seen not so much as individuals but as members of communities who share a common culture. Culture therefore becomes the critical context in which the gospel is communicated and without which the gospel cannot have any meaningful impact. Unfortunately evangelical communicators have often underestimated the importance of cultural factors in their efforts to communicate the gospel to Africans. In Africa, the evidence shows that evangelicals have been so concerned to preserve the purity of the gospel and its doctrinal formulations that they have been insensitive to African cultural thought patterns and behaviour in their communication of the gospel.

It has taken them a long time to realize that terms such as God, sin, incarnation, salvation, and heaven convey different images in the minds of Africans from those of the messenger. Even those Africans who have become Christians and have had long contact with Christian missionaries continue to give a totally different interpretation to the gospel. Generally, African Christians have been slow to reflect critically on the impact of their own cultural heritage and personal experiences on their understanding and interpretation of the gospel. They assume that it is possible to transmit the pure gospel of the Bible directly to the hearer without the carrier modifying it. In chapter 3, Richard Niebuhr and Charles Kraft, concluded that there is no such thing as the pure gospel, if by pure we mean the gospel without the embodiment of culture. The gospel always comes to us embodied in culture and for that reason the relationship of Christ and culture is unavoidable. As demonstrated in their typologies of this relationship, both theologians agree that there is not one but many answers and responses to the question of Christ and culture.

This chapter considers the same question of Christ and culture but from an African perspective. I will explore the contributions of two African theologians, Lamin Sanneh and Kwame Bediako. The African contribution to this debate is important because of the overwhelming presence of Christianity on the continent. According to Kwame Bediako (1992:250-51), it is without doubt that one of the success stories in the history of the

expansion of Christianity through twenty centuries is its massive presence on the African continent today. Bediako attributes this phenomenal growth to the evangelistic work of the modern missionary movement. The Malawian theologian, Harvey Sindima<sup>124</sup> (1994:85), however argues that the work of Western missionaries would not have accomplished much if it were not for the interest and enthusiasm of the African Christians themselves in the Gospel. He attributes this phenomenal growth to the dedication and hard work on the part of lay people and their clergy.

If this incredible growth is a measurement of how Christianity has been accepted on the African continent and add to this general realization and celebration of political independence and the quest for education, then what we have in Africa is an exceptionally positive and rich environment conducive for serious theological reflection among African Christians. What makes this even more exciting, as demonstrated by African Christian theologians, is the evidence of a new consciousness among African Christians that promotes and defends not only the fundamentals of the Christian faith but also the need to maintain an authentic African Christian identity.<sup>125</sup>

There is increasing realization among African Christians that the missionary did not bring to Africa the pure gospel which they then adapted to the African culture. Rather, the gospel missionaries brought to Africa was already embodied in their own culture. According to Roth (1972:86), this realization has helped African Christians appreciate how burdensome western cultural appendages of the Gospel have become and the need for a paradigm shift. Arguably, all that African Christians want is the freedom to be African and not European or American in their expression and application of the Christian faith. Hence, the strong and growing cry for theological reflection that is relevant to African people (Niringiye 1987:15). This is very consistent with Bolaji Idowu's call to African theologians to a serious consideration of making Christian Theology relevant to the African people. Idowu (Cited in Dickson&Ellingworth 1969:9) says that:

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<sup>124</sup> Harvey Sindima, a Malawian, is professor of Philosophy and Religion at Colgate University.

<sup>125</sup> The Islamic religion has also been around since the 17<sup>th</sup> century and Africans have equally embraced it as a religion. This is as evidenced by Islamic penetration in many areas of the African continent especially the north and west of Africa. My concern in this thesis is primarily the Christian faith.

The Church in Africa could only attain selfhood and be adequate for her mission when she possessed first-hand knowledge of the Lord of the Church and was able to express that knowledge in clear accents made possible through her own original meditation and thinking. . The Church has been speaking in Africa and to Africans in strange or partially understood tongues.

There is therefore no doubt that there is a renewed interest in the relevance of Christianity to the African context. According to Padilla, a Xeroxed copy of a theology made in Europe or North America has failed to satisfy the theological needs of the Church in Africa (Padilla 1978:28). Perhaps, it is this deep dissatisfaction that has helped African theologians to speak more confidently about the authenticity of African Christianity as well as the need for the African church to attain theological independence from those who originally brought the gospel to Africa (Mbiti 1986, Bediako 1995, Sanneh 1983).

#### **4.1.1. Background**

These developments in the African context obviously have a historical background. African Christian theologians look at the Edinburgh Missionary Conference in 1910 as the beginning of this important discourse, at least in the public theological domain. It was at this conference that it was declared that African Traditional Religions (ATRs) do not contain any preparation for Christianity.<sup>126</sup> As expected, this raised great concern among non-Western theologians, in particular African theologians who were already grappling with critical issues of gospel and culture and how God had made himself known to Africans. On the cards was also the quest for political independence in Africa and the need to deliberately and consciously attempt to distance Christianity in Africa from European values. Looking back to that most significant point in the history of the expansion of Christianity into Africa, Bediako (1997:426) reports that the Edinburgh Conference met under what he describes as “the prevailing European value setting of the Christian faith.” Interestingly the concerns of African theologians at this conference were in fact a reaction to the predominance of these values in the way the Christian faith was understood and applied. According to Bediako (1996:33) this reaction eventually became a call for a paradigm shift away from the Euro-centric missionary paradigm. The intention being to somewhat bring about some form of integration between the African pre-Christian religious experience and African Christian commitment in ways that would ensure the integrity of African Christian identity and selfhood”.

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<sup>126</sup> The Missionary Message in Relation to Non-Christian Religions: The World Missionary Conference 1910, Report of Commission IV Edinburgh and London 1910 p. 24; see also Bediako, 1997:426-427).

It took another forty five years after the Edinburgh conference at the Ghana Conference on “Christianity and African Culture” for African theologians to take at least the first step in realizing this goal. In attendance was the Swedish theologian, Per Frostin (1988:14) whose evaluation of the proceedings was that significant steps had been taken in pursuance of cultural and spiritual liberation. Frostin goes on to suggest that following the Ghana conference, a new theological trend whose main emphasis was ‘African identity’ was born. According to Bediako (1997:428) this new theological trend sort to earnestly express the character of African Christian identity.

Once the foundation as described above was laid down, we have seen the emergence of many African Christian theologians, all of them seeking to make a contribution that would help express the character of African Christian identity. Relevant to my thesis are two of these African theologians, Lamin Sanneh and Kwame Bediako. Lamin Sanneh, a native of Gambia, is D. Willis James Professor of Missions and World Christianity and professor of history at Yale Divinity School. He has written extensively on issues to do with Christianity in Africa, particularly West Africa. Kwame Bediako is a Ghanaian and Presbyterian minister and leads a program on African Christianity through which he articulates his views about Christianity in Africa.

#### **4.2. Lamin Sanneh: Christ and Culture**

My primary interest in Lamin Sanneh (1984:422) is his views on the relationship of Christianity and culture as demonstrated in his discussion on the translatability, vernacularization, and indigenous assimilation of Christianity in the African context. Among his books, the one that has perhaps made the deepest impact is *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture (Orbis 1989)*. Here Sanneh argues that Christianity, due to its emphasis on mother-tongue translation, preserves indigenous life and culture. The key to Sanneh’s (1989:200ff) argument is obviously the process of translation. Translation is not only a matter of language but culture. Language is a living expression of culture and is therefore the garment that gives shape, decorum, and vitality to conscious life, enabling us to appreciate the visible texture of life in its subtle, intricate variety and possibility.

The translation of the Scriptures has a long and distinguished history. At the time of Christ the Old Testament was widely available in the Greek of the LXX. Even in the original Greek, the Gospels are translations of words first spoken in Aramaic. The principle that God's message could be communicated in a variety of languages was illustrated clearly on the day of Pentecost when the Spirit gave people from all over the world the ability to hear the message of the Apostles in their own language. In fact, according to Sanneh (1989:67) right from the start of the Christian era the use of vernacular languages and the translation of the Scriptures has been important to the Church. As a rule the Christian church has promoted Bible Translation such that there are portions of the Scriptures now available in over 2,000 languages.<sup>127</sup>

Sanneh's (1989:6) main contribution to the Christ and culture discourse begins with identifying five paradigm shifts that mark the course of Christian history: the Judaic phase, the Gentile breakthrough in the Hellenic phase, the Reformation, nineteenth-century laissez-faire liberalism, and in our age, the missionary movement in Africa and Asia when the vernacular paradigm came into its own. The vernacular paradigm is consistent with Idowu's (1965:1) observation that African theologians have made a definite positional move from doubt and reservation about the genuineness of African Christianity to Mbiti's (1986:229) statement that "the Christian way of life was in Africa to stay, certainly within the foreseeable future," to Bediako's argument that Christianity has become an African religion.

According to this argument the critical concern is therefore the question of how to ensure that Christianity in Africa is truly African (Bediako 1995:4). It is here that Lamin Sanneh and Kwame Bediako, among other African theologians have made their greatest contribution to the Christ and culture discourse. Even Maluleke (1996:3-19) one of the worst critics of African Christianity and theology admits that it is in this important discourse that these two theologians have made some fascinating proposals that will have far reaching implications for the future of Black and African theologies on the one hand and African Christianity on the other.

Sanneh is known for his scathing criticism of the Eurocentric approach to African cultures, especially the way missionaries preserved and promoted their cultures in a cultural context

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<sup>127</sup> <http://www.biblesociety.org.uk/13.php?id=460#7>



that was not their own. This explains why missionaries presented the Gospel in the context and values of European cultures in total disregard of the African context. The basis of Sanneh's criticism is that religion and culture are two inseparable realities and for that reason, Christianity affirms cultural particularity and cannot be expressed apart from it (Sanneh 1993:15). Sanneh therefore argues that African Christians belong to a particular brand of Christianity, one "mediated to them by the West", but whose success has been its assimilation into the local idiom (1993:16).

#### **4.2.1. Translation and Vernacularization of Christianity**

Sanneh's (1989:11) unconventional alternative to the Eurocentric approach consists in the recognition of the translatability of Christianity epitomized in the translation of the Scriptures from one language to another. The importance of mother-tongue translation is found in the fact that the "New Testament Gospels are a translated version of the message of Jesus, and that means Christianity is a translated religion without a revealed language (2003:97)."

The essence of Sanneh's argument is that translation is a benchmark of the Christian Church, and thus establishes the importance of further translation to include catholicity of cultures that Christianity now confronts. Sanneh emphasizes this by pointing to how through translation the Bible adopted into its canon the indigenous names of God. For example, Africans reading the scriptures in their mother-tongue have a sense of pride, a sentiment which according to Sanneh (2003:138) is born from the notion that God cares about them so much that he can speak to them in their own language. In other words Sanneh gives pride of place to the recipients of the Christian message rather than to the missionaries themselves.

Sanneh's central thesis is therefore that Christianity is a translatable religion and has been right from the beginning, and culture is its natural extension in different cultural contexts. He maintains that when first century Christians translated their sacred texts into Greek they began a process by which the Christian message was repeatedly restated in new linguistic and cultural forms. This process both recognized the worth of each language employed and limited or relativized the significance of each cultural medium.

The Translatability of Christianity has had important consequences not just for the church, but for culture generally. Given the centrality of language in African culture, Sanneh

(1989:200) describes translation as adopting indigenous cultural criteria for the message because language is in essence the intimate, living, articulate expression of culture. In African cultures, language and culture are so closely intertwined that language can be said to be synonymous with culture. Language and culture are therefore essential aspects of Christian transmission.

According to this argument, the translation process is such that the messenger, in this case the missionary, is forced to engage indigenous cultures and because the missionary is not familiar with these cultures indigenous experts had the upper hand in the process (Sanneh 1989:5). That way the gospel found itself in the hands of vernacular speakers. In this regard, Sanneh (1983:166) makes a distinction between two processes, the “*historical transmission*” (the work of missionaries) and “*indigenous assimilation*” (the work of local receivers). Of the two, indigenous assimilation is more significant not only because it adopts the vernacular context as the final criterion in translation but also that it is in the work of local receivers that the process of translation becomes meaningful. Therefore to understand African Christianity for example, Sanneh would argue is to give priority to indigenous assimilation, for “in so far as modern Africans have become Christian, they have done so with a Christianity mediated by the West, but in so far as Christianity has successfully penetrated African societies, this is largely because it has been assimilated into the local idiom.” (Sanneh 1993:16).

Wycliffe Bible Translators reinforce this understanding when they define Bible translation as an interaction between God, through his recorded word, and human languages and culture.<sup>128</sup> The translator simply acts as a bridge between the Biblical culture of the text and the target culture. For the translator, the target culture is the end point of their work, but for the language community it is the starting point. They read the scriptures in their own language, interpreting them according to the norms of their society and examining their culture in the light of what they have learned. The translator has a limited role in translating the text, but the community has an open-ended role applying the text to an almost limitless set of circumstances and issues. In other words the translator strives for accuracy in his work, but he ultimately has no control over how the community will choose to interpret the translated text.

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<sup>128</sup> [http://www.ethnologue.com/show\\_language.asp?code=kyf](http://www.ethnologue.com/show_language.asp?code=kyf). Wycliffe Bible Translators are an interdenominational mission that exists to promote the translation and use of the Scriptures amongst minority language groups.

One missionary whose work sparked such response was Rev. J.G. Christaller, a German linguist, served with the Basel Mission in Ghana (Sanneh 1989:179-80). Between 1871 and 1881 he produced a Bible translation, a dictionary and a grammar of the Twi language, crowning his labours with a compilation of 3,600 Twi proverbs and axioms. He also helped found the Christian Messenger in 1883, a paper devoted to the promotion of Akan life and culture. His Twi Dictionary has been acclaimed as an “encyclopaedia of Akan civilization” by the modern generation of Ghanaian scholars.

Often the outcome of vernacular translation was that the missionary lost the position of being the expert (Sanneh 1989:5). But the significance of translation went beyond that. Armed with a written vernacular Scripture, converts to Christianity invariably called into question the legitimacy of all schemes of foreign domination – cultural, political and religious. Here was an acute paradox: the vernacular Scriptures and the wider cultural and linguistic enterprise on which translation rested provided the means and occasion for arousing a sense of national pride, yet it was the missionaries – foreign agents – who were the creators of that entire process. Sanneh (1984:430) is convinced that this paradox decisively undercuts the alleged connection often drawn between missions and colonialism. Colonial rule was irreparably damaged by the consequences of vernacular translation – and often by other activities of missionaries.

In fact, Sanneh (1989:143ff) argues against the theory that “mission was the surrogate of Western colonialism and that together these two movements combined to destroy indigenous cultures.” African Christians, reading the Bible and reflecting on its message in their own languages, have tended “to question, and sometimes renounce, the Western presuppositions of the church.” Moreover, the languages and cultures into which the Christian message has been translated have been invigorated, not destroyed. The genius of the Christian movement through history is therefore its acceptance of cultural and linguistic diversity.

Sanneh’s argument for the translatability of Christianity contains implications about the nature of culture itself. Translation destigmatizes culture – it denies that culture is “profane” and asserts that the sacred message may legitimately be entrusted to the forms of everyday

life. Translation also relativizes culture by denying that there is only one normative expression of the gospel; it results in a pluralism in which God is the relativizing center.

#### **4.2.2. Christianity as a Pluralist religion**

Sanneh has already established that language and culture are essential aspects of Christian transmission. This critical relationship is such that Christian transmission cannot happen apart from language and culture. The Christian gospel needs a language and because language is part of culture, culture becomes the vehicle that carries the gospel. It is in this regard that Sanneh (1989:208) characterizes Christianity as a pluralist religion because its advancement demands a plural cultural frontier. In other words vernacular translation implies a radical pluralism where all languages and cultures are, in principle, equal in expressing the word of God. Sanneh therefore rejects the notion of a hermeneutically sealed culture as the exclusive conveyance of God's truth (Sanneh 1989:30). It therefore goes without saying that no one culture can be God's normative pattern for communicating. Sanneh (1989:6) challenges Christians to accept this pluralist thrust of the gospel as evidence of God's pilgrim purpose (Sanneh 1989:24-28).

Sanneh (1989:47) refers to the 'Pauline factor in cross-cultural mission' in support of his argument. He is fascinated by the way the apostle Paul consistently argues for pluralism as the necessary outworking of the Christian Gospel. In the first instance, the Gospel was rooted in the Gentile breakthrough, which in turn justified cross-cultural tolerance in Christian mission. In Paul's thought the point is made that God does not absolutize any one culture, whatever the esteem in which God holds culture. In fact all cultures have cast upon them the breath of God's favour, thus cleansing them of all stigma of inferiority and untouchability. According to Sanneh this constitutes what he regards as the incipient radical pluralism of Pauline thought (Sanneh 1989:47).

If Christianity is invested in languages and cultures it therefore means that God's purposes are mediated through particular cultural systems (Sanneh 1989:47). It is this insight that the mission of the church applied and as a result recognized all cultures, and the languages in which they are embodied, as lawful in God's eyes, making it possible to render God's word into other languages. The concept of translatability represents this understanding.

According to Sanneh (1989:214) translatability became the characteristic mode of Christian expansion through history. Christianity has no single revealed language, and historical experience traces this fact to the Pentecost event when the believers testified of God in their native languages (Acts 2:6,8,11). But after translation into Greek, Sanneh argues, second and third century Christians so identified with the norms of Hellenistic culture that they turned their backs on the principle that justified “the Gentile breakthrough”: “The timeless logos of the Greeks was substituted for the historical Jesus (1989:215).”

#### **4.2.3. Christ and culture typologies**

Sanneh (1989:29-30) presents two alternative mission strategies which he then links to his typologies: One is “mission by diffusion,” making “the missionary culture the inseparable carrier of the message. Here religion is basically implanted in other cultures as a matter of cultural identity. Islam exemplifies this mode of mission.” The other is “mission by translation,” making “the recipient culture the true and final locus of the proclamation, so that the religion arrives without the presumption of cultural rejection.

Sanneh however admits that these two alternative paths are not always separate or easy to untangle. He concedes that from the beginning, Christian history has included both mission by translation and mission by diffusion as exemplified by the Jerusalem church where most of the disciples thought at first primarily in terms of cultural diffusion.” Yet he is sure that translation is the “vintage mark of Christianity.”

In the same way Kraft and Niebuhr identified models that represent the different Christian cultural attitudes, Sanneh (1989:39) defines his types in three broad categories, Quarantine, Accommodation, and Prophetic witness. As a schematic representation, Sanneh’s typologies are designed to depict major rhythms in the process of the expansion and assimilation of Christianity.

##### **4.2.3.1. Quarantine**

The first type he calls Quarantine, which is the self-sufficient attitude nurtured in isolation, sometimes even in defiance of the world (Acts 2:43-47; 1Pet. 4:7-13; 1Thess. 4:16-18). Both Kraft and Niebuhr characterize this as what was understood by the early Christians as the relationship of Christianity and the world. As clearly indicated in the book of Acts, all contact

with outsiders is reduced to a minimum, and the disciples devote themselves to prayer, the breaking of bread, exhortation, and mutual aid. Under the security of quarantine, people adhere to a literal understanding of the Scriptures, gripped by fear and a fervent conviction that their community represented the decisive virtuous break with an unrighteous world destined to be destroyed in the imminent end (Sanneh 1989:39). Charles Kraft and Richard Niebuhr called this type the 'Christ-against-culture' model characterized by a total rejection of the world and all that it stands for.

#### **4.2.3.2. Accommodation**

The second type is accommodation, characterized by attitudes of compromise rather than defiance. According to Sanneh (1989:39) accommodation is by nature syncretistic because once believers left the secure walls of quarantine behind them, they encountered the world of other beliefs and ideas, which insinuated themselves into the main body of Christian teaching. For example, the practice of circumcision, upheld in quarantine, is considerably modified outside quarantine until it is dropped altogether as a prerequisite of faith (Gal. 5:2-6, 11; 6:12-15). It is retained only as a metaphorical concept (Rom. 2:29; Phil. 3:2-3). Others include sacrifice and marriage.

The point that Sanneh makes is that as the walls of quarantine begun to fall away, as they did in the book of Acts between Jewish and Gentile believers, believers found themselves face to face with people who do not share their faith but who share the world with them and have a culture that is different from theirs. Observances that had been maintained as rituals of separation and transition gradually change to become rites of initiation and confirmation.

#### **4.2.3.3. Reform and Prophetic witness**

The third type is prophetic witness, in which a critical selectiveness determines the attitude toward the world. Christians are in the world but not of the world. This critical selectiveness is really a delicate line between being in the world and not or to put it another way, being behind the walls of quarantine or outside. You can therefore understand why the majority of believers would live lives that overlap between the two, according to Sanneh (1989:42), increasing the likelihood of compromise. In fact Sanneh insists that the three types must not be understood in terms of rigid separation, for there is an inevitable overlap between them.

Instead, they should be thought of as types and styles of religious organization and understanding, all existing – sometimes – together, though in varying degrees of sharpness.

According to Sanneh, Reform does not reject the world, nor does it reject human instrumentality in setting the world aright. Translatability ensures that the challenge at the heart of the Christian enterprise is kept alive in all cultural contexts, though prophetic reform may exploit it best. It is for this reason that the triumphant Hellenized church came to face an irresistible challenge. (Sanneh 1989:48).

Sanneh's own critic of the types is that both quarantine and accommodation threaten religious integrity: the one by cutting us off from the world, and the other by surrendering to it. Reform, on the other hand, points to God's action at the stage where the message intersects the world of culture, and mission is the promise and engagement with that action (Sanneh 1989:46-48).

#### **4.3. Conclusion**

Sanneh's argument for the translatability of Christianity, adoption of indigenous culture and vernacularization suggests that God chooses the cultural milieu in which humans are immersed as the arena of his interaction with people. He speaks human languages and by doing so he participates fully in human culture. Christianity therefore has no single revealed language and no particular religious Geographical centre. The early disciples struggled with this, but in the end translatability won out over uniformity and that is how Christianity has expanded ever since.

Sanneh describes the relationship of Christ and culture in terms of adoption and assimilation into the local idiom. Reform and prophetic witness category is obviously Sanneh's preferred typology of the Christ and culture relationship. What Sanneh is advocating is that once Christ is stripped of all the Western cultural appendages, and has incarnated in African cultures then he can bring about cultural reform. This is possible because Christ becomes like us, dresses like us and speaks our language and in the process reveals himself not only as God, but the God-Man who died and rose again so that human beings in their different culture groups can be reconciled to God. And this revelation of himself comes to us in our cultural thought forms and idioms and so He interacts with us at this level and it is here that we come to know him truly. Sanneh's description of the Christ and culture relationship therefore fits into the



general 'Christ-Above-Culture' model and culture is the God ordained vehicle of bringing Christ to the peoples of the world.

Sanneh makes it very clear that the translatability of the Scriptures and therefore of Christianity is incarnational. It is not limited to the text of the Bible being expressed in different languages, it also involves the interpretation and application of the text by the community. According to Andrew Walls (in Bediako 1995:109), as the people apply the Scriptures to their contexts, the expression of the Christian faith may well adapt to the context.

“It was not merely God’s intention that the message, as disembodied language, be translated from one language to another . . . Translatability is not merely a linguistic passage, limited to words, but a cultural appropriation of which the language becomes the primary medium and symbol, and the practice of faith becomes the tangible dimension (Guder 2000:83).

As all languages are capable of expressing the Gospel through Bible translation, the Gospel can be lived and experienced in all cultures; though it will always challenge the values of any culture it encounters.<sup>129</sup> Because the Gospel can be experienced in all cultures, no single expression of Christianity can claim to be more authoritative than others. Therefore “the principle of translation should serve as a deterrent to the tendency of any national church to absolutize its form of Christian faith” (Carman 1989:786).

This translatability of the Christian faith is rooted in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. In other words, according to John 1:14, the divine Word took on human flesh and lived an authentic human existence at a specific point in space and time. Witnesses saw, listened and touched the Word (1 John 1:1) and they could report their experiences in everyday language without recourse to esoteric or arcane expression. These reports became part of our Scriptural record. In the same way that the original writers could witness to Christ without using any special language, subsequent generations can experience him through their own tongues (Guder 2000:80). The incarnation as an event in space and time renders Bible translation possible, but at the same time, Bible translation reflects the work of Christ. The expression of the Word

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<sup>129</sup> “The Lord’s prayer may be prayed in any language. The call to discipleship may be shaped in every culture and it will always be a blessing and a scandal in that culture – if it is faithful to Christ.” Guder 2000:93.

of God in a new language points to the Incarnation of the Word, himself, in human flesh. The act of translation itself is a signal to the community that God is interested in them (Peskett and Ramachandra 2003 :222)

Sanneh also describes translation as empowerment. The translation of the Scriptures carries the clear message that every language and culture is valuable to God and is a fit vehicle for his Gospel, something which was underlined by the miracle of tongues in Acts 2. At Pentecost, God did not reverse the events of Babel by making everyone speak and understand one language, rather he enshrined the principle of diversity by conveying his message in the language of each of the hearers (Sanneh 1989:46). Revelation 7:9 shows people from all languages honouring the Lamb. “The full confession of God’s grace and glory can only take place through the assembled choir of all human tongues and cultures (Guder 2000:79).”

#### **4.3.1. Critique of Sanneh’s contribution**

Sanneh sometimes gives the impression, not only that translatability is the valid principle of Christian mission, but that cultural absolutism or cultural diffusion is both sub-Christian and inimical to cultural development. While this is a possible theological assessment, a historical comparison of Christianity and Islam needs to include the Christian instances of cultural diffusion. As Sanneh himself notes, there have been many refusals to translate in the history of Christian mission.

In a theological assessment of Christian missionary strategies, I question whether cultural diffusion and ‘translation need be antithetical. The notion of an untranslatable Scripture is connected with the conviction of divine revelation in particular persons, events and institutions. While the original language of the Scripture, of the temple cult and of much scholarly debate was Hebrew, the language of the marketplace was Aramaic. Outside Palestine many Jews used Greek in their homes and recited the Greek translation of the Hebrew sacred writings. What in modern terms would be called Jewish culture was believed to be the same, whether the Scripture was read in Hebrew or in Greek. The first Gentile Christians inherited this culture of religious beliefs and practices, and it made concrete their claim to be part of God’s chosen people.

Subsequently, many Christian communities have also claimed to be God's chosen people. Many such communities have insisted that foreigners who hear the gospel from them should accept their particular cultural version of the gospel as the embodiment of the authentic Christian tradition. Is such a claim justified?

We can admit, however, that what each "Christian culture" tries to embody is the total inheritance of Christian tradition, and it is this tradition that its missionary representatives have sought to pass on. It is certainly true that church history often appears to be a record of Christian unfaithfulness rather than a deposit of faith. But even a record of mistakes can be a salutary lesson for a new Christian community; and there is also in that history a record of courageous attempts to bring forth the fruits of the spirit.

On the question of diffusion and translation, Sanneh understands cultural diffusion from inside as honouring a sacred language and customs chosen to convey God's word and upholding a body of custom developed in obedience to the specifics of God's word. Both diffusion and translation as approaches to mission assume that religion is expressed through culture but also transcends and transforms culture, and both approaches must therefore wrestle with the particularity and universality of God's saving Word.

Modern Protestant mission has, in fact, emphasized both translation and the forming of converts in a Christian culture brought from outside, a culture stamped with a particular Western culture and often, in "higher" education, communicating through a particular Western language?

There is a fundamental ambiguity which lies at the heart of Bible translation. The translator makes every attempt to assure that his translation is faithful to the original, but he has no control over the ultimate test of accuracy –the interpretation and use of the translation by the community. Walls (2002:13) suggest that this sort of vulnerability is actually inherent to the Christian faith. Sanneh (1987:111, 176) sees the vulnerability associated with translation as essentially positive as it allows the community to interpret the translation on their own terms and so develop an authentic, indigenous expression of Christianity. While there is certainly truth in Sanneh's view, it needs to be balanced by wider experience which shows that reaction to translated Scripture is not always as positive as he suggests. Far from ensuring a

vital, indigenous expression of Christianity, the use of the translated Scriptures may in some cases simply reinforce pre-existing missionary or ecclesiastical biases (Trudell 2004:190). Perhaps the most severe reaction that a community can have to the translated Scriptures is also, unfortunately, a common one; they may continue to use the Scriptures in another language despite the availability of the Bible in the vernacular. There are numerous reasons why this might be the case; the attitudes of the translator may alienate the community, the community may be going through a period of language use change, government policies may mitigate against the use of local language.

Where Sanneh's approach suffers most profoundly is in the presumably humble attempt to cast Christianity as one noble option among various religions of the world. Sanneh's "Christian/Muslim Dialogue" argument reflects this kind of value-free, relativistic approach to truth claims. This is, in effect, a betrayal of the very message of Christianity, which inescapably calls for radical conversion and discipleship under the banner of the cross. Sanneh's vision causes no ultimate disturbance for Muslim adherents, (or Jewish adherents, or Mormon adherents . . .) and having thus removed the offence of the cross, is ultimately anaemic.

#### **4.4 Kwame Bediako: Christ and Culture**

In the light of the various theologies being pursued on the African continent, Bediako has deliberately and firmly placed himself within the crucible of African Christian theology (Cf. Bediako 1992). His response to the many contemporary issues facing the African church today is always from an evangelical, scholarly, and African perspective. His evangelical perspective implies a non-negotiable belief in the truth of Jesus Christ. He states categorically that Jesus Christ is a historical reality and that the testimony of the church to Jesus Christ as true God and true man, is a testimony to a given reality (Fotland 2005:36). It is therefore not surprising that Bediako's efforts in the African Christianity discourse are characterized by his consistent use of Christology as a key for interpretation. Bediako always seeks to understand and articulate what the person and ministry of Christ and his accomplishments on the cross means for African reality and context. Bediako is therefore a living example of how to live with the Christ and culture tension as he allows both his love for Christ and the African context to drive his theological reflection.

Like all of us, Bediako is not immune to the influences of key scholars who have been in this enterprise before him. The ones that stand out in his writings include Lamin Sanneh, Andrews Walls, Bolaji Idowu and David Barret. Bediako is privileged to stand on the shoulders of these theologians and therefore sees himself as part of an ongoing process of building authentic African Christianity and theology.

Bediako's contribution to this process is very clear. Throughout all his writings on African Christianity he endeavors to strengthen authentic African Christianity by giving an adequate apologetic to criticisms of Christianity by African intellectuals. Secondly he wants to help African Christians to unashamedly reaffirm and embrace their Western missionary heritage, especially its role in education and Scriptural translation (1995:39-74). Bediako would therefore argue that through education, the missionary enterprise contributed to the "making of the independent African Christian," and gave birth to "vernacular Christian scholarship" as well as the African Independent Churches (1995: 48). Bediako embraces both of Sanneh's concepts of the translatability and vernacularization of Christianity.

In his argument about African Christianity, Bediako describes the present era as "the age of Africa's faith and confidence in the Gospel of Jesus Christ" (1995: 85). In 1970 David Barrett explained this in terms of the numerical growth of the church in Africa and had said that 'African Christians might well tip the balance and transform Christianity permanently into a primarily non-Western religion' (1970:39-54).<sup>1</sup> Andrew Walls then drew out implications from Barrett's observation and suggested that 'what happens within the African churches in the next generation will determine the whole shape of church history for centuries to come; what sort of theology is most characteristic of the Christianity of the twenty-first century may well depend on what has happened in the minds of African Christians in the interim' (1976:180-9). For this prophecy to come true, Bediako suggests that African Christians reconsider their understanding of the gospel in the context of African culture and religion.

Bediako also seeks to challenge the notion amongst African theologians of regarding the "foreignness of Christianity in Africa as a fundamental datum" (1995:115). Following Mbiti and Sanneh, Bediako urges a distinction between Christianity and the Gospel. "We can add nothing to the gospel, for this is the eternal gift of God; but Christianity is always a beggar seeking food and drink, cover and shelter from the cultures it encounters in its never-ending journeys and wanderings (1995:117)." Both Bediako and Sanneh argue on the basis of the

translatability and vernacularization of the Christian faith and therefore suggest that Christianity be understood as a non-Western religion. This way Christianity becomes an adequate frame of reference for all life. According to Benezet Bujo (1992:69), “The incarnation of Christianity in Africa can only come about when it has been shown to the people of that Continent that the message of Jesus, far from destroying the liberation which traditional religion sought, provides it with new, purifying, and total stimulus.” This only happens when Africans are transformed by the Christian message to live a life that is both truly African and truly Christian. This, in Bediako’s argument is what will bring about a genuine African Christian identity and a fuller African humanity and personality.

#### **4.4.1 Africanisation of the Christian Experience**

In ‘Christianity In Africa – The Renewal of a Non-Christian Religion’ (1995:5) Bediako, in agreement with other African theologians like Idowu and Mbiti identifies what he considers to be the main challenge facing Christianity in Africa today - the charge of African intellectuals who say that Christianity can never become an adequate frame of reference for the full expression of African ideals of life. Idowu calls this challenge, Christianity’s apparent foreignness to Africa.

As early as 1963, John Taylor, the then Bishop of Winchester made a statement that holds true as a general character description of western missionary preaching and teaching in Africa during the 19<sup>th</sup> century:

Christ has been presented as the answer to questions a white man would ask, the solution to the needs that western man would feel, the Saviour of the world of the European world-view, the object of the adoration and prayer of historic Christendom. But if Christ were to appear as the answer to the questions that Africans are asking, what would he look like? (Taylor 1963:16)

This statement also raises fundamental questions about the universality of Jesus Christ especially whether or not he is also the Saviour of the African world. In his article, ‘Jesus in African Culture: A Ghanaian Perspective’, Bediako takes as his starting point, the theological meaning of his Akan cultural practices. In the light of this setting he turns his attention to the theological tradition of Christianity, especially the meaning of Christ’s incarnation. He begins

with an innocuous question: What does it mean to call Jesus the universal savior? But then goes on to put an important twist on this confession: what does it mean to call this universal savior, the savior of the African world? The question becomes more pressing in the light of the fact that the teaching of this Jesus in Africa has all too often not touched the African reality. These considerations bring us near to the problem that he maintains confronts us now: how to understand Christ authentically in the African world (Bediako in Dryness (ed) 1994:93-121). This also echoes the concern of African intellectuals who question the adequacy of the gospel to meet the needs of African people.

But this challenge comes out of a much broader problem to do with what Richard Niebuhr (1975) called the enduring problem of the relationship of Christianity [Christ] and culture, especially how the Christian faith can be sustainably and meaningfully African without losing its Christianess. Like Niebuhr says, Christ's answer to the problem of human culture is one thing, Christian answers are another; yet his followers are assured that he uses their various works in accomplishing his own (1975:2).

The fact that Africans struggle to accept Christianity if it is presented as a foreign religion is precisely the problem that Bediako is trying to describe. Africans want to be convinced both practically and intellectually that Christianity is their religion too and that they are not embracing a foreign religion that is often an inadequate frame of reference for all life. It is therefore not surprising that one of Bediako's basic points of departure is that African Christianity must achieve Africanisation of the Christian experience (1995:5). Bediako makes it clear that this Africanisation is not indigenization of the Christian faith and Gospel into African forms but "how African Christianity, employing Christian tools, may set about mending the torn fabric of African identity and hopefully point the way to a fuller and unfettered African humanity and personality" (Ibid.,5). In other words, the issue is not only a religious matter but intellectual and it is at this level that Bediako tries to give a response that is not only evangelical, but scholarly and African.

#### **4.4.2. Christianity and Culture**

Unlike Richard Niebuhr and Charles Kraft and to some extent Lamin Sanneh, Bediako does not necessarily set out to formulate typologies of the Christ and Culture relationship. He adopts and applies a model which one has to more or less construct as you work through his



thinking about Christianity in Africa. Perhaps that explains why, in his contribution to this cardinal discourse, he begins by acknowledging the significance of Niebuhr's approach, but his interest in the issue arises from a set of questions which are somewhat different. His work is specifically directed toward clarifying "how the abiding Gospel of Jesus Christ relates to the inescapable issues and questions which arise from the Christian's cultural existence in the world (Bediako 1992: xi)." To make his point Bediako interlaces the thinking of second century and contemporary African Christian thinkers for the purpose of identifying consistent historical precedents in order to establish parallels between them (Helleman 2005:227-34). He does this by reading Christian tradition of the past with new eyes and asking fresh questions, an exercise that should be helpful in the process of doing theology in a religiously pluralistic world. His main interest in establishing these parallels is the relationship between traditional African religion, culture and worldviews and the acceptance of Christianity.

The backdrop to what Bediako is seeking to establish is how the earliest missionaries understood the African context. Whilst Bediako (Dyrness 1994:93) does not want to exaggerate the negative side of missionary history in Africa he does not disagree with the sentiment that they characterized Africa as a backward continent, its people savage and primitive. It was this paternalism and cultural imperialism more than anything else that bedeviled the efforts of early missionaries (2005:227-34). One of the major negative implications of this is the way African Christians look down on their culture and religion as backward and inferior. This in itself tells a story of what happens when a people's culture and religious identity is so disfigured after many years of abuse that one has no identity. For such people conversion to Christianity is in essence a radical departure from anything and everything that is African. Helleman (2005:4-5) called this total rejection of culture 'cultural discontinuity'. Niebuhr (1975:45) and Kraft (1979:104), called it the radical 'Christ Against Culture' position, which identifies culture with "the world" as in passages such as 1 John 2:15-16 and 5:19, where Christians are enjoined against loving "the world," since the world "is in the power of the evil one." Such passages are taken to indicate that God is dead set against human culture, since the latter is wholly under the power of Satan. To those who hold this view the essence of "culture" is the evil that they see around them, and the way to holiness is to escape from and to condemn "the world."

The correlation to this represents Western theology and Christianity as universal and forgets that it comes to us in Africa biased towards the western culture. Whether this is deliberate or not on the part of the missionary, the point is that Africans were given a gospel dressed in Western cultural attire and the identity crisis is evidence that they failed to discern the distinction between the two. It was only later that African Christians began to realize that they had been cut off from their own past, denied their own history and a legitimate continuity with their respective African ethnic identities (Bediako 1992:237). Desmond Tutu makes this crisis clear when he says:

The African Christian has suffered from a form of religious schizophrenia. With a part of himself he has been compelled to pay lip service to Christianity as understood, expressed and preached by the white man. But . . . he was being saved from sins he did not believe he had committed (cited in Fashole Luke 1978:366).

John Pobee in his book 'Toward an African Theology' quotes a statement made by one of the traditional leaders in Ghana thus:

With the advent of Christianity and western civilization we have been taught to disregard our way of living – a setback to our culture and an opportunity to the imperialists and their agents. . We have too much adopted the Christian way of life and if we could do as our forefathers did, there was no reason why we should not force the imperialists to go bag and baggage from our God-given land (1979:16).

As we now know, this sad situation begun to change radically with the attainment of independence on the continent and the end of the colonial era. Amongst African theologians there was an extreme reaction that shifted the focus from African traditional religion to African independent churches. African Independent churches became a model for how to re-appropriate African traditions as they integrated features of traditional religion.<sup>130</sup> Bediako's opinion is that this marked the beginning of early African Christianity and cultural bridging could have happened by bringing into this context the universal Christ who is also the great fulfillment of the deepest aspirations of all nations.<sup>131</sup> This cultural bridging is what could

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<sup>130</sup> These are the more superficial aspects; there was also outright rejection of the Christian faith. Bediako alerts us to Okot p'Bitek, the non-Christian African representing a modern Celsus; his critique of Christianity has not yet been answered with a full theological response (438-39)

<sup>131</sup> Bediako points to Acts 13:26ff.; 14. 15ff; 17:22ff., as a precedent in this regard.

have assured the newly emerging Christianity a much better sense of identity, and freedom from cultural ties with a foreign culture. This view is also shared by Mbiti and Nyamiti among others.

The fact that this did not happen explains the theological crisis of African Independent churches today. Bediako argues that the church missed the opportunity to help establish the African experience as a preparation for the gospel (1992:434-38). Andrew Walls supports Bediako's argument in this regard and adds that even within African culture it would not have been unreasonable to recognize and utilize such a preparation for the acceptance of Christ (cited in Bediako 1992:245-48).

Unfortunately, not all African theologians agree with Bediako's view of what happened and how the worst could have been avoided. According to John Parratt (1987:154) most African theologians proceed on the assumption that God reveals Himself to some degree in all cultures and in all religions. The African cultural and religious heritage is therefore a source for African Theology. Idowu represents those who argue that the concept of God in African religion is essentially the same as that in Christianity, while Setiloane (1986) has in some sense gone even further, and argued that the traditional African concept of God is in some respects higher than that of the idea of God in Christian theology.

#### **4.4.3. Bridge to Faith**

Bediako's argument about how cultural bridging could have happened in early African Christianity is reinforced by what he perceives to be cultural bridging precedents in the history of the Church. He looks at earlier periods of Christianity which exemplify a similar bridge to the faith and identifies analogies for issues of cultural continuity, and the incarnation of the faith in African life (1992:427). Bediako looks at four 2<sup>nd</sup> century authors, Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Tatian and Tertullian, as examples in how to communicate the faith within a context where they share its socio-cultural heritage (Bediako 1992:429). What makes them such a good example is that they all recognize not only the importance of fidelity to the Scriptures and to Christian tradition but also the validity of cultural continuity (Ibid., 429). This is important for Bediako's conclusion that "positive evaluation of the pre-Christian tradition, and an attempt to derive insights from it for the declaration of Christian convictions, need not imply a theological syncretism (1992:431)."

#### 4.4.3.1 Christ, The Pre-Incarnate Word

As an example of cultural bridging from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, Bediako(1992:436) looks at Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria to learn from how they responded positively to the Graeco-Roman tradition. Justin Martyr is known to have done the basic ground-clearing work aimed at securing the rights of Christian revelation in the context of rival claims and against its misrepresentations. He is recognized as more accommodating to contemporary Greco-Roman culture (Helleman 2005:7). Clement on the other hand sought to unify Christian insights and what he considered worthy in the Hellenistic tradition into an integrated account of reality, with Christ as its head as the ultimate hermeneutical key to the entire religious history of mankind.

The key example is that both authors accepted the pre-incarnate Word at work in non-Christian traditions, in this case the Hellenistic culture. Helleman (2005:436) argues that by accepting the working of the pre-incarnate Word in Hellenistic culture these Christian thinkers were also accepting the idea that pre-Christian traditions also responded to the reality of the Transcendent and were therefore sensitive to truth and falsehood. According to Justin Martyr (about A.D. 100-163), every apprehension of truth (whether by believer or unbeliever) is made possible because humans are related to the Logos, the ground of truth (cited in Ronald Nash 1984:88). Justin was therefore convinced that there were Christians before Christ. He even went further and argued that some philosophers and thoughtful persons of the past had in fact found justification through their genuine quest after nobler conceptions of the divine, and excellence in conduct; that the philosophical tradition itself was a divine gift bestowed upon Hellenistic culture to lead to Christ and so to serve much the same purpose as the Old Testament revelation in the religious history of the Hebrews (Bediako 1992:435).

By adopting this open and inclusive approach to the pre-Christian tradition, Justin and Clement were refusing to treat Christian revelation and the “non-Christian” tradition as mutually exclusive systems. Rather, in their thinking, the encounter between the two realities took place on quite different terms, that is, “in the things that pertain to the spirit,” and they were prepared to argue for the operation of the pre-incarnate Word in the “non-Christian”

tradition no less than in the Christian (Bediako 1992:436). Looked at from this angle, the pre-Christian tradition became a “tradition of response” to the reality of the Transcendent, and so could be probed not so much for the measure of truth it contained, as for the truth of the human response to the divine action within the tradition (Taylor 1972:182ff).<sup>132</sup>

On this matter Bediako recognizes analogies with the positions of Idowu, Mbiti and Mulago, who affirm an African identity, rejecting discontinuity between African Christian experience and its pre-Christian heritage (Helleman 2005:6-7). This argument helps to shed light on how the Gospel relates to the different cultures and the nature of God’s saving activity prior to the Incarnation and the beginning of the Christian era. In the context of Africa this argument is also helpful in answering the question of whether or not missionaries brought God to Africa. The standing argument amongst African theologians, especially Mbiti is that missionaries found God already there in Africa, they only brought Jesus with them. According to Mbiti, belief in God is at the centre of African religion and dominates all its other beliefs (Mbiti 1975:40). This is consistent with Justin Martyr’s argument that every apprehension of truth, in this case belief in God is made possible because Africans and so are all other cultures, are related to the Logos, the ground of truth.

#### **4.4.3.2 Christ, the Pre-existing Logos**

Another example is that of Christ as the “Seminal Word” who became man. Justin’s theory of the Logos/Word seeks to give account of his witness in the Hellenistic past (Bediako 1992:146). As a result of this theory, Justin was able to integrate his Hellenistic self-consciousness and his Christian commitment.

John writes in Chapter one of his gospel that “the Word (Gk. Logos or LOGOS) was with God and was God.” Some have apparently misunderstood this phrase to mean the “word of God” i.e. the Bible. But it was not the writing (Gk. Graphe) or Bible (GK. Biblios) that existed before creation, but rather the LOGOS (literally – “word”), a concept from Greek philosophy. But what made John’s statement so profound was that he not only affirmed the

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<sup>132</sup> Bediako argues that the concept of “religion as a people’s tradition of response to the reality of the Holy Spirit” describes what he thinks Justin and Clement were trying to express in their approach to their Hellenistic heritage.

existence of the LOGOS but claimed that it was God himself (Henry 848).<sup>133</sup> New Testament scholars say that to properly understand John's prologue one must appreciate how a literate, first century citizen of the Roman Empire, familiar with Greek philosophy and culture would have understood the term (Tenney 1981:10).

Heraclitus (Wheelwright 1959) of Ephesus, who lived in the sixth century, B.C. was the first philosopher known to have given LOGOS a philosophical or theological interpretation. He described the LOGOS as a universal, underlying principle, through which all things share. In a changing universe, it was the unchanging (Hussey 1982:33-59). The notion of the LOGOS was further developed by Stoic philosophers who spoke of the LOGOS as the "Seminal Reason," through which all things came to be, by which all things were ordered, and to which all things returned (Funk 1996:100). And so Justin adopted the Stoic doctrine of the "Seminal word" and identified the WORD with Christ. His aim was to emphasize the absolute significance, so that all that ever existed of virtue and truth may be referred to him. The old philosophers and law-givers had only a part of the Logos, while the whole appears in Christ.

Philo of Alexandria (Evans 1959), a Hellenistic Jew who lived around the time of Christ, references the LOGOS as the "Divine Reason," by participation in which humans are rational; the model of the universe; the superintendent or governor of the universe. According to the preceding considerations the LOGOS would have been understood as:

The plan or model of the universe – the source of order in the universe, that by which all things come into being and all things come to pass, the source of human reason and intelligence, universal, unchanging, eternal (Evans 1959:334-336).

In other words the LOGOS is God! A more complete understanding of this LOGOS comes from recognizing, as John states in his gospel, that the Logos became flesh at a particular time in history: about 4 BC; in a particular place: Palestine; as a particular man: Jesus Christ; and for a particular purpose: to reconcile humankind with God through his human life, death, and resurrection (Beaumont 2002)

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<sup>133</sup> Cf. H. Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God* (translated by William Hendriksen), Grand Rapids, Mich., 1951, pp. 260-264; W.F. Howard, *Christianity According to John*, Philadelphia, 1946, pp. 34-56.

This was Justin Martyr's (Bediako 1992:142) measuring principle and it is important to Bediako's thesis on building bridges within a culture as a way of mediating reception of the gospel. The urgent contextual question for Bediako is, how God could have left himself without a witness in the African context. This he links with the question of how God had provided a witness of himself in the Hellenistic past (1992:146). The answer is: Christ, the divine *logos spermatikos* (seminal word) sowing seeds of truth in human minds. He understands the 'seminal word' as a simple description of how Christ functions in practice, among human beings (1992:147).

Since Christ was active first in creation his incarnation then meant a continued active role which is fully appreciated only by Christians, who know him as the 'whole *logos*', even though every race 'partakes' of him and accordingly has 'partial' knowledge (Helleman 2005:8-10). In this sense, Bediako (1992:149-50) would argue, Socrates or Heraclitus knew the truth partially, and in knowing the truth also knew Christ, who is the truth. Partial knowing is evident from inconsistencies in their views, but what they did know was based on direct inner working of the Word (1992:151-152). Justin claimed that those who were living according to the truth, and willing to confront falsehood, even at the expense of their lives, may be regarded as companions of Christ, even if they were regarded as 'atheists' (as Christians of his own time)(1992:156).

In this argument Justin links every human destiny to Christ and brings every human thought and action and every movement of the human spirit under Christ, the seminal Word of God who has "sown seed of truth among all men" (Bediako 1992:146). When he refers to the full manifestation of the incarnate Christ as the "seminal Word" it is for the sake of all humankind. This brings out the redemptive concern that underlies Justin's theory of the universal activity of Christ.

In his conclusion on Justin Martyr, Bediako is confident to argue that far from Justin attempting to Hellenize Christianity, he was in fact Christianizing the Hellenistic traditions (Ibid., 159). He points out how in the history of mankind, God has never left Himself without a witness and therefore in the Hellenistic past the LOGOS/Word was that witness which also brought about integration or cultural bridging of his Hellenistic world and his Christian commitment.



In this argument of cultural bridging from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, Bediako clearly recognizes these analogies with the positions of African theologians, Idowu, Mbiti and Mulago, who affirm an African identity and at the same time reject discontinuity between African Christian experience and its pre-Christian heritage. There is therefore a deliberate push for continuity using the same argument presented above. God indeed has not left himself without a witness on the African continent.

#### 4.5. Christology as interpretive key

A. Bediako's non-negotiable belief in the truth of Jesus Christ as a historical reality identifies him with many Evangelical Christians who believe that Jesus is the revelation of God. He is God's Son, God's representative, he makes God's will known to us, and he is the human being God intended us to be. In one sense, all Christologies say that we know God, in the deepest sense of the word, in Jesus Christ (Berkhof 1973:28).<sup>134</sup> In fact, the Christian faith stands or succumbs by this. The logic of this reasoning is that if we know God most clearly in Christ we should begin with that clarity and from there proceed to what is less clear. According to John Calvin, Christian theology that does not begin with Christology or more specifically, this Christological understanding is a detour (Calvin's Institutes III, 2, 2). That explains for example, why the earliest credal statements of the church begin with Christ. They find their centre in the phrase 'Jesus is Lord (Seeberg 1920:200-204).'

This Christological thinking is central to Bediako's theology. It is therefore not surprising that in his theological reflection on Christianity and African culture, he uses Christology as an interpretive tool. John Mbiti does the same and Bediako finds him to be very helpful in developing a more acceptable understanding of the Christ and culture relationship. For example, Mbiti is well known among other statements for saying that, 'what the Gospel brought to Africa was Jesus Christ and not God, and therefore the uniqueness of Christianity is Jesus Christ (Bediako 1986: 49; Mbiti 1969:277).'

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<sup>134</sup> A 'high' Christology speaks about Jesus as God, a 'low' Christology focuses on his humanity. Rarely are these absolute perspectives, but they indicate the position from which the Christology begins: 'from above' (as God who comes to us) or 'from below' (as a human who expresses something or all of God) See Berkhof 1973: 281f [ET 1979 *Christian Faith*: 267f.].

Jesus of Nazareth is the criterion by which every Christian affirmation has to be judged, and in the light of which it stands or falls (Neill 1984:23).

This, for Bediako marks the distinction not only between African traditional religions and Christianity but also Christianity and Christ. Christ is something other and something more than Christianity and all its agents (Fotland 2005:36). Essentially Christians claim uniqueness and finality only of Christ and not for Christianity in any of its many institutional or cultural forms (Stott 1992:305). Bediako therefore argues that African people received Jesus Christ for his own sake and for the qualities they saw in him, and not for other benefits that missionaries could offer (Bediako in Bauckman 1989:223). Bediako will later on use this in qualifying Jesus Christ as an ancestor.

The logic of Bediako's argument is that, if African people received Jesus Christ as a result of a genuine encounter with the risen Lord, then it follows that the interpretation of Christ and the expression of his accomplishments must grow out of that encounter. Fotland describes the encounter as between Christ and the local culture (Fotland 2005:36). Missiologists have argued that the encounter is not only between Christ and culture but between worldviews, the Christian worldview, and the African worldview. Such an encounter in my opinion implies a growing and living relationship between Christ and a given culture and how out of such a relationship will come an appreciation of the relevance of Christ and his work in that given context. For Bediako, Christ is found not only in the Bible but also in local contexts.

According to Fotland (2005:36) there are two processes that must happen in order to discern the relevance of Christ. The first one is a process of engagement between the biblical testimony and the local culture. The second is a process of engaging Christian scholarship by listening to other view points. This explains why Bediako uses images from different sources to elaborate his Christology. But his constant aim in working the processes is to express a coherent Christology that is adequate for Africans.

**B.** Since Christ is central to Bediako's thinking about the African context, he deliberately wants him to be expressed in a way that is culturally relevant to Africans. To do this he uses a variety of sources but especially the cultural thinking and understanding of the Akan people group of Ghana (his own cultural group) as representative of the general thinking of African

people (Bediako in Samuel & Sugden 1984:98). There is no doubt that the Bible remains the primary resource in Bediako's attempt to find African Christological titles, but he also feels very strongly the necessity to emphasize images that can express the African experience in a particular way and such images can only come from the different aspects of African reality (Fotland 2005:36-37).

As basis for his argument, Bediako points to the precedent set by the Apostles and the first century Christians in the gospels as they reflected on the situation after the death of Christ. Their reflections led them to bestow upon Jesus titles borrowed from contemporary culture which made Jesus and the good news intelligible to their context. These titles remained in the Christian tradition through all the cultural changes which took place down the ages (Schillebeeckx 1982:25ff). What is however interesting is that Western theologians are today calling these titles into question because they want Jesus to be relevant to the modern men and women. They believe that these titles, even if they originate in the Bible, are puzzling for people today and often serve to obscure rather than to illuminate the message. Christian thinkers today are striving to recover the genuinely human dimension of Jesus so that his message may really meet modern people and modern problems, instead of being wrapped in some ancient and often incomprehensible metaphysical idiom (Kung 1978).

If such a reinterpretation is necessary for Western people, it is much more urgent for the Africans, who received Christianity in foreign wrappings which made it impossible for them to perceive the message hidden within. Bediako argues that the early Greek Church Fathers set a precedent in this regard and therefore takes their theological approach to doing Christian theology as a model to follow. Instead of reproducing biblical idioms for their Christian theology, they simply added to biblical Christology from their own cultural context (Bediako 1978:13). This was obviously in order for Christ to be culturally relevant to the Greek context. This was acceptable scripturally because their Christology 'spoke the language of the scriptural message (Ibid.,). Further, Bediako states that the 'content of Christian communication is Christ himself (Ibid.,14) and so in his argument, it is possible to be both biblical and contextual at the same time as exemplified in the Greek context.

Although Bediako recognizes that equivalents of biblical titles for Jesus Christ can hardly be found in African cultures and local languages, he still maintains that Jesus Christ can best be

understood when given titles related to African traditional worldviews (1998:110) and so he uses freely, but not uncritically, titles of Christ from African traditional religions. He avoids those titles that cloud or distort the process of communicating the biblical message and promotes those that enhance it.

#### 4.6. Titles of Christ

The list below contains Christological titles that Bediako (cf. 1990, 1995: 85f) makes use of or refers to. Roar Fotland (2005:38) in his article on the 'Christology of Kwame Bediako' does a good job of assigning the titles to three different categories as well as identifying where in Bediako's writings these titles are used.

<b>African Titles</b>	<b>Biblical Titles</b>	<b>Other Titles</b>
Healer	Jesus Christ	Protector
Master of Initiation	Jesus of Nazareth	Provider
Elder Brother	Son	Enabler
Ancestor	Christ	Christus Victor
Great Ancestor	Son of God	Friend of the poor
Great and Greatest Ancestor	Lord	Field Marshal
Supreme Ancestor	Saviour	The Valiant One
Chief	Second Adam	Sword Carrier
Hunter	Son	Hero Incomparable
Great Doctor	Logos	Universal Saviour
Chief of all chiefs	Mediator	Saviour of the World
The Big Tree	High Priest	God the Son
Powerful Chief	Man	God-man
Nana Yesu	Lord and Saviour	Son of the Father
Odwira	King	Source of life
The Lion of the Grasslands	Christ as God	Incarnate and Risen Saviour
Diviner	Lamb of God	The Great Doctor
	Messiah	Supreme Priest
	Holy One	
	Redeemer	
	Word of God	

Of all these titles Bediako's obvious preference is the African perception of Jesus Christ as the supreme ancestor. He uses this perception for his analysis of African Traditional religions both as preparation for the Christian Gospel and as a basic clue to the very reason why Christianity has grown in Africa. It is here that Bediako speaks categorically about the relationship of Christ and culture. Everything he has written points to a relationship where Christ uses culture and at the same time is undoubtedly supra-cultural and therefore judges and transforms culture in the process.

#### 4.6.1 The Ancestor cult

Bediako joins many other African theologians to persuasively argue for the title 'ancestor' as the most significant African title for Jesus Christ. Obviously this is not without qualification because most African theologians argue that Jesus is not just one of the ancestors, but ancestor par excellence, a unique ancestor. In fact there is a pre-eminence, a priority, to Jesus' ancestorship (Shorter 1969:27-37).<sup>135</sup> For African Christians the balancing act is in that Jesus is definitely unlike the other ancestors, but he is clearly not totally unlike them.

This preoccupation with the ancestor cult is not surprising when you consider that the religious universe of most Africans gravitates around the cult of the dead. For Africans, "survival after death is not a matter for argument or speculation; it is an axiom of life (Willoughby 1978:66)." Mbiti affirms, "Without exception, African peoples believe that death does not annihilate life and that the departed continue to exist in the hereafter (Mbiti 1970:264)." Whilst there is no uniform system of beliefs and practices of this cult in black Africa, Bediako proceeds on the basis that there are many elements shared in common by many ethnic societies.

Gehman (1987:141) places the ancestor cult in its most meaningful context of family, which is also the base of African culture. In this context ancestors are always related by blood, as members of one's family or tribe. They therefore remain linked to their families and continue

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<sup>135</sup> Shorter is perhaps the strongest critic of the ancestor cult as a helpful Christological title. Here he gives a positive appraisal of the role of ancestors in African Christian life, but he expresses hesitancy with respect to its value in Christology. In his 1983 article, he does write, "But, whereas the 'ancestor' concept does not illuminate or develop our understanding of the person and role of Christ, the person and role of Christ can and does illumine and redeem the African understanding of the 'ancestor'" (202). Certainly the ancestor concept has to be 'purified' or further theologized as it is applied to Christ. It is not applied to Christ univocally. The theologian who has utilized ancestorology most extensively in theology is Nyamiti, incorporating it into a theology of the Trinity as well.

to protect them and to act as their mediators. They watch that the living follow the customs of the family, they bless them or punish them according to the circumstances. When the living fail to follow the customs of the fathers, it becomes the duty of the ancestors to correct their errors (Ibid., 141).” They do this by bringing upon the family some crisis, whether it is a drought or pestilence, sickness or death. This explains why in African culture and religion, all life is spiritual and everything that happens in the community or the individual for that matter has a spiritual explanation.

But who are the ancestors? To make this concept stick, it is important for Bediako and other African theologians to clarify who the ancestors are because they are going to enlist Jesus Christ as one of them. Not all the dead are ancestors. In fact this is often highlighted as one reason why the first missionaries had difficulties accepting the cult of the ancestors. According to Ezekiel Gwembe (1995:32), in his paper entitled ‘Ancestors and African culture’ the first missionaries failed to make the distinction between the spirits and the ancestors. All ancestors are spirits but not all spirits are ancestors. In other words there are spirits who never can be ancestors. Ordinarily only those who show exemplary qualities in life qualify as ancestors. Nyirongo’s (1997:52), emphasis is on the exemplary life the deceased lived whilst “in the flesh.” His argument is that if life flows from tradition it then means that only those who would have observed the traditions of the ancestors by practicing its laws become ancestors. In other words, no one can attain ancestral status without having led a morally good life, according to traditional African moral standards. An ancestor is therefore regarded as a role model of conduct in the community, and a source of tradition and stability (Nyamiti 2004:4).

This qualification points to someone who favoured life and was therefore a pillar of the community during his life and promoted union and communion in the midst of the family. According to Nyamiti (1984:100), this links the ancestor cult with the African traditional worldview that makes life understood as sacred power (vital force), the central element. The ideal of African culture is coexistence and strengthening of vital force in the human community. This ideal is one of the basic motivations of ancestral cult.

The belief in ancestors therefore implies faith in their continuous presence. In fact, “the dead are not dead,” they only “departed,” they “left us” “passed away,” “went to rest” the way

many African people express it. The ancestors are believed to have survived death and to be living in a spiritual world, but still taking a lively interest in the affairs of their families. They are not far away, and they are believed to be watching over their families like a “cloud of witness.” According to Parrinder (1962:59) everything that concerns the family, its health and fertility are of interest to the ancestors, since they are its elders and will also seek rebirth into the same family. The family land is their property, and they must be consulted when land is let out to other people. Gehman (1987:143-44) highlights this in terms of the obligations of the living to their Ancestors.<sup>136</sup>

If this line of logic about the ancestor cult is followed to its logical conclusion, it is not surprising that in African culture, Ancestors are the most, if not the only visible and prominent aspect of the transcendent realm. In fact, according to Parrinder (1962:57), “No approach to any appreciation of indigenous ideas regarding God can take any path but through the thought-area occupied by the ancestors.” For the ordinary African man and woman, life has no meaning at all apart from ancestral presence and ancestral power.

Right at the top of the hierarchy is God, the Supreme Being, and ‘the ancestors form the most prominent element in the African religious outlook and provide the essential focus of piety’ (Bediako in Samuel&Sugden 1884:99). So, by naming Jesus as an ancestor, Bediako places Jesus among the outstanding persons of the community. There is therefore consensus of concept amongst African theologians and what they have all attempted to do in varied ways is to qualify Christ’s ancestorship instead of disputing it. For example, for John Pobee, writing within the context of Akan society in Ghana, Jesus is *Nana*, “the Great, and Greatest Ancestor.” For E.J. Penoukou, whose society of origin is the Ewe-Mina of Togo, Christ is *ancetre-joto*. For Benezet Bujo of the Congo, Christ is the proto-ancestor (Bujo 1992:92-94).

<sup>137</sup> Charles Nyamiti has written more than most on the topic of Christ as ancestor. For him

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<sup>136</sup> Gehman, Richard. *African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective*. Kijabe: Kesho Pub. 1987. p.143-44. Gehman points out that throughout life, there are many occasions for remembering the living-dead through customary household rites, through significant points in the cycle of life like at child birth, puberty, marriage, sickness, and death. The cycle of seasons also serve the same purpose when the living-dead are specially remembered during rain rites, planting and harvest time, hunting and fishing.

<sup>137</sup> Benezet Bujo prefers Proto-Ancestor to Ancestor and argues that the concept of Jesus as Proto-Ancestor is the basis of African Christology. The historical Jesus lived the African ancestor-ideal to the highest degree. Jesus manifested those qualities which Africans attribute to their ancestors. Yet the concept as applied to Jesus is only applied analogically. Jesus is not one ancestor among many, but the ancestor par excellence. The title of



Christ is both our Brother and our Ancestor, or better our Brother-Ancestor. For Francois Kabasele, also of Congo, Christ is an elder brother-ancestor. Abraham Akrong, also from within the worldview of the Akan of Ghana, speaks of Christ as Nana and as warrior-ancestor and hero-ancestor (Goergen 2001:51).<sup>138</sup>

#### 4.6.1.1. Ancestors as Intermediaries

The most important role Ancestors play in African religion and is important in Bediako's Christology is that of mediator. According to Nyamiti (1985:41) an ancestor, who was once living a natural life among the people, now enjoys a quasi-supernatural or supersensible mediatorial status. He is an intermediary between God and the ancestor's people.<sup>139</sup> The rationale given by Gehman (1987:141) is that the ancestors are close in time to the living and therefore they can best understand man's needs. Being closer to God, they have "full access to the channels of communicating with God directly."

In his explanation of the intermediary role of the ancestors, Idowu (1987:129) accepts Rudolf Otto's description of man's religious situation as that which bewilders, terrifies, frightens, spells danger, but yet attracts and invites with a "beckoning" which is tantamount to absolute demand.<sup>140</sup> Undoubtedly, belief in such experience accounts also for the African's ambivalent behaviour characterized by fear and affection towards his ancestors (Parrinder 1962:59). The need for a mediator arises out of this unique experience but also because the reality that man has to deal with is not a vague abstraction but a reality with the attributes of a person. Therefore, man needs something to mediate between them (Nyamiti 2004:5).

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Proto-Ancestor "signifies that Jesus did not only realize the authentic ideal of the God-fearing African ancestors, but also infinitely transcended that ideal and brought it to new completion.

<sup>138</sup> His article is on African Christology and together with a group of African students struggled with "an African Jesus." He explains that it was not a question of accepting or not accepting traditional images of Christ. The questions were rather how best to inculturate Christ, how best to evangelize African cultures, how to allow Africa to make its distinctive contribution to Christian theology, how to contribute to an intercultural theological dialogue and even an inter-religious dialogue with African religion.

<sup>139</sup> Nyamiti, in "Trinity from an African Ancestral Perspective," p. 41 indicates five items that are sufficiently common within the African concept of ancestor to make it theologically helpful for constructing an African theology. These are the ancestor as kin and source of life, his or her sacred status, the mediatorial role, exemplary behaviour, and the ancestor's right to regular sacred communion with the earthly kin.

<sup>140</sup> Idowu, *Olodumare*, p. 129. See Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, (London: O.U.P., 1943), chapters 4-6.

#### 4.6.1.1.1. Why should Africans relate to Jesus as ancestor?

Bediako (1990) argues consistently that a true African is one who is genuinely connected to the reality of the ancestors. It has already been argued that by ‘ancestors’ most African theologians mean the good ones, the God-fearing ancestors if you wish, those who exercise a good influence on their descendants. For such ancestors their experiences and examples are considered a “last will and testament” left behind for the benefit of their descendants. In the African context the last words of a dying person, especially of a father or mother, are of particular significance. According to Bujo (1992:73), the words are words of life, setting the seal on the experiences and an example of one who, while withdrawing from the community, yet truly lives on within it, along with the other ancestors. It therefore adds up that a fully integrated African Christian is one who relates Jesus to the reality of the ancestors.

Another reason is that the role of the ancestors is to protect and care for the totality of life. If Africans are to experience Jesus as a protector and one who really cares for their daily life, he must also be understood as ancestor (Bediako 1990:12). This is why Bujo (1992:73) looks at the historical Jesus of Nazareth and calls him the proto-Ancestor. He sees in him, not only one who lived the African ancestor-ideal in the highest degree, but one who brought that ideal to an altogether new fulfillment.

A third reason is that the ancestor cult lies right at the heart of African spirituality. If Jesus is to be more than a guest and a stranger to the African context, he has to be among those to whom one can relate at the level of the heart (Bediako 1990:11). In his earthly life, Jesus manifested precisely all the qualities and virtues which Africans like to attribute to their ancestors and which lead them to invoke the ancestors in daily life. Bediako’s missiological argument is that it is fundamentally important that Africans should relate to Jesus in this way because he qualifies to be one plus more.

The logic of Bediako’s argument in calling Jesus ancestor is therefore the relevance of Jesus Christ to the African context as determined by whether or not he can relate to the importance and function of the ancestors? Bediako (1990:13) confidently identifies Jesus as an African ancestor, he calls him *Nana Yesu* and the reason for this inclusion is his universality of Jesus Christ. Jesus belongs to all human cultures because of his universality. His universality is such that even though he was born a Jew he cannot belong exclusively to the Jews. In fact his

Jewishness becomes a universal gift to all those who believe in him because they will inherit all the 'divine promises given to the patriarchs and through the history of ancient Israel' (Bediako 1990:14). Through faith in Jesus these promises also belong to all of us.

Bediako relates this logic to the 'Ancestor cult'. Ancestors in African traditional religion belong to the clan or the lineage and as a result can only function in that closed system (Bediako in Samuel&Sugden 1984:99). According to Nyamiti (2004:1-5) African ancestral relationship includes the idea of kinship as an indispensable factor. No one can be an ancestor of an individual who is not kin related to him. It is for this reason that rituals for the dead without any particular reference to kinship are generally considered as not belonging to ancestral cult. But with Christ this closed system is opened and Christians from the different clans can see themselves as part of a universal system and universal human family. It is for this reason that Bujo (1992:73-74) calls Jesus Proto-Ancestor. His argument is that the term "ancestor" can only be applied to Jesus in an analogical or eminent way, since to treat him otherwise would be to make him only one founding ancestor among many. That is why he reserves the title "Proto-ancestor" only to Jesus. This signifies that Jesus did not only realize the authentic ideal of the God-fearing African ancestors, but also infinitely transcended that ideal and brought it to new completion. No other ancestor can be thought of who was capable of such a complete and effective realization of the ideal.

To name Jesus as ancestor and give him the most prominent position among them, has wider implications for both Jesus and the ancestors. Roar Fotland elaborates these implications:

Jesus is suddenly incorporated into the African sphere and is connected to religious language and an understanding that previously belonged only to the ancestors. On the other hand the ancestors also have to adjust to a new reality. They do not receive as much reverence as formerly, their way of relating to the living comes under fresh scrutiny, and they are desacralised as they are increasingly viewed as mere human beings. Jesus slowly but steadfastly takes over the position both in relation to individuals and to society ((2005:37).

If according to African traditional religion, the ancestors are mediators between God and human beings, acting on 'delegated authority from God', (Bediako in Samuel&Sugden

1984:99:98) then the ancestorship of Christ has some very challenging implications for traditional religion. This is especially true when you consider that their mediation would include various aspects of what may be called 'salvation': (Ibid.,98) rescuing in times of trouble, securing the continuation of the society, (Ibid., 99) helping when sin destroys the social order, (Bediako 1990:17-18) and receiving prayers for help.

What makes the ancestorship of Christ even more challenging to traditional religion are the obvious obstacles in the relationship between the people and their ancestors seen from a Christian perspective. According to Bediako, one obstacle is the ambivalence of the ancestors. For ancestors are also a source of fear and uncertainty (Bediako in Samuel&Sugden 1984:115) and take revenge if necessary. On the part of the living, the ambivalence is in that on one hand, there is an attitude of affection and respect because the ancestral spirits are in fact their own family members, yet on the other hand, the living-dead are dreaded and feared. When death occurs, a barrier is erected between the living and the living-dead which creates anxiety and fear (Gehman 1987:145). Mbiti's (1969:84) observation is that the living-dead are wanted and yet not wanted. Taylor (1963:152) summarizes this ambivalent attitude towards ancestors as a "strangely mingled sentiment of awe, anxiety, and affection which the living feel toward the ancestors.

Another obstacle is the human origin of the ancestors: 'Ancestors were once upon a time, mere men' and by contrast, Jesus is from above (Bediako in Samuel&Sugden 1984:115). Jesus is 'the Son of God: the Christ from heaven who became incarnate' (1984:116). In this way Jesus is more than the ancestors. As one with God, he is automatically above them, and as Lord and Saviour, he replaces them and 'becomes for us the only mediator between God and ourselves' (1984:104). By becoming a human being and sharing our condition, Jesus can also be defined as an Elder brother who lives in the presence of God. As such he 'displaces the mediatorial function of our natural "spirit fathers"' (Bediako 1990:18).

The climax of Bediako's (1990:18) argument is that Jesus is able to take over the role of the ancestors because he is their Lord. On the basis of the resurrection and ascension, Jesus became the Lord of the ancestors so that he is Lord over them 'in much the same way that he is Lord over us' (Bediako in Samuel&Sugden 1984:104). Bediako points to the sending of the Holy Spirit as a 'guarantee' of his Lordship over the ancestors. The sending of the Holy

Spirit upon his followers secures the continuous presence of Jesus among them, in order to take over the role of the ancestors to protect and guide us (1984:104). Bediako says about Jesus, 'he has sent us his own Spirit, the Holy Spirit, to dwell with us and be our protector' (Bediako 1990:19).

Having exposed the ambivalent nature of the ancestors and how some of them are even 'malevolent', Bediako (1984:114) sees Jesus as the one who will bring to an end this negative influence of ancestors. Jesus will eliminate this negative influence and terror by becoming the sole divine ancestor, and therefore the Lord of the ancestors. As Lord he empties them of their power, and claims that power for himself (Bediako 1990:19). In this way, according to Bediako, Jesus neutralizes the ancestors by replacing them and therefore they have no power to save and no power to harm.

Without this power, not only does Jesus eliminate the negative influence of the ancestors on society, he also desacralises and reduces them to ordinary members of the community (1984:115). The coming of Christ inaugurates 'a new humanity', 'creates a new history', and for Christians this means that there is a new way of laying the 'power lines' (1984:115). In this new community, Christ is seen as the only Lord and the ancestors are reduced to participants in the community. No longer will the community look to the ancestors as transcendent and as a source of blessing (1984:105). As a result the ancestors lose their divinity and are reduced to mere dead human beings (1984:109). Even the kings who are appointed by the ancestors and therefore rule on their behalf are desacralised and become human beings among other human beings. The general understanding in African culture is that the chief represents the power and authority of the ancestors and if the ancestors lose their divinity, the same happens to the chief who represents them. This basically leaves Jesus Christ standing alone as the divine ancestor and benefactor of the community.

According to Bediako, Jesus replaces the ancestors as benefactor of society because he is Lord, mightier than the ancestors, and is the one who, among the dead, is the only one alive. Bediako revisits the mediatorial role of the ancestors and speaks of Jesus as a 'mediator of a better covenant relating our human destiny directly to God . . . that meets our needs to the

full' (Bediako in Samuel&Sugden 1984:104).<sup>141</sup> Bediako emphasizes this message by describing Jesus as the 'Saviour', who gives 'protection' and 'guidance' (Bediako 1990:18-19). This protection is seen in Jesus as *Christus Victor* (1990:8). By this description Bediako means that Jesus is victorious over the spiritual realm and particularly over evil forces.

#### 4.6.2. High Priest

Bediako uses the title 'High Priest' from the Letter to the Hebrews to further elaborate why Jesus is an ancestor, why sacrifice is no longer necessary and how Jesus is the perfect mediator (Bediako in Samuel & Sugden 1984:112). To do this he draws parallels between Jewish and African cultures. Whilst the Jews found it difficult to accept Jesus as High Priest because he did not belong to the right tribe, in the African context it is because he is from outside the tribe.

Bediako supports an interpretation of Hebrews that makes it possible for someone from outside the tribe to exercise a priestly function by using the achievements of Jesus as a point of connection. In Bediako's argument, what Jesus has achieved points not to his particularity but universality and therefore the basis on which he is the High Priest. In the Old Testament, High Priests had to be of a particular family line, except Melchizedek, who was a priestly king at the time of Abraham, the original and greatest ancestor of the Jews. Melchizedek functioned on a universal level, beyond the tribal lineage of Aaron.

Bediako (1990:35) uses this as an analogy to point out that that the Priesthood of Jesus, because of his universality and nature as true God and true man, is in a different category from that of lineage ancestors. That therefore makes his accomplishment significant 'for every human person and every human context and every human culture, including African culture.

Following the exposition in Hebrews, Bediako believes that Jesus not only fulfilled the purpose of a regular animal sacrifice, but that he, out of free will, sacrificed himself. This was a once-for all sacrifice that achieved fully what all sacrifices seek to do, so doing away with

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<sup>141</sup> Bediako, 'Biblical Christologies':104. The phrase 'to the full,' is a strong indication that in his view there is no need for benefactors other than Jesus, and Christians should therefore look to him. When he uses the expression, 'a better covenant', I interpret this to mean that Jesus is of a higher quality than the ancestors because, unlike the ancestors, he is solely beneficent.

all other sacrifices. Therefore, faith in the sacrifice of Jesus makes any future sacrifices unnecessary (Fotland 2005:42).

#### **4.6.3 Jesus Reformer of Communities**

Jesus is not only ancestor and universal High Priest but also Lord and reformer of communities. According to Bediako (1998:60) his concern is the transformation of the world, individual societies, and the whole concept of living. This concern comes out of the resurrection of Jesus which vindicates the promise that both the world and human life can become different (Bediako in Bauckham 1989:225). The gospel is by nature transformational and this partly explains why social concern activities by Christians are often motivated by it. For example, most African leaders during the struggle for independence from colonial powers were inspired by the gospel. But Bediako makes it very clear that the gospel cannot be reduced to any or all of its social and political benefits. It remains essentially a religious message (1989:225). This is obviously Bediako's evangelical response against making the gospel into a purely political message rather than a religious one with political implications.

If Jesus is to have a reforming impact on society, particularly in Africa, Bediako perceives a need for Desacralisation – to remove the divine under girding from the various manifestations of the human exercise of power (Bediako 1990:26). Society, the power base of the chiefs, the ancestors (Bediako in Fyfe (ed) 1988:456) and the political realm are to be desacralised (1988:456). Bediako argues that this process of reforming society is not new to Christianity. From a historical perspective, Desacralisation has taken place wherever Christianity has made its way and become a dominating factor in society (1988:26). It is clear that for Bediako, this perspective on African society is built on the desire to make Jesus the sole Lord of persons and of the community.

Bediako has already expounded the need to desacralise the king and chief in the African context by making them human among other human beings. That way they are not ruling on behalf of the ancestors but on behalf of the people dependant on God (Bediako in Fyfe (ed) 1988:455). The reason for this is not to make religion irrelevant to human political rule but to despiritualise the African concept of power (1988:456). Religion is still important for giving guidance to the chief, but it needs to be religion interpreted within a Christian framework under the lordship of Jesus Christ.



Bediako also applies this concept to modern African post-colonial national rulers (Bediako 1990:26) and offers a gospel alternative approach to power in the name of transformation. Desacralisation of power happens when there is a shared understanding that all authority belongs only to God and therefore power is delegated from him for the purpose of serving one another (Bediako 1995:9). This non-dominating concept of power enables leaders to be human and sets them free from seeking personal satisfaction and instead transforms them into servants of the people (1995:245). Bediako points to the struggle of the church in South Africa against apartheid, and in Kenya and Ghana towards democracy, pluralism and human rights as examples of how Christ, through the church, might make a valid contribution to the contemporary reformation of African society (1995:10).

#### 4.6.4. Christ Fulfills Religion

Bediako presents Jesus as the fulfiller of religion in a context of religious inclusivism where he acknowledges the presence of divine revelation in other religions (Bediako in Thrower (ed) 1986:44). The ambiguity in Bediako's position is that he is a Christian missionary who preaches the Lordship of Christ to all religions. Fotland (2005:42-43) explains this ambiguity by describing Bediako as a Christian apologist who makes religious comparisons in order to emphasize Jesus Christ with the aim to balance various aspects, but hold onto the missiological and Christological perspectives in his theology.

Bediako describes religion as a human response to the 'reality and disclosure of the Transcendent' (Bediako 1996:36).<sup>142</sup> This applies to all religions and means that all religions can be described as recipients of divine revelation. He however describes this revelation as partial and that it can only be completed by Jesus Christ. In other words all religions need the fuller divine self-disclosure and involvement that came in and through Christ'.

Bediako (1996:39) is also open to the work of Christ in other religions and argues that 'whatever is ultimate in the religious universe of every "tradition of response" is, at least in intention, Christ'. This is consistent with his wish to make Christ Lord and at home in the entire religious world. He quotes Mbiti's affirmation of Christ as 'the fulfiller of all human

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<sup>142</sup> Bediako, 'How is Jesus Christ Lord?': 36. Bediako borrows the phrase 'a tradition of response' from John V. Taylor in, *The Go-Between God – The Holy Spirit and the Christian Mission* (London: SCM Press, 1972): 182, quoted in Bediako, 'How is Jesus Christ Lord':36.

cultures' (Bediako 1993:373). This therefore means that Jesus Christ is the measure by which all religious traditions are assessed and evaluated (Bediako in Thrower(ed) 1986:49). As has already been argued, this essentially locates the superiority of Christianity in the universality of Christ, by declaring that it is the only religion that is truly universal, because it is the religion without a special centre, it is at home everywhere, just as Jesus is at home everywhere (1994:244). Christ is therefore, in the understanding of Bediako, the fulfiller of religion.

#### **4.7. The uniqueness of Christ**

To support the argument that Jesus Christ is the fulfiller of religion, Bediako insists on the uniqueness of Christ against a background of religious and societal pluralism (Bediako 1996:31-32).<sup>143</sup> He argues that the biblical affirmations of the uniqueness of Christ 'have the character of conviction', not of fixed data', (Bediako 2005:43) and that such affirmations are an invitation to recognition and personal response to who he is and what he has done (2005:43). Bediako has already argued for the Lordship of Christ in all the world and religions, something that points to his uniqueness (Bediako 1996:35). His earthly ministry highlights this uniqueness, but especially how the salvific content of his life, death, and resurrection are validated by the witness of the Scriptures (1996:35). This perhaps explains why Christians have always claimed uniqueness and finality only for Christ and not for Christianity in any of its many institutional or cultural forms (Stott 1992:305). Even Andrew Walls confirms this when he says 'it is not Christianity that saves, but Christ, and that Christianity as a religion, is also to be challenged by the life and ministry of Christ (Walls, in Bediako 1996:37).

Bediako acknowledges both religious pluralism and plurality of truths in religions as his explanation for the existence of various religions. He links plurality of truth to the revelatory work of the Holy Spirit in different religions and the existence of various religions to the varied human responses to that revelation (1996:36). There is no doubt that God lies beyond all religions and for that reason all religions are only human responses to what the Holy Spirit revealed and do not necessary reflect God's truth. Bediako is however quick to accept that with different human responses every religion will have something that either points to Christ

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<sup>143</sup> Bediako, 'How is Jesus Christ Lord?': 31-32. Uniqueness in this case assumes that there are other 'lords' that compete for lordship. Christ is therefore unique only in relation to other lords.

or away from Christ. This way Bediako elevates the finality of Christ, not only in every religion, but also in the religious lives of people and this places Christianity in the same position as other religions.

#### **4.8. Summary**

There is no doubt that the ancestor cult has some very special significance in Bediako's theology (1996:39). One can argue that without this concept, Bediako's argument about Christ as an African ancestor would not hold. He therefore reinforces this argument by formulating a theology of ancestors which bears the marks of Christianity by using the concept from a Christian perspective..

What he has done so far is to desacralise African ancestors to make sure that they are no longer included in the divine. He has also given reasons for affirming Christ as ancestor, and for using 'ancestor' as a Christological term. That basically leaves Christ alone as ancestor (1996:39). He has also successfully argued that this ancestor is different because he has both a divine dimension that makes him the only transcendent ancestor as well as a human dimension where African traditional ancestors and Christian predecessors find a place in the Christian memory and as role models (Fotland 2005:44). This without doubt makes him a universal ancestor and therefore he belongs to all people and at every time in human history. The important point in this formulation is about the contribution of the concept of African ancestors to the development and completeness of a more holistic Christian theology (1995:212).

The challenge that remains for Bediako up to now is what he is going to do with human ancestors. On the basis of his inclusive approach to religion and divine revelation, he looks at human ancestors from the point of view of the image of God and his presence in African Traditional religions (Bediako 1995:225). He argues for continuity from African Traditional Religion to New Testament Christianity and recounts stories of people who, prior to the coming of the modern missionary were used by God (1995:225). According to Bediako modern missionaries are messengers who made Christ manifest in the African context and prior to their coming local ancestors were used by God to prepare the way for the coming of the gospel. In this regard Bediako uses African traditional religion as a parallel to the Old Testament where people 'whose faith was not perfect' are offered as an example of how God

relates to people (1995:226). Bediako states that in Christ, biblical ancestors become ancestors of Christians in Africa also (1995:227). In the same way:

We must have had our fathers and mothers, ancestors who like the biblical ancestors, at critical points in their lives and careers, made choices which went into shaping the destinies of our traditions till in the fullness of time our histories became merged, in Christ, with the history of the people of God (1995:227-28).

Here, Bediako echoes his patristic mentor, Clement of Alexandria:

Rightly then to the Jews belonged the Law, and to the Greeks philosophy, until the advent; and after that came the universal calling to be a peculiar people of righteousness through the teaching which flows from faith brought together by one Lord, the only God of both Greeks and Barbarians, or rather of the whole of mankind (Bediako 1992:205).

Without doubt, Bediako articulates a new concept of Christian ancestors with two categories: divine and human. Jesus Christ is the most prominent and is the only divine ancestor. Among the human ancestors, there is a great variety which includes biblical ancestors, traditional African ancestors, new African ancestors, and Christians from other parts of the world who played significant roles in the Christian story of Africa. This way, the old and new, the local and global, are kept together and everything is passed ‘through the prism of Christology’ (1995:228).

The tension associated with the way Bediako uses the title ancestor is obvious. He uses it for Christ, for traditional African ancestors, for desacralised human ancestors and for Christians from the past that he admires. It is for this reason why there is no definitive position on the ancestors in African theology. Theologians are not of one mind on the precise nature of our relationship with ancestors. However despite the reservations, many theologians embrace or adapt traditional beliefs about ancestors in their attempt to develop a Christian theology that is authentically African.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> See Ezeogu, Ernest M., ‘Bible and culture in African theology’, for a detailed analysis of the ‘dialectic and dialogical approaches to Bible and culture.’

Bediako reflects the legitimate concerns of contemporary theologians who wish that early African Christianity had done more to seek points of contact within traditional religion, with its own worldview and understanding of God. This assumes an understanding of the role of religion that ties closely with Niebuhr's favourite model that of Christ transforming culture. According to this model Christianity neither ignores nor destroys a culture but seeks to change it, to reform and restore it to what it should be, as a healthy, positive environment for human life and society. To mention but one example showing that missionaries were not totally oblivious to the need of impacting the culture from within, we must examine the process of translating the Scriptures into languages of emerging congregations. This task demanded careful discernment, not just with respect to language as it was used, but also traditional concepts and their implications.

#### **4.9. Conclusion**

Having interacted with the thinking of Lamin Sanneh and Kwame Bediako, I find it is very convincing that an extraordinary new world of Christianity is now unfolding. It is an unprecedented world, something that will change the face of Christianity. In other words, Christianity today has never been more vibrant, more varied, more pro-active, and more widespread. The text for it might be, "Behold, I make all things new." According to Sanneh, what needs to be promoted is that Christianity is not about the refusal to accept the old, but about the willingness to embrace the new. That has been one of the most detrimental things to afflict people today.

From the typologies of Richard Niebuhr and Charles Kraft we can immediately eliminate the basic positions of Christ against culture and Christ in culture as irrelevant or inapplicable to the contribution of Lamin Sanneh and Kwame Bediako. Both of them would identify more with the general God-above-culture perspective that views God as transcendent and absolute, completely beyond, and outside culture. And culture, perhaps as a vehicle or milieu, neutral in essence, though warped by the pervasive influence of human sinfulness, to use Kraft's words (1989:113). In Niebuhr's words, Christ converts man in his culture and society, not apart from these, for there is no nature without culture and no turning of men from self and idols to God save in society (Niebuhr 1951:43).

There is no doubt that the four theologians whose contribution I have considered are all calling for contextualization of the Christian gospel in the cultures where it is presented. Whilst Kraft and Niebuhr provide the models within which this can be discussed, Bediako and Sanneh undertake the praxis and use terms such as contextualization, indigenization, translation, vernacularization, and Africanization. The critical assumption in the discussion of Christ and culture is that the Gospel is the good news that God has put himself within man's reach and that he has broken into human history through the breach made by Jesus Christ in the time-space reality in order to accomplish this (Padilla 1978:12). Though God had made himself known in many ways in the past, in these last days he has visited us in the person of his own Son – the Word made man at a particular time and in a definite place. It may be said that God has contextualized himself in Jesus Christ.

According to Newbigin (1989:141) the gospel is always addressed to human beings, to their minds and hearts and consciences, and that it calls for their response. In the African context human beings are seen not as individuals but as members of communities which share a common language, customs, ways of ordering economic and social life, ways of understanding and coping with their world. In other words they have a shared culture. Mbiti (1980) described this in a sentence when he said, "I am because we are."

If such a community is to understand and receive the gospel it has to be communicated in their language and clothed in symbols which are meaningful to them. The gospel does not come as a disembodied message, but as a message of a witnessing community which claims to live by it and therefore invites others to adhere to it. In the case of Africa, European missionaries were sent from communities that believed the gospel and wanted other communities outside Europe to hear and believe in it. The argument is that those to whom this gospel is addressed by missionaries must be able to identify with it as true for them and for their particular situation. This can only happen when the gospel is communicated in such a way that the subject in the sentence is as important as the predicate (Newbigin 1989:141). Or to put it in another way, how can the gospel "come alive" in this particular cultural context, and still be the authentic gospel? That is the problem of contextualization.

When discussing contextualization it doesn't take much to discover the central importance of the incarnation both as a basic element in the Gospel and critical to contextualization. Since

the Word became flesh (man), the only possible communication of the Gospel is that in which the Gospel becomes incarnate in culture in order to put itself within the reach of man as a cultural being. The incarnation unmistakably demonstrates God's intention to make himself known from within the context of the human situation. The very nature of the Gospel is therefore such that we can only know it as a message contextualized in culture. In other words it is impossible either to understand or to communicate the Gospel without referring to culture. Neither the interpretation nor the communication of the Gospel can be carried out in a vacuum; they are realized in, and conditioned by, a given cultural context (Padilla 1978:18). True contextualization therefore accords the gospel its rightful primacy, its power to penetrate every culture and to speak within each culture, in its own speech and symbol.

As has been already argued, Contextualization of the gospel in particular contexts happens in a myriad of different ways. Nevertheless the gospel is not an empty form into which everyone is free to pour his or her own content. Bediako argues consistently that the gospel is Jesus Christ in the fullness of his ministry, death, and resurrection. Jesus is who he is, and even though our perceptions of him will be shaped by our own situation and the mental formation we have received from our culture, our need is to see him as he truly is.

The consistent argument of the four theologians, each in their own way, is that the Christ and Culture relationship is necessary and unavoidable. On one hand, Christ needs culture to be relevant. Culture embraces thought patterns and world and life views and it is at this level that he is understood. In other words if theology is to be lived, the contemporary social-cultural factor must come in the foreground. On the other hand cultural thought patterns and world and life views cannot come into contact with Christ and remain unchanged. In other words whilst Christ works in the context of human cultures, his uniqueness is such that he does not only transform human beings in their cultural context but in the process he also reforms culture.

A consistent argument has been made that language is a vehicle of communication, and is therefore included in a comprehensive approach to the meaning of culture. Adequate communication is the essence of contextualization because language conveys concepts and thought forms and in turn concepts are reduced to symbols and codes. This highlights the



importance of both biblical and local languages in the complex process of translating the gospel into other languages. This is important for both Bediako and Niebuhr.

From the above, there is no doubt that evangelical Christians and theologians have put a very premium on the idea of contextualization. What seems to run through all the Christ and culture arguments considered so far is the realization that only contextualized mission is worthwhile Christian ministry. The Christian ministry is about Jesus Christ and this Christ, as the way, the truth and the way, is understandable, believable and accessible. As David Bosch says, “The missionary nature of the Church does not depend on the situation in which it finds itself at a given moment, but it is grounded in the Gospel itself.”

For this reason, I will conclude this chapter by briefly looking at contextualization as way forward for both Sanneh and Bediako and in some sense, Niebuhr and Kraft.

Perhaps the best way to understand contextualization following through from what these theologians are saying about the Christ and culture is to first agree on some presuppositions that come out of their arguments. Firstly, proponents of contextualization believe that the core of the gospel, indeed Jesus Christ is valid for all cultures and times. In other words it is the universality of the gospel that most people find attractive about Christ. Secondly, however, they recognize that such a gospel must be clothed in time – specific cultural forms in order for it to be communicated and understood.

Contextualization, then, can be defined as the dynamic process whereby the constant message of the gospel interacts with specific, relative human situations. It involves an examination of the gospel in the light of the respondent worldview and then adapting the message, encoding it in such a way that it can become meaningful to the respondent. Latin American theologian Rene Padilla (1985:93) says,

To contextualize the gospel is to translate it that the Lordship of Jesus Christ is not an abstract principle or a mere doctrine, but the determining factor of life in all its dimensions and the basic criterion in relation to which all the cultural values that form the very substance of human life are evaluated. Without Contextualization the gospel will become tangential or even entirely irrelevant.

Because the gospel is always God's good news to humankind it cannot be defined without reference to the human context. So, although the gospel is unchanging, the contexts in which it must be related will be regularly changing. It must be communicable for it to be news. No matter the socio-economic, ethnic or age group, the gospel must relate to the whole human context, including both the situational and the experiential. By situational I mean all that is true of people in their given situation, comprising their past, present and future; their lot in life, including their culture, nationality, language, the laws that affect them. It also includes their situation as God sees it; their fallenness and their beauty. But the gospel must also relate to the experiential context of people – the subjective experiences of humans arising out of but also creating their situational context, such as feelings of insecurity, hopes, fears. The totality of the context is obviously very wide and fluid. This makes the concept of contextualization an ongoing, dynamic process wherever the gospel is being preached and lived.

Niebuhr's typology spells out three approaches to contextualization: Gospel over Context, Context over Gospel and Gospel in Context. Each is valuable insofar as they call us to take either the gospel or the context seriously, but clearly a more balanced position would be to take them both seriously, thereby avoiding either irrelevance (Gospel over context) or syncretism (context over Gospel). I identify more with the third position. This position takes as a given the essential link between the gospel and context. We will always live with the tension of not wishing to fall into the gospel over context or the context over gospel positions but to present the gospel without compromising the gospel message or becoming unintelligible, which is contextualization. In the next chapter I wish to attempt doing this with the Shona context, with a particular interest in the salvific significance of the gospel (the cross of Christ).

## CHAPTER FIVE

### The Salvific Significance of the Cross of Christ in Shona culture

#### 5.1. Introduction

A survey of world religions shows that most of them are cultural religions. For example, Hinduism with its caste system and social rituals, is inextricably tied to the culture of India. Islam seeks to apply the Koranic law to every detail of society and so create a specific culture, as evident throughout the Middle East. Tribal religions mythologize tribes' customs, history, and social organization. Secular sociologists go so far as to define religion as a means of sanctioning the social order. According to this line of thought, cultural institutions are invested with a spiritual, divine significance, so that people will more obediently go along with them.

Christianity, on the other hand, is not a cultural religion. The Bible outlines a much more complex approach to culture, one that offers a radical critique of culture while encouraging believers to engage their culture in positive ways. Christianity is a faith for all cultures, "for every nation, tribe, people, and language" (Rev. 7:9). Sanneh (1989:51) gives the reason why? Christianity, right from its origins, identified itself with the need to translate out of Aramaic and Hebrew. Sanneh calls this a dual movement in the historic advancement of Christianity: relativizing its Judaistic roots and at the same time destigmatizing Gentile culture and adopting it as a natural extension of the new religion. Central to this dual movement is the concept of translatability, which Sanneh considers to be the taproot of Christian expansion. Cultural differences are therefore not an obstruction to Christian unity, as the controversies in Acts and the Epistles over the status of gentile believers demonstrate.

But Jesus tells his followers to be salt, light and leaven in the world, he also warns that the world will hate them (Matt 5). Christian freedom and service extends to every dimension of life, yet Christians are warned about the temptation of worldliness. Christians are commanded to obey the secular authorities (Rom 13:1-7), and yet to obey God rather than men (Acts 5:29). Jesus, in his prayer in Gethsemane, sets forth the principle that his followers are to be "in the world," but not "of the world": "I have given them your word and the world has hated

them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is that you take them not out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world” (John 17:14-18). Christians are somehow to be separated from the world, while still being involved redemptively in it.

How are we to untangle these paradoxes? Church history demonstrates that one of the constant struggles of Christianity, both individually and corporately, is with culture. Paul, for example, wrote two letters to Christians who lived in Corinth, a very challenging culture. Where should we stand? Inside? Outside? Ignore it? Become isolated from it? Should we concern ourselves with attempting to transform it?

Careful readers may have noticed how in this research I have tried to describe the key concepts in terms of typology or motif. In chapter one, I described African culture(s) and in particular Shona culture as a typology of themes and evangelical Christianity as a typology of position. Typology of position in evangelicalism is expanded in chapter two to include the different themes evangelicals use to explain the meaning and significance of the cross of Christ. In Chapter three Richard Niebuhr (1956) and Charles Kraft (1979) respond to the questions above by presenting the dominant typology of possible responses to culture.

In the African context and in particular, Shona culture, the question of Christ and culture is not merely an academic matter; rather, it is one of fundamental religious importance. This relationship shapes the earthly life of Christians, and plays a critical role in relationships among Christians and between Christians and non-Christians.

Of the different typologies of this relationship discussed by both Niebuhr and Kraft I identified more with the positions “Christ and culture in paradox” and the “Christ Transformer of Culture” as perhaps the two closest and most applicable to Evangelical Christianity as it responds to a very complex package of African realities. This of course is not to say that the rest are totally irrelevant. Niebuhr’s pluralistic argument that affirms that each of these five positions is needed on the Christian scene and should be taken as a complimentary package (1951:50) is a very convincing one. After all, these are only types and should be utilized as a tool and not a perfected system.

In Chapter two evangelical Christianity was described as Christ himself and his death on the cross as central to evangelical understanding of him. P.T. Forsyth, the English Congregationalist, wrote in the *Cruciality of the Cross* (1909:44-45):

Christ is to us just what his cross is. All that Christ was in heaven or on earth was put into what he did there . . . Christ, I repeat, is to us just what his cross is. You do not understand Christ till you understand his cross.

In Chapter two John Calvin and Derek Tidball used many and diverse metaphors to unpack the plain meaning of the cross, the affirmation that “Christ died for our sins”. What is true of what both theologians say about the meaning of the cross is summed up neatly by Green and Baker (2000:15):

The portrait of Jesus’ execution could not be painted with a single color. Against the horizons of God’s purpose, the Scriptures of Israel, and Jesus’ life and ministry, and in relation to the life worlds of those for whom its significance was being explored, the death of Jesus proved capable of multiple interpretations.

And so, Evangelical Christianity paints an all inclusive understanding of the meaning of the cross of Christ with the idea of substitution constituting the core. My particular interest in this chapter is to consider the salvific significance of the cross of Christ in Shona culture utilizing the ‘Christ and culture in paradox’ typology as a tool for analysis. The question of significance is asked here with regards to the transformative implications of the message of the cross in the face of Shona/Zimbabwean realities of poverty, increasing starvation, ethnic and political tensions and conflicts, social injustice, inequitable distribution or redistribution of resources. In Chapter three, both Kraft and Niebuhr defined culture to include all such issues, summarised by Adamson Hoebel (1966:5) as world view, actions, and products of a given culture. How is a Christian supposed to respond to such conditions? Or, how should we deal with the culture that surrounds us?

The paradox is that such a crisis is happening in a country where the church, particularly the evangelical church is growing rapidly with 60% of the population professing to be Christian and of this figure more than 30% are Evangelical. Of the 30% the majority are Shona speaking. The Shona ruling tribe make-up 80-84% percent of Zimbabwe’s population and the rest is primarily made-up of Nguni Speaking Ndebeles (Murray 1981:196). In fact, it is not

just rapid growth isolated to Zimbabwe, the bigger picture, according to Andrew Walls (1976:180), leading scholar of world Christianity, is that one of the most important events in the whole of Christian history occurred in the twentieth century:

It is nothing less than a complete change in the centre of gravity of Christianity, so that the heartlands of the Church are no longer in Europe, decreasingly in North America, but in Latin America, in certain parts of Asia, and most important for our present purposes, in Africa.

As a result of this remarkable shift in world Christianity, plus the observation that theology which endures is that which affects the minds and lives of a significant number of people, Walls asserts that the theologies presently arising in Africa will have a determinative effect in shaping church history for centuries to come.

Even though Walls is talking about the African continent and the African church in general, this is just as much true for the church in Zimbabwe and as it is for the church in South Africa and any other African country. This landmark shift of influence calls for celebration, but maybe not yet. How can we celebrate when we have nothing to show for the more than seven million Christians in Zimbabwe today. How do we reconcile the rapid growth, the shift of influence and the unbelievable statistics when our state of wellbeing or *shalom* as nation remains far less than adequate?" Does the life-changing message of the Cross of Christ have any transformative impact on the wellbeing of a nation that is confronted with such challenges? Where is the power of the cross to bring about genuine transformation that will give us a sense of wholeness not only to believers and the church but also the rest of the community and nation?

## **5.2. Jesus Christ in Shona Culture?**

In Chapter Three, both Calvin and Tidbal acknowledged that whilst the cross is the heart of the atonement, the complete package of God's grand act redemption includes the incarnation, the life of Christ, the descent, resurrection, the ascension and his second coming. In the Shona context, the meaning of the cross is derived from the different responses to the fundamental question of Jesus Christ, "Who do you say that I am?" (Mk 8:29). Who Jesus Christ is to the Shona also becomes an explanation of what he has done. In other words we

cannot separate who he is from what he has done. To the Shona, Jesus is what he is because of what he has done, particularly that which no other human being has done.

By asking the question “Who do you say that I am?” the Shona conception is that God in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ moves into and engages the Shona frame of reference, i.e., culture, language, space, and time. For both Bediako and Sanneh, this engagement begins with the process of translation of the Scriptures into the Shona language. Here the gospel is literally handed over to the Shona, to engage with at a very deep level of Shona thought forms and idioms. Hence, respect for this culture and language can find no higher expression than in Bible translation.

The fundamental assumption here is that the God of the Bible is the God who communicates with human beings wherever they are found and he does so by using the language and thought patterns of those with whom He speaks. This implies the incarnation as the only way of gaining a culture’s permission to communicate the message of the cross. God actually speaks my language and therefore he not only knows me but he wants me to understand him just as much as he wants to understand me. That in itself becomes therapy for the restoration of Shona self-confidence and identity.

Kraft (1979:175) views the incarnation as clearly, the most profound example of contextual self-revelation by God. When God revealed himself in Jesus Christ, “God not only came, he became God, in Christ, and identified himself with his receptors. God in Jesus Christ became so much part of a specific human context that many never recognized that he had come from somewhere else.” If we believe that in the Incarnation God’s true self has been ultimately revealed and, as Karl Barth states, the true identity of humankind is also revealed, then two things follow: Firstly, men and women discover their authentic humanness in Jesus; and secondly, they come to know the true God through him.

In responding to the question ‘Who is this Jesus Christ?’ in the Shona context, Bediako and Sanneh in Chapter 4 argue for a precedent that was set by the apostles and the first Christians in their reflection on Christ after the resurrection when they bestowed upon him titles that they borrowed from the contemporary culture. Bediako argues that the early Greek Church Fathers set a precedent in this regard. Instead of reproducing biblical idioms for their



Christian theology, they simply added to biblical Christology from their own cultural context (Bediako 1978:13). This they did in order that Christ may be culturally relevant to the Greek context. Bediako (1998:110) therefore maintains that Jesus Christ can best be understood when given titles related to African traditional worldviews. Bediako's assumption is that the Shona Christian would respond to this question not only in light of biblical revelation and Christian tradition but also in terms of Shona realities both past and present.

### **5.2.1.Christ–OurAncestor:Mediator**

There is no doubt that the ancestor cult constitute the core of Shona religiosity. Their cultural and religious world revolves around this cult. To the Shona, ancestors are the most, if not the only visible and prominent aspect of the transcendent realm. In fact, according to Parrinder (1962:57), "No approach to any appreciation of indigenous ideas regarding God can take any path but through the thought-area occupied by the ancestors." For the ordinary Shona, life has no meaning apart from the overwhelming presence and power of the ancestors. And for that reason more attention has to be given to the ancestor cult as a way of "contextualizing" Jesus than to almost any other metaphor.

In Shona religiosity, right at the top of the hierarchy is *Mwari*, the Supreme Being, followed by the ancestors who according to Bediako, 'form the most prominent element in the African religious outlook and provide the essential focus of piety' (Bediako in Samuel&Sugden 1884:99). This is so because ancestors are the only mediators between Mwari and the Shona people. So, by naming Jesus as an ancestor (*Mudzimu*), the Shona are placing Jesus among the outstanding persons of the community, those who represent the living before Mwari.

This has been described as Anthropocentric Christology, the view of Jesus from below. African theologians refer to the genealogies of Jesus (Mt 1:1-17; Lk 3:23-38) as important in placing Jesus in the human Shona family, clan and tribe. In Shona tradition, ancestors belong to the clan or the lineage and as a result can only function in that closed system. In chapter one it was pointed out that the genealogies of Jesus are synonymous with the Shona totemism. It is noteworthy that Matthew's genealogy links Jesus with the Davidic kingly dynasty as denoting power and authority and the first patriarch of Israel, Abraham, limiting him to being ancestor of one nation. Luke's genealogy, on the other hand, is universalistic, it links Jesus to

the first person, Adam. This ancestry links Jesus to all the tribes of the earth and that includes the Shona tribe (Wanamaker 1997:292).

According to Shona thinking, Jesus is therefore the most senior Primogenitor of all ancestors and member of the human family. He is the most senior because he qualifies to be both a tribal ancestor and ancestor of all the tribes of world. According to Bediako (1990:13), his universality opens the closed system of family, clan and tribe and Christians from different families, clans and tribes see themselves as part of a universal system and family. He therefore belongs to all human cultures. It is also for this reason that Bujo (1992:73-74) reserves the title, Proto-Ancestor only to Jesus. His argument is that Jesus is not one founding ancestor among many but transcends the ideal of a good ancestor and brings it to completion. The historical Jesus lived the African ancestor-ideal to the highest degree. He manifested those qualities which Africans attribute to their ancestors plus much more. That explains why the concept as applied to Jesus is only applied analogically.

From the gospel of Luke (3:21-22), Wanamaker (op.cit) notes the importance of juxtaposing the baptism of Jesus with the genealogy, the former preceding the latter. His observation concerns the communication between the invisible and the visible worlds, the living dead and the living descendants in that *God, the first Person* of the Godhead reveals Jesus directly. This is different from the intervention of the n'anga/diviner's indirect mediation with the spiritual world. It can be said that Jesus as *mudzimu mukuru* (greatest ancestor) has God directly as his Father.

Wanamaker (1997:285-289) rightly asserts that if Christ is to be understood as an ancestor in Shona culture, it will require some correspondence between the function of the ancestors and his own function in the lives of the believers. There are three main functions of Shona ancestors, which have Christological resonance. These are that Ancestors are (a) guardians of the social and moral order, (b) givers and sustainers of life, and (c) mediators (1997:292, cf. 287-291). There is consensus amongst African theologians (Charles Nyamiti 1984:22-24; Francois Kabasele 1991, 1997:109-112) that Christ fulfills all these functions a double fold by offering redemption from sin, mediation and reconciliation between God and his estranged people and his example as the ideal human being. The reason why Christ can fulfill all these functions is because of both who he is, and what he accomplished on the Cross.

According to Shona religion, God's life exists in abundance among the ancestors, they are a reservoir that brims with the life-force, from which the living derive the resources of life's wholeness and goodness. In the same way, Jesus is the vine that mediates fullness of life, to the branches (John 15:4-7) (Kabasele:127-128). All the blessings of the creator are mediated through Jesus, the ancestor: living water (John 4:14), living bread (John 6:51), abundant life (John 10:10). In an equally important role as ancestor, Jesus mediates between the living and the creator God by bringing people, their prayers, offerings, and aspirations, to God. This is precisely how Shona Christians understand Jesus' words, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). Jesus is the gate of the sheepfold (John 10:9), for only those "to whom the Son chooses to reveal" know God their creator (Luke 10:22).

Like other ancestors, Jesus provides an exemplary model of behaviour: "For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you" (John 13:15). He serves the needs of others, restores their dignity by defending the weak (women and children), identifies himself with sinners, and heals the sick. He confirms positive African values. Hospitality and family spirit, solicitude for parents and orphans, and the unfortunate are, in him, taken up and perfected (Bujo 1982:144). In other words, Jesus is the model of the best of African behaviour. Finally Jesus provides a watchful presence over the community. Refusing to leave them desolate (John 14:18), Jesus promises to be with them always (Matt 28:20).

Nyamiti emphasizes that the theme of Christ's death is an important prerequisite of an African ancestor because ancestors can only fulfill their functions because they have died and acquired from God supernatural power. They also know the language of the invisible. This echoes Christian belief in the post-resurrection Christ who is exalted in heaven and through his spirit is a dynamic life-giving and empowering force (Christian affirmation that the risen Christ is both Lord and Christ). Unlike Shona ancestors, ancestor Jesus not only died, but rose again. He is in a league of his own.

The consistent argument of African theologians is therefore that, Jesus fulfills all the roles that Africans (Shona) attribute to their ancestors: mediator of God's blessings, mediator of human prayers, exemplary model of behaviour, and provider of watchful care. Yet, a question

still remains: How can Jesus belong to the ancestors of a particular African tribe when he lived as a Jew in Palestine? The answer to this question is based on the resurrection. At the resurrection, Jesus accomplished the “future the ancestors sought to guarantee,” in him the mediatory words and actions of all Shona ancestors culminate and are fulfilled (Mushete 1988:76).” At his resurrection, he achieved what no other living being or ancestor has achieved and, as a result, became proto-ancestor (Bujo (1978:143).

Jesus therefore not only fits but transcends the role that has traditionally been reserved for the ancestors in Shona culture and religion. As proto-ancestor or ancestor par excellence, Jesus is now the only mediator between God and the Shona Christian, founder of a community of Shona believers that seek to establish the Kingdom of God in their communities and nation. And so the cross is understood in terms of mediation, life and the example that Christ is to us.

### **5.2.2. Shona view of Salvation**

Before we can identify two other relevant titles for Jesus Christ in the Shona worldview we need to consider the Shona perspective of salvation. In this regard, Mbiti (1986:134) points out that the central concern for each religion is salvation for its adherents. Salvation is often necessitated by the existence of evil which is attributed to different sources, for example, the devil, sin, witchcraft, sorcery and the weakness of human nature. Salvation in traditional Shona religion is wholeness within this life. It entails social equilibrium – harmony with the living and the dead. According to Mbiti (1973:397-414), it also entails personal equilibrium – inner harmony that produces comprehensive physical well-being. It occurs here and now in the blessings of friendship, plentiful of offspring, and a long life.

This understanding of salvation in Shona religiosity is best painted against the background of Shona logic of causation. Like other African groups, Shona people do not believe that events happen by chance especially if such events result in misfortune. People don't just get sick, a prolonged or serious illness is presumed to have some invisible cause and a diviner should be consulted to determine it and to state the necessary remedy (Bourdillon 1976:171). The belief is that serious or abnormal illness is caused by spirits, perhaps angered spirits, or by witchcraft or sorcery. Until the ultimate cause of the trouble is discovered and appeased or overcome, there remains the frightening possibility of further trouble, and it is hopeless to

expect complete relief from the present affliction. The questions to which answers are sought include 1) who caused the misfortune and 2) why?

The underlying belief is that a person's fate or misfortune is associated with the general relationship that is supposed to exist between a man and the spirits who control his world and who to some extent take responsibility for his life out of his own hands (Bourdillon 1976:173). The Shona believe that their well-being depends on their relationships with spirit guardians who control their lives. Any persistent trouble or anxiety is likely to be interpreted in terms of this relationship and in terms of tensions and ill-will within the local community. Sickness is the most common such trouble, but by no means the only one. Whenever there is unease concerning the spirits, a diviner in touch with the spiritual powers is consulted in order to resolve it.

Because there is no concept of the fall or original sin in Shona religiosity, sin is only understood as any action or behaviour of which the community and the ancestors disapproved or considered morally wrong. It is primarily a disturbance of human relationship at different levels: first with individual members, then within the family including ancestors, with the community and ultimately the entire nature. So the Shona define sin as horizontal, which is from below, in terms of its consequences in human life. Briefly stated: whereas Christians define sin in terms of what humans are in themselves, the Shona defined it in terms of what humans do or do not do.

Everyday sin is therefore not against God but against the community – one's family or tribe (which includes ancestral spirits). Consequently, fear of disapproval from one's family or tribe is more valid than fear of God's wrath over sin. According to Adeyemo (in Van der Walt 1988:13) in African culture, salvation and blessedness often mean acceptance by society. Mbiti (1971:108) makes similar observations: "Just as God made the first man, as God's man, so now man himself makes the individual who becomes the social man. It is a deeply religious transaction. Only in terms of other people does the individual become conscious of his own being, his own duties, his privileges and responsibilities towards himself and towards other people . . . I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am . . .". Shona religiosity therefore makes people to be more concerned about acceptance by the community than acceptance by God. According to O'Donovan (1992:98), the will of the

ancestors and the words of the village elders as the originators and custodians of the laws and customs of the tribe, are more important for daily living than the knowledge of God.

For Jesus to become a saviour to the Shona, he must do more than just procure for them eternal life destiny. Through his work on the cross, he must conquer and control the forces from which the Shona themselves struggle to be saved here and now, whether that be infertility or malevolent spirits. Two figures within Shona communities that have as their responsibility to accomplish this sort of salvation are the tribal chief and the healer or “witch doctor.”

#### 5.2.2.1. Christ as Chief (*Ishe/Mambo*) Reconciliation/Sacrifice

It is noteworthy that where other cultures have king or potentate as the highest authority, the Shona equivalent is chief (*ishe or mambo*). Francois Kabasele (1997:109-112) identifies the chief's characteristic as having *supernatural power, generosity and having the ability to reconcile*. He is the guardian of the Shona community, the one person who embodies the religious and political aspirations of the tribe.<sup>145</sup> The chief must therefore be a courageous heroic figure, able to triumph over enemies in the terrestrial and spiritual worlds.

In chapter one we saw that the chiefly dynasty is concerned with ancestral origins and the promogenitor. The chiefly *mhondoro* are understood as owners and guardians of the land. The chief is thus understood to have supernatural powers as given by the primogenitor, and ultimately, by God. Christological designates highlighted here are the Servant Messiah or Christ the Steward, who is above all, a person for others. The Shona cultural elements of hospitality and friendship are also emphasized here.

According to Marcelle Manley (1995:70), as different from the modern political functionaries, the Shona understand that the chief has spiritual powers communicated to him by the soil (*vhu*) through the *mhondoro*. Manley explains that the *vhu* (soil) is not just the material base of the subsistence economy of people since it represents the very power of chieftaincy. She adds that the soil is both the founding ancestors (Shona: *mhondoro* – tribal tutelary spirits or

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<sup>145</sup> It is frequently difficult to distinguish between the chief and other key figures of the community. Nevertheless the chief provides perhaps the most familiar paradigm of Jesus' leadership. See, e.g., Douglas Waruta, “Who is Jesus Christ for Africans Today? Prophet, Priest, Potentate,” in *Jesus in African Christianity*, ed. Mugambi and Magesa, 40-59.

guardians of the land) who conquered it and the rules by which those who occupy the land today vatorwa (aliens), and living descendants, have to obey.

To mark the significance of mhondoro as *vhu* (soil) or owners of the land, a *chisi* (rest day) as synonymous with the Christian sabbath day is observed. **Chisi** days differ from area to area. **Chisi** day is said to be the day the progenitor mhondoro died. A Shona Christian has thus two Sabbath days. Manley (1995:72,74) is right in asserting that the chief as an amabuensis (vice-regent) is a power to reckon with.

It is noteworthy that the land –reclaiming crisis that has been going on in Zimbabwe over the last three years touches the very nerve of the Shona people. The post-independent era weakened chiefly authority, especially as concerning land allocations. But today in land restitution moves, there is concern to reinstate it. The recent land crisis also calls for a theology of the land that incorporates the Shona religious world-view.

In Shona culture-Christianity dialectic, we can identify the Servant King motif of scripture (cf. Isa 53) and the Christ of the Gospel. In a new Christian understanding, God is understood as the ultimate giver of the chief's supernatural powers through the mediation of the primogenitor. The *ishe* (chief) is custodian of morals and in his or her judicial role, administers justice. There is emphasis on the concept of the ancestors as guardians of the social and moral order and the land. Reconciliation is a function of the chief's jury (*dare*). The Shona chief has religious, political and social roles. He or She is intermediary between the ancestors (in particular the area mhondoro) and has to see to it that ceremonies such as the petitioning for rain (*mukwerera*) and harvest thanksgiving (*nhendo*) are performed. By the same note, he sees to it that the lion spirits (mhondoro) rest day (*chisi*) – the Shona equivalent of the Christian Sabbath is kept.

In a pedagogical approach, the attribute of Christ as Chief can be understood as good news to believers when we look at Christ's Lordship as power over for, as against, power over against (cf. Rebecca Pentz, in Erickson 1991:591). Thus the chief's lordship can best be described as empowerment of subjects. Concerning the jurisdiction of the chief, it can be said that there is tension between customary law and Roman-Dutch law. For example, the offender does not solve crime like murder by serving a jail sentence. In the context of the extended patients, the



family has to make reparation for such a sin through the ritual of *kuripa ngozi* (appeasement of vengeance spirits) or *kuroora guva* (payment of roora over the grave or dead woman's body). Reparation of *ngozi* is by *danga* (a herd of cattle) and a girl-child. The latter is, in turn, given away in marriage to a kinsman of the victim. When she has borne a replacement to the deceased, she is then free to go back to her family or to stay married. The *kuroora guva* is also demanded for women who die a natural death when roora is not paid. Concerning *kuroora guva*, the agnates of the deceased woman do not perform burial rites until payment is made by way of *danga*, usually live cattle. The chief's judgement is by consensus and the above example shows that it borders on tit-for-tat. In the Sermon on the Mount, for example, Christ teaches against revenge and expands the view on sin and reconciliation by encouraging unconditional forgiveness and love of enemies (Mt 5:38ff).

Hospitality to strangers and providing for the needs of the poor and widows are prerogative roles of the chief. To accommodate for this, the Shona practice what is called *zunde ramambo* (take a turn in working in the chief's field from which the proceeds go towards meeting these charity acts) (Claude Mararike 2001:53-65). There is a striking parallel with the O.T. concerning the leader of the community having to take overall responsibility for the *anawim* (the poor of Yahweh – cf. Ps 72). The concept of the poor of Yahweh is inherent in Shona religious orientation. The Shona recognize the biblical trilogy of the widow, orphan and stranger (cf. Ex 22:21-24; 23:9; Lev 19:33-34; Deut 27:19; 24:17) as *vanhu vaMwari* (people of God). Traditionally there were crops considered *zvinhu zvinodyiwa nevapfuuri* (things to be eaten by hungry passers-by or travellers) and there was the practice of *zunde raMambo* mentioned above. The latter is still in practice by some chieftains. These elements underlie essential cultural elements of friendship, hospitality and togetherness. Thus it can be said that the Shona have an inherent posture for *anawim*. The *anawim* motif is seen in that the Shona talk of the crippled and mentally disabled as *vanhu vaMwari* (people of God) and consequently have a predilection for them and the widow, orphan and stranger. Christians today transpose *anawim* with the preferential option for the poor and marginalized of society as compatible with Christ's mission agenda (Lk 4:18-19, cf. Is 61:1-2).

For example, Ex 22:21-24 reads:

You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You shall not afflict any widow or orphan . . . If you do afflict them, and they

cry out to me, I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless.

There is also a striking parallel with the Old Testament concerning the leader of the community taking overall responsibility for the anawim. In Psalm 72 we read of what is required of the king:

In his day may righteousness flourish, and peace abound, till moon be no more (72:7)!

And again:

For he delivers the needy when he calls,  
The poor and him who has no help.  
He has pity on the weak and needy,  
And saves the lives of the needy.  
From oppression and violence he redeems their life;  
And precious is their blood in his sight.

In the New Testament, the sacramental value of the needy and marginalized is seen in the Incarnate Jesus' mission agenda or statement:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
Because he sent me to proclaim release to captives  
And recovering of sight to the blind,  
To set at liberty those who are oppressed,  
To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord (Lk 4:18-19; Is 61:1-2).

And again in Matthew 25:31-46, Jesus identifies himself in the distressing disguise of the poor, prisoners and the sick. In this anawim motif, Christians are required not only to empathize with (know the heart of) the poor and marginalized, but are also required to know the heart of God. They are called, not only to see God in the poor and marginalized, but also to see the anawim as God sees them.

#### **5.2.2.2. Christ as Healer-Christus Victor Wellbeing/Wholeness**

Another figure within African society who attempts to effect salvation is the healer. In the Shona world view, God is the *Healer par excellence* who is understood not to need the help of any muti or mushonga (medicine) – traditional or Western, since it is *Mwari* who made the

herbs, shrubs, trees, etc. used by people for muti. In the concept of mediated immediacy, the Shona claim supernatural powers for their ancestors in the adage *mudzimu haubati mushonga* (*ancestral spirits do not handle medicine*). They understand that the ancestors in their death acquire this power from *Mwari*. Thus the Shona talk of ancestor spirit mediums (vadzimu or midzimu) as healing by *kufurira* (to blow the spirit or water on the sick person – member of the family) (Chimhanda 2000:54-55).

In Shona religion Christ the Healer can be seen to take the roles of *Mwari*, the ancestors and the traditional healer. Thus in the culture-Gospel dialogue, Christ as Healer and Creator, par excellence, is *Mwari* who heals without herbs and provides all medicine (Mararike 1995:9). By the same note, Christ is **Christus Victor** (*Victorious Christ*), who, by his death and resurrection has conquered evil – including the Shona's chronic fear of ngozi, witchcraft and sorcery. All this can be seen to be in line with Karl Barth's (1886-1968) postulate of 'the total annihilation of evil' through the victorious Christ's saying 'yes' to the good elements of culture and 'no' to life's destructive factors. This is compatible with Christ's mission agenda or jubilee mission (Lk.4:16-21) of bringing the Good news of Salvation.

The Shona understand that the gift of healing comes from the *vadzimu* (ancestors) or from *mashavi* (alien spirits). Thus the Shona distinguish between good shavi (e.g. involved with healing or hunting) and bad shavi (e.g. those implicated in stealing, witchcraft) (Bourdillon 1976:189; Gelfand 1959:121-152). Communication between the healing shavi and the svikiro (medium) is understood to be through trance, dreams and / or divination. Healing ministry, particularly as imparted by the ancestor, is meant to be for the good of the family, clan and tribe. Thus the Shona believe that every Shona family has a healing mudzimu (Chimhanda 2000:108). The healing shavi seems to transcend consanguine boundaries to include all sick people.

Chavhunduka (1977:2; 136-142) explains that there are three types of traditional healers. These are herbalist, diviner therapist and diviner. He adds that traditional medicine can be protective (e.g. the wearing of charms) or a cure for natural diseases since Shona holistic cosmology accounts for both natural and supernatural causes of illness. Whereas the herbalist is sufficient in dealing with the former ailments, the latter is a prerogative of the diviner or diviner-therapist. Alternatively, as already been pointed out, the Shona understand that the

mudzimu (ancestors) can intervene directly through its svikiro (spirit medium) (see also Thorpe 1991:58). N'angas are consulted in cases of illness and death and prior to kurova guva (homing of the spirits) Thus it is the n'anga who informs of the need for appeasement of spirits. In the dialectic of western medicine and traditional medicine, the Shona believe that the n'anga is the specialist in dealing with diseases like ngozi and kutandabotso. Thus the n'anga is understood to heal the whole person – there is stress on psychosomatic therapy (Chavhunduka, 1977:142-143)

The healer functions to bring salvation or wholeness to every aspect of community life. “He plays a part in the political, social and economic spheres: he confers authority on the village chief, encourages fertility, blesses every undertaking. He is undoubtedly the most powerful, influential and complex figure in the community. That is why the word healer may be translated priest, chemist, doctor, magician, prophet and visionary.

The healing by the healer, unlike scientific medicine, is holistic. It requires determining the spiritual cause in the true inner being which has revealed itself in a physical ailment. Equally the healer looks for social cause, perhaps in communal tensions and aggressiveness. Once the ailment is diagnosed, the healer prescribes remedies that range from sacrifices to dances, to restoration of social relationships.

The gospels are replete with accounts of Jesus' healing that share the healer's holistic approach. Like the healer, Jesus acknowledges a relationship between the spirit and the body of those whom he heals. Along with physical healing, Jesus absolves the unhealthy of guilt (“Your sins are forgiven” to the paralytic [Mark 2:5]), commends them for their faith (“Your faith has made you well” to Bartimaeus, a blind beggar [Mark 10:52]), and restores them to responsibility (“Go . . . and from now on do not sin again” to the adulterous woman [John 8:11]).

Also like the healer, Jesus places healing within the context of social reintegration into the community. In other words, he re-establishes equilibrium to the community by returning those who are healed to normalcy. Jesus asks healed lepers to present themselves to the priests, the preservers of cultic regulations (Mark 1:44; Luke 17:14). He returns the Gerasene demoniac to his village with the words, “Go home to your friends, and tell them how much

the Lord has done for you” (Mark 5:19). He permits Peter’s mother-in-law to take up her role as host immediately upon her healing (Mark 1:31). To this can be added innumerable examples of Jesus’ eating with the outcasts and so-called sinners – an action by which Jesus restores them to the central activity of communal life. Social reintegration is also implicit in many miracle stories about those who have been ostracised for cultic reasons on account of their sickness, such as the woman with a flow of blood. The simple words “Go in peace” are redolent of social wholeness and restored health (Mark 5:34).”

Finally, some of Jesus’s methods of healing are akin to those of the healer. He applies saliva (Mark 8:23) or a mixture of saliva and dirt (John 9:6) to the unhealthy body part; he spits on his finger, then touches the tongue of a deaf-mute (Mark 7:33); and he makes noises that can be interpreted variously as a sigh or a snort or a groan. In these ways his method of healing conforms to the healer of Africa, whose holistic healing, characterized by the unity of spiritual and physical healing, reintegrates the healed person into the life of the community.<sup>146</sup>

Jesus also shares with the healer mysterious, perhaps clairvoyant, knowledge. The healer claims to know the secrets of a person’s heart and to be able to foretell the future (Kibongi 1969:50). Similarly, Jesus is able to feel power leaving his body through his clothing (Mark 5:28-32). He knows that the man at the pool of Bethesda was handicapped for many years (John 5:6), that Lazarus was dead before Jesus reached Bethany (John 11:11), and that Judas is about to betray him (Matt 26:20-25). He can even predict the downfall of Jerusalem (Mark 13:1-8).

The healer exercises power over the spirit world by interposing himself or herself between the ordinary person and sorcerers or ghosts. Similarly, Jesus exorcisms demonstrate his authority over the spirit world. When the seventy return from their mission, they exclaim, “Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!” Jesus replies, “I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning” (Luke 10:17-18). Later, he retorts to would-be opponents, “But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out the demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you” (Luke 11:20).

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<sup>146</sup> Shorter (Jesus and the Witchdoctor, 10) also observes the similarities between Jesus and the itinerant healer-exorcists of Palestine.

The healer and Jesus both exhibit power for holistic healing, a knowledge of mysteries, and the capacity to mediate between the human world and the spirit world. A parallel could easily be drawn between Jesus and the healer in this respect. Jesus was known as a friend of outcasts and sinners. He was a relatively poor Galilean, on the social fringes of Judaism. And at death, his marred visage suggested Isaiah 53 to some of his followers. In addition Africans believe that the healer can divine witches and sorcerers because they themselves utilize sorcery. This evaluation of the healer suggests the response that Jesus evoked among some of his contemporaries: “He casts out demons by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons” (Luke 11:15). Jesus’ ambiguity and marginalized status comport well with those of the healer.

Cece Kolie of Guinea (cf. Schreiter 1991, 1997:128-150) represents the proponents of the appellation, Christ the Healer. Kolie (Schreiter 1991, 1997:132-138) lays emphasis on African holistic healing. The Nigerian, Akintunde E. Akinade (1995:190) accentuates this point in claiming that the African’s cry for salvation is a cry for health and wholeness. In a comparative approach, Oduyoye (cf. Akinade 1995:188) shows that holistic healing is compatible with Christ’s healing ministry. She alludes to Morton Kesley’s claim that the latter makes about 20 percent of Gospel narratives. This view is underscored in Matthew’s assertion:

And he went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom, and healing every disease and every infirmity (Mt 9:35, Mk 6:6)

Jesus Christ as Healer par excellence promises help to his extended family. The promise is linked with reward in the reciprocal relationship of love and the keeping of the commandments:

Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it, that the Father may be glorified in the Son; If you ask anything in my name I will do it (Jn 14:13-14).

The name of Jesus carries power that brings good health. The Book of Acts is full of such healing miracles. Examples include the healing of the cripple at the gate Beautiful (Acts 3:1-10), healing of the people of Samaria from unclean Spirits (Acts 8:4-9), the healing of Aeneas the cripple at Lyda (Acts 9:32-35) and the raising of Dorcas (Tabitha) from death (Acts 9:36-

41). The apostle are portrayed as having the healing mantle of the Lord. This is shown in that in Jesus' own life, power to heal was seen to go from him on the mere touching of the fringe of his garment (Lk 8:43-48). This too was done in a reciprocal relationship of faith.

It is noteworthy that the Shona Christian's designates of Christ with soteriological import are *Muponesi* (Deliverer-Saviour-Redeemer-Liberator) and *Mununuri* (the go-between or mediator especially in disputes and fights). The latter attribute has Christological overtones in that more often than not, the go-between has to bear the brunt of the crossfire. Thus Christ the mediator bore the burden of our sins. The former attribute is seen to capture all that Christ is across all areas of experience.

Concerning the title Liberator, or Saviour, the Shona conception differs from the Christian understanding which places salvation as first and foremost liberation from sin. In a holistic and existential spirituality, for the Shona, it is not salvation from sin, but liberation from anything that oppresses them, such as disease, pestilence, war and the Shona's chronic fear of witchcraft, ngozi (vengeful spirits in cases of murder) and kutanda botso (parental spirits seeking vengeance or appeasement) that matter (Chimhanda 2000:25).

There are many positive aspects to this way of naming Jesus in Africa. The title resonates well with what we know about Jesus of the Gospels. Although post-Enlightenment skepticism has dismissed most of Jesus' miracles, healing was a significant dimension of Jesus' ministry.<sup>147</sup> Jesus, preacher and teacher, prophet and sage, is often given greater attention today. But healings and exorcisms are widely attested in the New Testament, and in material that meet modern critical biblical criteria. Nor should the healings and exorcisms be separated from the preaching. They were preaching – preaching in deeds rather than words. The symbolic actions of Jesus' ministry were as important as the parabolic stories. Both reflect Jesus the healer – healing in words and in deed – the two always being integrated in Jesus for whom praxis was never separated from proclamation.

There is great need in Africa as well as throughout the world for personal healing – physical, mental, emotional, spiritual. But not only for personal healing, economic, political, social,

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<sup>147</sup> See Donald J. Goergen, *The Mission and Ministry of Jesus* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1986), a Michael Glazier Book, esp. 170-76.



tribal and national wounds are staggering. Can Jesus' healing power reach these wounds? As we ponder this question, Jesus the healer becomes Jesus the liberator, the two are inseparable. In an African context, healing always implies something communal.<sup>148</sup> The nations of Africa have been wounded by slave trade, colonization, the post-colonial formation of the nation states, neo-colonialism's economic dependency, intertribal violence and war, the corruption of many post-independence national leaders, and on and on. Could not the healing Jesus have a strong appeal in Africa today? Is he not what Africa needs now more than ever? How can African Christology allow Jesus, the n'anga, the diviner, the healer to speak with all power, strength and alternatives that are his?

The title 'healer' is only less comprehensive for the Shona context if we fail to have a holistic concept of a more integral healing. No one title ever says it all. That would place too great a burden on any one metaphor. Even biblically and traditionally many titles were needed to do justice to Jesus. Some were more flexible and therefore valuable (Son of God, Lord, Christ) but others equally significant even if limited (Son of humanity, Son of David, Rabbi, Prophet). So likewise in Africa, many African names are needed if Christ is to be inculturated. In one sense, Christ the Healer has its parallel in the tradition with Christ the Priest.<sup>149</sup> Priesthood is applied to Jesus biblically only in the Letter to the Hebrews. Yet the Church picked up the title as a way of speaking about the threefold ministry of Christ and the Church: Jesus as prophet, priest, and king. Michael Kirwen has indicated how, in African society, the diviner is the African equivalent of priest. Jesus Christ is the supreme priest: Jesus Christ, Healer par excellence, diviner, medicine man.

### **5.2.3. The Significance of the Uniqueness of Jesus Christ in Shona Culture.**

It is clear from the preceding discussion that when Jesus is given titles that reflect the Shona traditional worldview in response to the fundamental question of Jesus Christ, "Who do you say I am?", the particular emphasis is both on his uniqueness as a person and what he did. Hence he is not only ancestor, but proto-ancestor or ancestor par excellence. The titles are also a description of what he did in order to fulfil the functions of proto-ancestor.

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<sup>148</sup> See Benezet Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community, The African Model and the Dialogue Between North and South*, among others.

<sup>149</sup> See R. Buana Kibongi, who translates n'anga as priest.

It is important to note that Evangelical Christians also claim uniqueness and finality only for Christ and not for evangelical Christianity in any of its many institutional or cultural forms. The different titles that tie Jesus to the Shona culture have each been used in such a way as to emphasise his uniqueness. African theologians are all agreed that for the purpose of communication, Jesus is all these titles to the Shona culture and yet at the same time he is unlike all of them, at least the way Shona culture understands them. He is unlike them because only he is the God-Man and only he died and rose again and only through him can we come to the knowledge of God. To use John Stott's (1992:306) words, but with reference to traditional Shona culture, Jesus' claim of uniqueness is not just that he was one of the great *ancestors, healers, liberators, chiefs or elder-brothers* of the world. It would be hopelessly incongruous to refer to him as 'Jesus the Great', comparable to *Nehanda or Chaminuka*, the Great spirit mediums of Shona religiosity. Jesus is not 'the Great'; he is the only one - he has no peers, no rivals and no successors.

Giving Jesus titles that mean something to the Shona context therefore opens the door to a deeper understanding of both the Shona culture and what the Bible teaches about who Jesus is, and what he has done. But these titles or metaphors not only apply to Jesus analogously but really. They tell who Jesus is, and can be, in Shona context today. Naturally this means not only applying an African name to Jesus, but also applying the name in a new way, which is the nature of metaphorical language. We must remind ourselves that with all the titles, traditional and new, African or Western, that their character is metaphorical. They are intended to be revelatory of who Jesus is within the confines of human language. Thus they can best be understood with something of the yes-no-yes structure (Ranshaw-Schmidt 1986:23-26). This is true of each title.

We should therefore be critical if these titles are applied literally, because in a very literal way Jesus is not an ancestor as we ordinarily might speak of ancestor. He is not a chief, not even "the Christ," not in the way that "Christ" or "Messiah" was ordinarily understood within the Judaism of Jesus' time. So the metaphor goes through a yes-no-yes in order to fit. Yes, Jesus is an ancestor. No, Jesus is not an ancestor, not in that way. But, yes, Jesus is ancestor, both in a deeper sense of what we mean by ancestor and in the sense that JESUS is ancestor. Jesus tells us and reveals to us, as much about what it means to be ancestor as the category of ancestor tells us something about Jesus. The two illuminate each other. This is true of Jesus

as healer, liberator, king, or even son of David, Christ, shepherd. Yes, Jesus is Chief. No, Jesus is not a chief, not in that kind of way, not that kind of chief. Yes, Jesus is chief, a chief in this sense, and let us keep in mind that Jesus is true chief, what being a chief is all about. So we find out about chieftainship from Jesus and not simply about Jesus from our pre-conceptions of what a chief is (Goergen 2001:8).

On the one hand, the names or titles or metaphors tell us something real and significant about who Jesus is. But on the other hand it is Jesus who tells us what being an ancestor, a healer, a liberator is all about. This is the traditional way of naming Jesus even with biblical titles. The Epistle to the Hebrews had to rethink the meaning of priesthood in order for Jesus to fit the metaphor. The earthly Jesus was clearly not historically a priest in the sense in which that would have been literally understood within the Judaism of Jesus' day. Nevertheless to the author of the Letter to Hebrews, Jesus was not only a priest, but the only true priest. Likewise with the expression Messiah or Christ as applied to Jesus: Jesus was not the Messiah in the varied ways in which that was understood within Judaism at that time. These names could not be applied to Jesus literally without any flexibility, without theologising the names, without realizing that they were functioning as metaphors for Jesus. The content of christological titles comes as much from who Jesus himself uniquely is, as from the prior understanding of them within the cultural milieu of which they were a part.

This therefore confirms what all Christian tradition has done, theologize the titles, theologise the African names for Jesus – name Jesus as Proto-Ancestor, healer, liberator, chief, elder-brother, but not allow this to be the end of the Christological process but rather the beginning. The title ties Jesus into the culture, helps to contextualize Jesus, but does not stop with doing this, but goes on to the theological task of interpreting the title.

#### **5.2.4. Implications for Shona Culture**

The message of the gospel in Shona culture is that this Jesus Christ whom they have come to know and accepted as proto-ancestor, healer and chief died on the cross of calvary and his death is such that it meets their deepest spiritual needs. To the Shona context, the cross means mediation, reconciliation, life, wellbeing. Whether the Shona realizes this or not, they, together with the rest of humanity have, in their sin, turned away from God and so merit

divine punishment. Their greatest need is therefore, forgiveness of sin from God and a personal relationship with him and not the ancestors or even the community.

Whilst it is true that sin affects personal relationships horizontally, the primary sin the Bible speaks of is sin against God and how this sin corrupts everything else, including human relationships and relationships with the rest of the created order. This forgiveness and the subsequent relationship is made possible only by the death of Christ on the cross. In chapter two we noted how both the Old and New Testaments use a plurality of metaphors to draw out the meaning and salvific significance of this death for all humanity in all cultures. And so Jesus' death on the cross was not only redemptive, but also sacrificial, revelatory and reconciliatory. Only his death could be all this and salvation which is a result of this kind of death can only be described as radical and therefore meets our deepest needs no matter what our culture is. The challenge for evangelical Christianity is to see salvation as comprehensive enough to do this even if this is accommodated in the past, present and future scope of salvation.

In chapter four Bediako (1984:114), exposes the ambivalent nature of the Shona ancestors and how some of them are even 'malevolent', and speaks of the desperate need of Shona Christians to overcome their fear of these ancestors. Jesus the ancestor par excellence, the proto ancestor, the only ancestor brings to an end this fear and the negative influence ancestors have on Shona communities. The belief in the power of ancestors to inflict pain or to enhance life, the belief that they can control the destiny of human beings is radically changed because of Jesus Christ. Their god-like status as superhuman beings is reduced to the status of deceased human beings. By accepting Jesus Christ as the sole divine ancestor all fear is eliminated. As Lord he empties them of their power, and claims that power for himself and because they have no more power to harm or save anyone he replaces them with himself (Bediako 1990:19). Shona Christians need not fear them any longer and they become a living witness to the victorious power of the crucified Christ.

Once the Shona ancestors have been dethroned and rendered powerless they also lose their influence and therefore cease to be the cornerstone of the Shona Christian religious consciousness. Only faith in God becomes the determining factor. Fear of the capriciousness of the ancestors gradually gives way to the gospel of freedom and hope.

Not only does Jesus eliminate the negative influence of the ancestors on society, he also desacralises and reduces them to ordinary members of the community (Bediako 1984:115). The coming of Christ inaugurates ‘a new humanity’, ‘creates a new history’, and for Christians this means that there is a new way of laying the ‘power lines’ (1984:115). In this new community, Christ is seen as the only Lord and the ancestors are reduced to participants in the community. No longer will the community look to the ancestors as transcendent and as a source of blessing (1984:105). As a result the ancestors lose their divinity and are reduced to mere dead human beings (1984:109). Even the chiefs who are appointed by the ancestors and therefore rule on their behalf are desacralised and become human beings among other human beings – mere leaders accountable to those who they lead. The general understanding in African culture is that the chief represents the power and authority of the ancestors and if the ancestors lose their divinity, the same happens to the chief who represents them. This basically leaves Jesus Christ standing alone as the divine ancestor and benefactor of the community.

According to Bediako, Jesus replaces the ancestors as benefactors of society because he is Lord, mightier than the ancestors, and is the one who, among the dead, is the only one alive. Bediako revisits the mediatorial role of the ancestors and speaks of Jesus as a ‘mediator of a better covenant relating our human destiny directly to God . . . that meets our needs to the full’ (Bediako in Samuel&Sugden 1984:104).<sup>150</sup> Bediako emphasizes this message by describing Jesus as the ‘Saviour’, who gives ‘protection’ and ‘guidance’ (Bediako 1990:18-19). This protection is seen in Jesus as *Christus Victor* (1990:8). By this description Bediako means that Jesus is victorious over the spiritual realm and particularly over evil forces. The Christian is therefore set free from the fear of witches and evil spirits.

In both Old and New Testaments, God’s activity in the world is presented in a context of the opposition between His Kingdom and that of evil spiritual powers. That encounter has been and continues to be a major factor in contemporary Christianity. In Shona culture and religion there is a strong belief in the spirit realm. Whilst there are aspects of Shona culture and religion that are consistent with the Lordship of Christ and therefore serve as preparation for

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<sup>150</sup> Bediako, ‘Biblical Christologies’:104. The phrase ‘to the full,’ is a strong indication that in his view there is no need for benefactors other than Jesus, and Christians should therefore look to him. When he uses the expression, ‘a better covenant’, I interpret this to mean that Jesus is of a higher quality than the ancestors because, unlike the ancestors, he is solely beneficent.

the gospel, there are many aspects that are inconsistent and in opposition to the Lordship of Christ. There is no doubt that many Shona people are enslaved to Satan and his dominion as they struggle with fear and the need to manipulate the spiritual powers in order to assure themselves of protection, health and success.

In chapter 3, Charles Kraft points out that when the witness of the gospel meets cultures, it involves three kinds of encounters: power encounters, truth encounters and allegiance encounters. Power encounters are concerned with securing freedom from the enemy's captivity. In different cultures Satan uses many things to keep people from commitment to God and truth. In the Shona culture it is fear of death, the ancestors and vengeful and alien spirits. In this context where spiritual power is a primary concern, power encounters are often the clearest way to demonstrate the superiority of God over their ancestors and vengeful spirits.

Commitment/Allegiance Encounters have to do with relationship. The initial commitment to Christ brings us into a primary relationship with Him in replacement of the primacy of relationships with the ancestors, spirits, and traditional healers. Subsequent commitments confirm and deepen that relationship. In Jesus' ministry and throughout the Scriptures, he calls people to commit themselves to Him as their primary allegiance, as their sole ancestor. The Christian message involves an invitation to this initial commitment, followed by a continuing series of invitations to greater commitment to God on a daily basis.

The major problem facing evangelical Christianity among the Shona is syncretism which results from a commitment to both Christ and the ancestors. These encounters aim to help people commit to Jesus Christ and a growing relationship to God, his people and his mission. The primary vehicle of this encounter is witness as people are challenged to respond to the new understanding and freedom that they have obtained in the other encounters. One example of this commitment encounter would be the decision to trust in God's power for healing and protection instead of a traditional healer (n'anga).

Truth Encounters are concerned with understanding and challenging the aspects of Shona world view and culture that are inconsistent with the gospel. Those aspects that dehumanize, subjugate and enslave Shona men and women. John Stott (1984:254) gives an accurate

description of the subjugation of women by men in different cultures which is very true of the Shona context. Shona women have for generations been habitually despised and demeaned by men. They have been treated as mere playthings and sex objects, as unpaid cooks, housekeepers and child minders, and as brainless simpletons incapable of engaging in rational discussion. Their gifts have been unappreciated, their personality smothered, their freedom curtailed, and their service in some areas exploited, in others refused. To change such attitudes among Shona men, they need not only the truth of Scripture about women, men and God but deliverance that is only possible because of what Jesus accomplished for us on the cross.

Jesus spent most of his time teaching truth, inviting people into truth encounters. As He taught, He constantly invited people into greater allegiance to him and his Father. In conjunction with the teaching of truth and the appeals for allegiance, He regularly freed people from the enemy's captivity through his use of God's power. Truth encounters are therefore about understanding. Prior to making a commitment to Christ, we need a certain level of understanding of the truth especially in the Shona context where understanding the distinction between human ancestors and Christ the Proto-Ancestor is critical. Whenever truth is taught, it confronts or encounters ignorance and error. As we grow in our commitment to Christ, we need a continuing deepening of our understanding of God's truth to fight any ignorance and error to which we are exposed. Contextual teaching is the vehicle of this encounter as the mind and the will are exercised and challenged. Faulty understandings are confronted with biblical teaching about Jesus. Kraft (1981:300) explains that truth encounters "provide the context within which the other encounters take place and can be interpreted."

All three encounters are necessary and they work together as people move along in their relationship and growth with Jesus Christ: encountering truth to counter error and/or ignorance and to bring people to a correct understanding of Christ, experiencing freedom from satanic captivity, and entering into deeper levels of commitment. At all points in Christian experience, the need for all three of these encounters cannot be over-emphasized, and all of them need to take place within the socio-cultural context appropriate to the given receptors.



Unfortunately, the majority of evangelical Christian witnesses have neglected the advocacy of power encounters in the presentation of the Gospel. Though Pentecostal and Charismatic witness have done better, evangelicals have stressed allegiance and truth but they have been deficient in the power dimensions of the biblical message. This has resulted in what is undoubtedly the biggest problem in worldwide Christianity: dual allegiance or at worst, syncretism.

#### **5.2.4.1. The Transformation of Shona Society?**

In this final section I shall attempt to relate the significance of the cross to the Zimbabwean realities to date. Shona Christians form a large proportion of the Zimbabwean population and they have great potential as agents for the transformation of Zimbabwe into a good place for all to live. The same is true for the African continent where Christians also form a large proportion of the continent's population. In the past, Christians, in particular Christian missionaries from the West, have made significant contributions to the development of Africa and African Christians could make even greater contributions.

Evangelical Christians in Zimbabwe have been guilty of isolating the power of the cross from contemporary situations and problems. They, perhaps more than most, have thrown a cultural cloak of privatisation around the cross and have not allowed its radical message to affect all we do and say. The ministry and witness of the early church in the midst of great persecution is evidence of the power of this radical message. Their distinctness, set apartness as a witnessing community, clearly pointed out the purpose for Jesus' self-giving on the cross. It was not just to save isolated individuals, but to create a new community within society.

Stott (1986:22) criticises evangelicals for trivializing the nature of salvation that brought about this new community, as if it meant no more than a self-reformation, or the forgiveness of our sins, or a personal passport to paradise, or a private mystical experience without social or moral consequences. Salvation is a radical transformation in three phases, beginning at our conversion, continuing throughout our earthly life and brought to perfection when Christ comes. So the new community consist of men and women who have been transformed by Christ and therefore they belong to him, love one another and eagerly serve the world. This community is nothing less than a renewed and reunited humanity, of which he would be head. According to Kraft (1979:334-336) what makes this community of believers distinct is their

conscious allegiance (faith commitment) to God, awareness of God's dynamic interaction with humanity, continual growth and maturity in the grace and knowledge of Christ, a conscious desire for the transformation of community and a contextual expression of the grace and knowledge of Christ.

If the cross can have such radical impact on a people group and that impact is understood as transformational, not only of the individual but possibly the community and culture, what does this mean for the Shona Christian in Zimbabwe today and for the African Christian on a continent that faces major challenges? The critical problems that face Zimbabwe and indeed the rest of the continent affect everyone regardless of their faith and all of us must therefore play our part if we are to overcome the problems. And overcome we must! If Zimbabwe is to overcome the present crisis and know peace and prosperity, Christians must become more active participants in the economic, political and social development of the nation. According to George Kinoti & Peter Kimuyu<sup>151</sup> in a book they co-edited entitled "Vision for a Bright Africa – Facing the challenges of development" (1997:6-7), the challenge is for Christians to become active at every level of the development process – from the development of the economic and political theory to the formulation and implementation of policy, and from the highest levels of government to the village. Christians must actively participate in the governance of the nation.

But if our Christian response to contemporary issues is going to be realistic and effective, it must always have an eschatological perspective as a hermeneutical key. To have such a perspective is to accept the painful reality that, not only do we live in between times, we also belong and therefore live in the two kingdoms, what Luther called the doctrine of Two Kingdoms. This doctrine acknowledges that we are cultural creatures, that God is sovereign over every sphere of life and that Christians must be both separate from the world and actively involved in it. According to Harvie Conn (1982:419), the balance and tension in this perspective protects the Church from becoming a launching pad for guerilla operations, but at the same time does not become the retreat where the pious await the parousia.

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In my opinion, this means at least two things as we attempt to challenge and change the evil that surrounds us: First, that the ultimate solution to the Zimbabwean problems, let alone all societal problems is the Parousia; the ultimate Christian hope is the new heaven and the new earth. However deeply we may feel the need to do what we can to improve society, our frame of reference is eschatological. Second, every form of Christian eschatology preserves some notion of the tension between the “already” and the “not yet.” Christians speak, on the one hand, of what God has done in Christ Jesus once for all, and on the other, of what he will do at the coming of Jesus in the end.<sup>152</sup> On the one hand, Christ is already reigning, and Christians rejoice to be under his rule; on the other hand, the whole universe groans in travail waiting for his rule to begin in an uncontested fashion.

John Stott (1992:375), describes this tension as living ‘in between times’ – between the past and the future, between the first and second comings of Christ, between what has been done and what remains to be done, between the present reality and future destiny, between the kingdom come and kingdom coming. However framed, it is this tension that generates a lot of debate with regards to the Christian responds to the challenges that surround us. The point is that we cannot expect complete success in our efforts to reform or influence culture. So what should we do?

What is obvious from the argument so far is that we need a theology of the cross which embraces a commitment to nation building and to the task of bringing Christ’s healing grace to the poor, starving and oppressed. Such a commitment can only be true for those who have experienced the power of the cross through salvation in Christ and for them such a commitment is not an option but a must and a good starting point for life in community as salt and light. African (Shona) Christians are in a situation similar to that of the Jewish exiles in Babylon to whom the Lord sent this message, “Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it because if it prospers, you too will prosper” (Jeremiah 29:7). We too, must work for the peace and prosperity of Africa.

In 2005, Zimbabwe celebrated 25 years of independence facing a situation which was a far cry from the lofty ideals that gave birth to the nation in 1980. The patriotic fervour, national

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<sup>152</sup> Cf. Gabriel Fackre, “Eschatology and Systematics,” *Ex Auditu* 6 (1990): 101-17; and especially Geoffrey W. Bromley, “Eschatology: The Meaning of the End,” in *God and Culture*, ed. D.A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 67-84.

pride and the once lofty and romantic ideals of independence were lost in the stark reality of a nation divided, traumatised and impoverished by a political, economic and social crisis whose solution does not seem to be anywhere in sight. Development indicators revealed that Zimbabwe had suffered a severe, downward spiral, an unrelenting economic melt-down characterised by the denudation of professionals and skilled personnel through massive brain drain, hyper-inflation (currently the highest in the world), shortages, decline in agricultural and manufacturing productivity, shortages of foreign currency, escalating corruption, drying up of foreign investments, and tourism dwindling to a trickle.

These negative indicators inflicted a heavy toll on the generality of the population. Health and education deteriorated. The quality of life generally has suffered immeasurably. We have seen the rapid growth in numbers of the rural and urban poor. In addition, the insidious HIV/AIDS is having a catastrophic effect on social and economic life. According to the latest UNICEF statistics, Zimbabwe has the highest number of orphans per capita in the world. Most of these cases are due to HIV and AIDS. Zimbabwe's HIV infection rates are currently at 20.1 percent and at least 3,000 people die every week from AIDS-related illnesses. The turn of events has led to disillusionment, the breakdown of civil society and makes it difficult to govern properly. The result has been, amongst other things, a frequent disregard for the rule of law and human life and a deepening sense of social despair.

The prevailing situation is a wake up call to the church. We cannot blame it all on the politicians and the unfair economic policies of the World Bank and the rich nations. At the end of the day, if we have 'failed institutions', 'failed homes', or 'failed nations, it is largely because the church has also failed in her prophetic role - to be a sharp eye, beholding the good and the evil and an eye that does not trivialize evil; a voice that calls good, good and evil, evil; the ear that hears and articulates the cry of the poor and powerless.

There are many reasons why Christians in Zimbabwe must work for the economic and social well being of the Zimbabwean people. First it is not God's will that any people should be oppressed by poverty, hunger, disease or tyranny. It makes a mockery of the cross of Christ especially what he went through for us, in our place. It is not God's will that millions of Zimbabweans should be the victims of hunger, malnutrition and disease, nor that they should suffer from abject poverty, ignorance, repression or injustice. On the contrary, He desires the

peace and prosperity of the Zimbabwean people. And the Lord Jesus has already come to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim freedom for prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind and release the oppressed (Luke 4:16-21). Secondly, as has been well argued by both Niebuhr and Kraft in their typologies of the Christ and culture relationship, Christians must act because we are part of the society in which we live and must therefore help the community and the nation to build a just, peaceful and prosperous society. Thirdly, the Christian belief in the dignity and worth of all human beings because they are created in the image of God compels us to work for peace and prosperity of the nation. According to Kinoti & Kimuyu (eds) (1997:8), abject poverty, chronic hunger, disease, torture and oppression tend to dehumanize, not only individual Zimbabweans but also the African race as a whole. Lastly, Christians have unique contributions to make. The Christian's own experience of transformation through Christ and belief in the dignity and worth of every human being ought to be a powerful motive for striving for the peace and prosperity of our people. It has been well argued that African must be transformed morally if she is to know peace and prosperity and the church is God's chief agent for such a transformation.

#### **5.2.4.2. The Church - God's agent for Transformation**

The church is better placed to bring about such transformation because of the value the church places on loving God and loving neighbour. The evangelical understanding of conversion is that, there can be no real conversion to God if there is no similar re-orientation to one's neighbour. Neighbour in the Zimbabwean context are men and women living under the terrible conditions described above. Jesus taught this himself at the level of forgiveness: 'Forgive us our sin, as we forgive those who sin against us' (Matt 6:12). So close is reconciliation to God and to our neighbour that one is not sure which is prior (Matt 5:23-4; 18:21-35). This biblical understanding of conversion places the Zimbabwe realities right at the center of evangelical spirituality.

If, as Calvin emphasised, the incarnation is part of Christ's work of atonement, we cannot possibly ignore the life of Jesus as if it were irrelevant to the task of redemption. The fact that Jesus himself entered human existence as a poor person, homeless (Matt 8:20) and spent a lot of time with the poor and needy. He identified with those who were regarded with disdain by the aristocracy: prostitutes, tax collectors, Gentiles and women. His opening words at Capernaum in Luke 4:18 gives all the appearance of a manifesto speech with its declaration

of concern for what we might call the underprivileged of society. The breaking-in of the kingdom in the ministry of Jesus, as expressed in this verse, means that in him the future has already, in part, invaded the present. People are in fact, healed, freed, converted and made whole. In his ministry we see no polarisation of spiritual healing and physical wholeness. Jesus responds to human need, whatever it is, and ministers his healing grace in accordance with it. Furthermore he also calls his disciples to identify with this simple lifestyle (Matt 10:7-12).

Jesus also taught that in the final days, salvation is marked by compassion to the needy. 'I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink . . . I needed clothes and you clothed me' (Matt 25:35-36). Those who emphasise the 'verticalist' view of atonement have always found the 'work-ethic' of Jesus' teaching a problem. But it is scarcely a problem if we hold faith and works together and realise that real faith and commitment to Christ and his way result in the fruit of faith, namely deeds of love and compassion.

The long heritage for Christian social involvement encourages reflection on deeds of love and compassion. We can remember how the early church, excited about their new life in Christ not only looked after their own, but fed many outsiders as well, and quietly tried to exert influence for good in the larger society. There were some remarkable examples of this in the eighteenth century Europe-America, the ideals of St Francis of Assisi come to mind, the concern for the poor displayed by the Reformers, Wesley's letter-writing campaign to abolish slavery, Whitefield's orphanage (Carson 1996:406). Historians have attributed to Wesley's influence, rather than any to other, the fact that Britain was spared the horrors of a bloody revolution like France's. Wesley was both a preacher of the gospel and a prophet of social righteousness. (Stott 1984:2ff). Stott goes on to mention a long list of leaders of the next generation who were committed with equal enthusiasm to evangelism and social concern.

#### **5.2.4.3. The Church under the Cross**

As we have seen more than once, the coming of Christ into our world was an act of love. He became human, lived among us, caring for the needy, died and rose again so that we might enjoy his new life. The cross and the resurrection are the seal of our freedom. But he who entered this life as a poor man in a poor family calls us to identify with his act of voluntary

surrender. St Paul goes to the heart of this when writing to the Corinthians about giving to the poor of Jerusalem: ‘For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich’ (2Cor 8:9). In this and other passages of the New Testament, the example of Jesus becomes the paradigm for Christian living. For instance: giving (2Cor 8:9); humility (Phil 2:5ff); suffering (1Peter 2:21) and discipleship (Rom 6:4). It is not surprising, then, that Luke tells us that the central characteristic of the early church was its sharing of goods so that there was not a poor person among them (Acts 4:32, 34). He does not inform us, nor does he need to, where the first Christians got this idea from. From the nature of the earliest preaching, it was clearly the ministry as well as the message of Jesus which had such an impact upon the way the first Christians lived. Again, we must make clear what we are not saying.

I am not suggesting for a moment that the act of becoming poor is redemptive, which is certainly Gutierrez’s position – instead I am arguing that a consequence of being redeemed is that one is drawn into Christ’s ministry to those in need. If the church has a strategy of the cross it will affect the way Christians live, not only separately but together and that will draw us into Christ’s ministry to those in need. To live the life of the cross, the church leaders must learn to use the talents and skills of Christian academics and other professionals to bring about transformation. Church history has taught us that the contributions of professionals like teachers, doctors, engineers, and artisans were crucial to the missionary enterprise. But Christian professionals need to think together and work together for the good of the society. They should equip themselves to play leading roles in their jobs and professions, in order to contribute effectively to both the making and the implementation of economic, social and political policies. This remains the only way Christians who have known and experienced the forgiveness and reconciliation of God through Christ can effectively use their God-given talents and gifts to be witnesses in the market place.

#### **5.2.4.3.1. Discipleship**

Liberation theology takes the Church from the study into the world, from the lecture room into the laboratory. Its emphasis on praxis, action, challenges the Church to a commitment to the cross which is not only deeply personal but which is also deeply social. At the personal level, the question emerge: how may we bring back the power of the cross into Christian living so that we ourselves are tangible witnesses of what following Jesus Christ really means?



In order to make a difference in a context of spiritual, physical, mental and social poverty, the cross should touch every aspect of the Christian's life – the heart, mind, feet and hands. It should also touch your family life, work life and everything else that we do. Whilst the Church is both entitled and obliged to condemn society characterized by the evils as we have come to know them in Zimbabwe the best way it can influence society is through its members. The church should inspire its members (whether politicians, civil servants, business people, trade unionists or leaders in other areas of public life) to seek and apply appropriate remedies in their different situations. The church has the responsibility of sending into society Christ-like disciples who can make a difference in both the private and public arena. If this were to happen amongst the ruling Shona Christians we would see a dramatic turn around in terms of service delivery and reduction in the levels of corruption. Unfortunately, whilst the church in Zimbabwe has done a good job in evangelizing the masses, discipleship remains a major challenge.

At the social level, there is an undeniable need to shift the attention of the Church from privatised religion to the arena of political and social commitment. Issues of social justice cannot replace the gospel, but neither are they external to it: they are integral to its message and life. A gospel which shrinks back from the deep concerns of people trapped by unemployment, dehumanised by social structures, cramped and confined by limited educational opportunities, is not a gospel worthy of the name of Jesus Christ. At the very least we can learn from Liberation theology the necessity to ask critical questions of any society which assumes the God-given right of the rich to get richer and the poor to get poorer.

William Temple, writing in 1941 of continuing poverty and malnutrition said, “there can be no true human freedom without economic freedom”, and he put his considerable ability behind the search for an equitable society in which the poor could climb out of the spiral of poverty to live more useful and dignified lives (Carey 1986:182). Liberation theology is quite right to remind us that this will involve ‘praxis’. Praxis took Jesus to a cross and it leads every Christian who is born again into his death and resurrection to embrace his way of living. His way of life is to get involved with the suffering, feeding, clothing, training, empowering, encouraging and pointing to Jesus in whom life is found.

A strategy of the cross will involve any Christian community in earthing itself in these real issues and problems of its social context. Insofar as the Christian community lives under the cross, preaches the cross and expresses the cross daily, the church will become a sign of hope to those who live without dignity and freedom. The church expresses the cross when it practically does something about the marginalised in society. In Bulawayo where I live, some churches have organized themselves to provide at least one meal a day to mostly destitute and unemployed people. Our church is part of a group of churches that runs a skills empowerment project for the poor and once they are ready, they are assisted with starting capital to help them to begin income generating projects. We also support projects that work with street children, HIV and AIDS and orphans.

When the church is involved in such acts of mercy, we are not doing the community a favour but simply living under the cross, being what God has called us to do and to be, salt and light in the community. We are loving God and loving neighbour. This is done not only by the church as an institution but also by individual Christians as they serve God in their various communities and in the market place where they spend most of their time.

#### **5.2.4.3.2. Stewardship**

If liberation theology sets an agenda for the Church to engage with its world and culture, there is an indirect challenge which resists the separation of the secular and spiritual. Evangelicals must challenge the attempt to make Christianity a 'religion'. The way of religion is that of compartmentalising faith so that it is confined to Sundays or to areas of life marked out as more holy than others. The history of the Church reveals the unfortunate legacy we have inherited – that of religious buildings deemed more important than others, that of Sunday deemed more important than other days of the week. A commitment to the world, God's world, frees Christians from the separation of the spiritual and secular, and releases us to consider life holistically and without guilt. Most importantly, it releases us to be effective stewards of the whole of God's resources in the world, and to see the ecological as part of God's new creation.

As I have remarked, if we are going to have a strategy of the cross which affects people here and now, we must 'incarnate' the message of Jesus in our society. Not only will this mean showing practical action but it will also include identifying with those concerns – social,

political, whatever in our community which will lead to the enrichment of human dignity. If we are called to preach a gospel that is genuinely 'gospel' and yet social in its application to the lives of men, we are forced to ask: what are the issues in this community which dehumanise people and restrict their growth? What Christian insights can we share with our community? How do we balance out the time we should give to purely 'Church' concerns with that we should give to 'community' issues? This challenges the church to be a witnessing community in the broader community and the pastor to be a community leader. Issues that affect the broader community become our issues also – issues of poverty, unemployment, crime, HIV and AIDS, racism, tribalism etc. When the church gets involved with the broader community in finding solutions to these problems, it earns the right to influence the community from within.

Taking up the cross, then, has implications for the individual Christian as well as the Church. We have been led to reject much of the system of liberation theology but what I, for one, do not wish to repudiate is its passionate belief in the relevance of the cross to the needs of our world. To love, to care for the weak, to help the afflicted – in short, to live as Christ lived in the world – will make us question anything which claims to be biblical Christianity if it does not participate in the struggle for the poor and needy. Rather than compromising the gospel and making it more difficult to preach, it will give it a new integrity and purpose.

#### **5.2.4.3.3. The Christian and Politics**

The doctrine of the Two Kingdoms is most often applied to the Christian's obligations to the state, but also illuminates the cultural controversies which are causing so much confusion in today's church. The Lausanne Covenant speaks not just of "social responsibility" but of "socio-political involvement." According to Stott (1984:11), broadly speaking, "politics" denotes the life of the city and the responsibilities of the citizen. It is concerned therefore with the whole of our life in human society. Politics is the art of living together in a community. According to its narrow definition, however, politics is the science of government. It is concerned with the development and adoption of specific policies with a view to their being enshrined in legislation. It is about gaining power for social change.

The Grand Rapids Report<sup>153</sup> addressed itself to distinguishing between “social service” and “social action” within the narrow definition of “politics.” Social service includes such activities as relieving human needs, philanthropic activity, seeking to minister to individuals and families and works of mercy. Social action would include, removing the causes of human need, political and economic activity, seeking to transform the structures of society and the quest for justice. The Report went on to delineate socio-political action in these terms; “It looks beyond persons to structures, beyond the rehabilitation of prison inmates to the reform of the prison system, beyond improving factory conditions to securing a more participatory role for the workers, beyond caring for the poor to improving – and when necessary transforming – the economic system (whatever it may be) and the political system (again, whatever it may be), until it facilitates their liberation from poverty and oppression (Stott 1984:12).

It seems clear, then, that genuine Christian social concern will embrace both social service and social action. Some cases of need cannot be relieved at all without political action. A good example is the harsh treatment of slaves could have been ameliorated, but not slavery itself; it had to be abolished. To go on relieving other needs, though necessary, may condone the situation which causes them. It is therefore always good to feed the hungry; it is better if possible to eradicate the causes of hunger. So if we truly love our neighbour, and want to serve them, our service may oblige us to take political action on their behalf.

Should individual Christians get involved in politics? According to the above argument, Yes, as part of our vocation in God’s secular kingdom. All individual Christians should be politically active in the sense that, as conscientious citizens, they will vote in elections, inform themselves about contemporary issues, share in the public debate, and perhaps write to a newspaper, lobby their member of parliament or take part in a demonstration. Further, some individuals are called by God to give their lives to political service, in either local or national government. Christians who share particular moral and social concerns should be encouraged to form or join groups which will study issues at a deeper level and take appropriate action. In some cases these will be exclusively Christian groups; in others Christians will want to contribute their biblical perspective to mixed groups, whether in a political party, a trade union or a professional association (Stott 1984:13ff).

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<sup>153</sup> Keele 67, *The National Evangelical Anglican Congress*, ed. Phillip Crowe (Falcon, 1967), para. 20.

The church however should not get involved in party politics. The church must teach both the law and the gospel of God. This is the duty of the church's pastors, teachers and other leaders. And "when the church concludes that biblical faith or righteousness requires it to take a public stand on some issue, then it must obey God's Word and trust him with the consequences."<sup>154</sup> Whether we think the church should go beyond teaching and take corporate political action of some kind is likely to depend on whether we adhere to the Lutheran, Reformed or Anabaptist traditions within Protestantism in relation to church and state.

For the individual Christian, the goal should not be necessarily the election of Christian rulers, nor to make Zimbabwe a "Christian nation." Rather, it should be to apply God's law in our social relationships and to establish justice and righteousness in our land. Christians in politics must play by political rules, whether hard-ball power plays or the arts of compromise and consensus building, but always role model honesty, integrity, wisdom and servant leadership. The rough and tumble of the political process, however, means that Christian politicians should not be prevented from exercising power or from making a tactical compromise by the charge that to do so is "not Christian." That confuses the two kingdoms. Christian politicians, however, like all politicians, must exercise their power justly and in accordance with God's law.

The church as an institution should not get involved in party politics but should be gentle and loving, while never compromising its doctrines and this often means consistently being a prophetic voice, upholding God's standard of peace and justice, speaking on behalf of those who cannot speak for themselves. The Church's nation building initiatives pursued by the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe (EFZ), the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops Conference (ZCBC) and the Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC) need to be commended and encouraged. Zimbabwe needs a new national vision to restore our self-confidence and pride, dignity and hope and the Church has the capacity, through its leaders and members with all their gifts and talents, to inspire, encourage and facilitate national dialogue, debate and reconstruction across the broad spectrum of national opinion, constituencies and stakeholders.

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<sup>154</sup> Grand Rapids Report, p.52.

The latest contribution of the church is a document authored by the three groups entitled, “The Zimbabwe We Want: Towards a National Vision for Zimbabwe”. In this document they highlight the crisis as well as paint a picture of the kind of Zimbabwe at least sixty percent of the population would want. This picture consist of the key core values such as, spirituality and morality, option for the poor and the marginalised, Gender equity, respect for others, respect for democratic freedoms. All this is effort on the part of the church to speak into a very chaotic situation and begin a process that could, by God’s grace bring about transformation.

It is only by so doing that the church has any chance of making a link between its experience of the cross of Christ, its preaching of the cross and the needs of people. Liberation theology is quite right in its observation that it is not a case of choosing sides. Silence is an actual choice because to do nothing in the face of wrong is in itself an act of injustice. For example, the failure of the churches of Germany to speak up against the tyranny of Hitler and his unspeakable evil encouraged him and his henchmen to intensify the atrocities. But any church which is under the sign of the cross will identify with the suffering, persecuted and the un-free because this was the way of the master and the disciple is called to follow.

### **5.3. Conclusion**

The Christian belongs to the kingdom of God and at the same time you both do and don’t belong to the kingdom of culture. The vantage point from which the Christian looks out over the kingdom of the world or culture is that of being a Christian. The cross of Christ has become the metaphorical vantage point from which the Shona Christian can look out across his/her culture and address it with the message of this Jesus, crucified and risen.

The Christian calling is a cultural task: “It is in this world, with its conflicts caused by the principalities and powers that we are called to culture and to evangelization (Schrotenboer 1998:333).” To fulfill this calling, this cultural responsibility, Christians should neither take flight from the world of culture nor simply affirm it but engage creatively in culture as co-workers with God. Neither world flight nor flight from culture is an option for the Christian. For God has given us the exalted position of being managers of his creation. To flee from culture is to desert that office. Worldliness cannot be eliminated by world flight because it is basically a matter of the heart.

To simply affirm the world without qualification means to claim that it is fundamentally good in its present state. That is an oversimplification; it cannot provide a basis for being active in society and participating in the governance of the world. This simple affirmation approach fails to take into account the devastation of creation due mankind's revolt against God. It fails to see the conflict of kingdoms and of worlds and of cultures.

The task of the church as this new community of Shona believers is therefore to ask the question: what is there in our culture that helps or clouds the process of transformation, what is going on in the street right now which must be affirmed, which must be confronted, which must be outflanked? Not only what can we transform, but also what must we reject, and what must we praise? Only the Shona Christian who is part of the culture can really answer these questions.

There are many fine elements in traditional Shona culture. These include strong family ties, generosity, respect for the elderly, a holistic worldview and a strong community spirit. But many of them are breaking down due to urbanisation and other modern forces. Christians need to find ways of helping society to preserve and strengthen them because they provide invaluable support to individuals and give society essential cohesion. In fact, Christians have the responsibility to role model the kind of life that the gospel generates and sustains. We can become a powerful symbol of the gospel, of the new human being living under the cross, of the true wisdom, of the kingdom of God on earth. The church as a witnessing community should so model the counter-cultural transformative lifestyle of the kingdom, not least through symbolic action, that its real power will be exercised and the culture transformed from within.

There are however, aspects of Shona culture that are a major hindrance to progress. First, take our attitude to work. Hard, honest work and pride in work well done are largely alien concepts in the Shona context, even among Christians. Second, take our disregard for time, which is well reflected in the idea of "African time". The amount of economic loss incurred on account of people just idling about is incalculable. The third example is the fatalistic attitude to life that is so widespread in Africa. Traditional society believes that everything that happens to us is either the work of evil spirits or the curse of departed elders and



therefore we have no control. Such thinking is a major hindrance to economic, political and social development in Shona society.

Finally, I think Africans generally tolerate evils which they ought not to, evils such as oppression, famine, corruption and disease. African leaders have used this to their best advantage by holding on to power as long as they think possible. Robert Mugabe has ruled Zimbabwe for twenty three years and there is no sign that the masses of Zimbabwe will do anything drastic to remove him from power. Tolerance perpetuates these evils within our societies. Among Christians wrong theology that literally hands over the world to the devil fosters a mistaken “other-worldly” attitude. They therefore try to detach themselves psychologically from the world, what Niebuhr and Kraft have called the “Christ against Culture” position. Christians must recognize that the world belongs to God and therefore they must courageously fight every form of evil as those who have been recruited into God’s army.

Involvement is definitely the ethical implication of salvation. As the saved, we must do for others what the Lord has done for us (Hazelton 1964:340). Salvation must be a concrete event in this life to save humans from “pain, loss and estrangement” (Hazelton 1964:339). So care must be taken that salvation is not turned into an escape from this world. Rather the ethos of salvation requires the saved to experience enormous power to stand without shaking in the midst of danger. If salvation means health for us, we must strive for the health of others. It is not enough to know the truth. We must actually experience and live it. Salvation means that those “who have seen a vision of salvation that belongs to God become inspired agents of that salvation in their local salvation and their days” (Webb 1974:107). We are saved to save.

The church should always be asking her members, what should we be doing that will speak into our culture with the word of affirmation, confrontation and subversive outflanking? Affirm what can and should be affirmed, for example, the God-giveness of Shona culture but totally redraw what that means around the death and resurrection of Christ. That means a culture revolution in and through the church as a witnessing community – role modelling to the rest of society the kind of Zimbabwe we all want.

Confront what can and must be confronted – confront paganism and immorality as dehumanizing, destructive and dishonouring to God’s creation. The fear of the ancestors and

the cultural values that subjugate women and treat them like second-class citizens must be confronted and challenged by our freedom in Christ because of the cross. Outflank that which is looking in the right direction but which then turns back and settles for second best. For example respect for the elderly which then is taken to mean respect for the ancestors.

God communicates salvation to reality through us. He uses parents to bring new human life into being; rulers to keep order; educators to educate; doctors to heal; churches to proclaim his gospel of salvation. In short God acts redemptively towards reality through us. The possibility exists for us to be used by God to bring about liberation, wholeness and soundness to reality when we trust in him. Without claiming equality with God in this project though, we must recognise the privilege of being used as channels of salvation to reality including humanity (Nürnberg 1995:10-32). The church needs to announce this message loudly and constantly, and encourage her members to avail themselves of his divine service.

So God's redemptive activities do not negate ours. Because a doctor is a Christian, he should not stop working hard for the health of his patients. Because a doctor is not a Christian does not mean God is not using him/her. That God can provide does not mean that we should not improve our qualifications and seek employment. Because salvation is not by works, it does not mean that we should not work hard for it. God does not nullify our ventures. As a matter of fact he invites us to act redemptively as he acts through us. God acts through us to bring his kingdom about.

Evangelical Christians need to be careful in keeping the balance between salvation by grace alone and the ethos of salvation here. It is true that salvation is a free gift from God – it is no human achievement. “In the final analysis salvation belongs to God” (Webb 1974:107). But law and grace, justification and sanctification, faith and works must be kept in creative tension at all times. Faith without works is no faith at all. So we do not have an either – or situation here. It is not either the law or the gospel, faith or works, salvation later or now. It is both/and. The free gift of salvation motivates, empowers and allures into acting redemptively towards reality as a whole. God's love and life draws those who receive it into redemptive actions. It makes them become ‘a Christ’ to others. In Romans 12, Paul speaks of the ethos of salvation. The saved should love one another (Rom 12:10); live in harmony (Rom 12:16); contribute to the needs of the saints; practice hospitality (Rom 12:13), and live peaceably (Rom 12:18).

Faith must necessarily lead to love, love to service and service to life. Love is the fruit of salvation and we can only bear this fruit of salvation as long as God acts through us (Nürnberg 1995:10-33).

The word of God is his means of empowerment. It reveals God himself, his power, his authority, his love and his intentions. The same Word is his means of communicating himself, his power, his authority, his love and his intentions. The church is called to communicate the Word of God which is his redemptive power, his love and his life (Rom 1:16). This is the task of the church, communicating the power of God by which he creates, recreates, saves and sustains (Clinebell 1984:28). But how does she do that in practical terms? Preaching, teaching and singing is not enough. It is not enough to tell people that God loves them, that he accepts them unconditionally, that he cares for them, that he wills their comprehensive well-being. We must make all these a reality by loving one another, accepting one another unconditionally and working for the wholeness of one another. Our salvation must motivate us to join God in improving life for others, in striving for peace in society, and of course for eternal life. After all:

The same Jesus who said that we should not worry about food because God cared for us (Mat 6:25), paradoxically fed the masses when they were hungry (Mat 14:16). In short God's care is mediated through our caring, though it also goes infinitely beyond our caring (Nürnberg 1995:10-35).

In doing this, evangelical Christians are continually called to practice discernment within contemporary culture. Never to assume the superiority of culture, to think and live distinctly as a Christian, to be a good, creative steward, and to do all things to the glory of God.

## Glossary

Abbreviations: Sh-Shona, H-Hebrew, L-Latin, Gk-Greek, Ge-German, It-Italian, Fr-French

**Abba(h):-**Father

**Akava munhu sesu (Sh):-** (Jesus) became human like us.

**Aldephoi (H):-** brother/sister.

**Baba (Sh):-** father; babamukuru/babamunini (elder and younger brother of father, respectively)

**Bantu:-** people; Shona – munhu (pl. vanhu), referring to many ethnic groups tracing descent from Central Africa; bantu can refer to humanness as distinct from animal-like or sub-human behaviour; concerning the bantu ethic of unhu, the Shona munhu chaiye, i.e. ane unhu (with good personality/fully human) is kind, generous, exemplary, etc.; unhu hwavo (their personality/character).

**Bira (Sh):-** beast-offering ritual to family spirits.

Mbuya, sekuru as mistresses and masters of initiation, respectively.

**Chidavo (Sh):-** totem praise names.

**Dzinza (Sh):-** ancestry/clan.

**Femo raMwari (Sh):-** God's breath/spirit.

**Gudo guru peta muswe kuti vaduku vakutye (Sh):-** literally, the elder baboon curl your tail (as a sign of humility) so that the younger ones will hold you in awe/respect/deference.

**Humwe (Sh):-** an occasion in which neighbours are invited to a task, e.g. weeding, harvesting, over pots of beer and food; cf. umwe, togetherness.

**Imago Dei/Christi (L):-** Image of God/Christ.

**In Persona Christi/ecclesia (L):-** In the person/ Representing Christ/ the Church.

**Inter alia (L):-** Among other things.

**Ishe** (or simply She)/ Mambo/ Mambokadzi (woman chief)/ Tenzi (Sh):- king, chief; We have a whole range of Shona names with divine attributes, inter alia, Simbrashe (strength of God), Kudakwashe (will of God), Tinashe (the Lord is with us), Ngonidzashe (mercy of God).

**Kenosis (Gk):-** self-emptying; skenosis, cf. skenoo, a tent, dwelling, abode, lodging-denoting the tabernacling of the soul of the eternal and non-negotiable Gospel of Christ.

**Kufurira (Sh):-** midzimu (ancestral spirit mediums) are understood to heal through (blowing of the spirit or water on the sick family member).

**Kurova guva** (homing of the spirits ritual in which the widow is asked to jump over the deceased's working tool, esp. the tsvimbo [knobkerrie]).

**Kugadzira/kuchenura/kurove guva (Sh):-** the homing of the spirits ceremony which takes place about a year after death, and in which the deceased is incorporated into the ancestral realm as a mudzimu with power to protect the descendants.

**Kutora mudzimu (Sh):-** to take the spirit, denoting the ritual of incorporation of the spirit into the ancestral realm in the kuchenura ritual.

**Logos (Gk):** Word/knowledge.

**Magna Carta (L):-** great charter (cf. King John in 1215).

**Mai (Sh):-** mother; maiguru, mainini – elder and younger sister to the mother, respectively.

**Mbuya (Sh):-** grandmother and her female agnates and nieces (brother's children).

**Mhondoro (Sh):-** lion also known as shumba; lion spirits also known as makombwe (see above); mhondoro masvikiro (lion spirits mediums).

**Missio Dei (L):-** Mission of God: missio ad gentes (mission to all people).

**Mudzimu (pl. vadzimu/midzimu) (Sh):-** family spirit(s). Mudzimu 'haubati' mushonga' (does not handle medicine) but heals through kufurira (see above).

**Muroyi (Sh):-** witch.

**Mwari (Sh):-** God; other designates include, Muvambapasi (Creator), Chidzachapo (Eternal Being); Mutangakugara (Eternal/Pre-existent Being), Nyadenga (God of the sky).

**Oikonomia (Gk):-** economy, organization.

**Par excellence (Fr):-** being of the supreme example; of its own kind.

**Ropa (Sh):-** blood

**Sekuru (Sh):-** grandfather and his male agnates; uncle – mother's brother and male agnates.

**Shavi (Sh):-** (pl. *mashavi*) – alien spirits with good or bad effects.

**Svikiro (Sh):-** (pl. *masvikiro*) – spirit medium.

**Tateguru (Sh):-** great grandfather.

**Tsika (Sh):-** to step; customs.

**Ukama (Sh):-** kinship/consanguine relationship; hama (kin/relation).

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