

## On enculturation of the gospel

### Ancestor veneration and the 'real presence' of Christ – A position paper

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My aim in this paper (consisting of some excerpts from an essay published in *Missionalia*) is to reflect on the accessibility of Christian spirituality in terms of African religious experience. Presence is decisive for impact. In traditionalism, the impact of a father or grandfather on his progeny while alive is considerable. When death removes him from bodily presence, what makes him remain close to his descendants? The impact of Jesus on his disciples must have been considerable. But when death removed him from bodily presence, what made him remain close to them - and close to us for that matter?

There are three ways in which a person who is physically removed from others through death can be experienced as present: verbal communication, spiritual presence, and ritual. Verbal communication is an *ad hoc* address assumed to be spoken by the person thus removed in the context of new experiences. Spiritual presence prolongs the impact of the deceased person through recollection of his/her personality, while ritual is an institutionalised form of remembrance. In this essay we focus on ritual.

Closely connected with presence is the question of relevance. Ancestors are custodians of tradition, identity and community. They are also supposed to look after their descendents and help those in need. For Christians Christ represents the ethos of the new community. But he is also remembered as redeemer and healer in the predicaments of life.

Who is more proximate to African Christians, the 'risen Christ' or the 'living dead'? Why do African Christians so often 'live in two worlds'? In this essay I will confront classical Western perceptions of the presence of Christ in the Eucharist (Luther, Calvin, Trent) with the 'typical' spiritual need structure of African traditionalism as manifest in ancestor veneration.

#### **African spirituality**

The most basic assumption in traditionalism that reality is permeated by what has become known as 'dynamistic' power. Like a vast ocean, such power can be relatively calm or in tempestuous turmoil, but it is always in motion. The flux can be channelled in life protecting, life stabilising, and life enhancing directions through rituals performed by authorised representatives of the community. But it can also be channelled in directions detrimental to the community through witchcraft and sorcery - which are the ultimate forms of evil in traditionalism. Sorcery causes harm through the use of objects or substances loaded with dynamistic power, while witchcraft is practised by people who are innately evil.

Dynamistic power, whether moving in positive or negative directions, is located in material objects, people, communities, roaming spirits, witches and their familiars, processes

and rituals. Socially the most important conglomeration of dynamistic power is the life force of the extended family. It is passed on along the male (or in some cases the female) lineage from grandfather to father, to son, to grandson. This 'life force' encompasses fertility, biological vitality, social structure, status and role allocations, spiritual assumptions, and moral patterns of behaviour. Life, in its entirety, is inherited from, and owed to, one's respective parents, who have had their own parents and who are all embedded in the extended family.

The result is a patriarchal hierarchy. Individuals are not entitled to go beyond their particular spheres of competence in an all-inclusive social and psychological dependency structure. This structure extends beyond death to the most proximate among the deceased and from there to the wider realm of one's ancestry. Ancestor veneration is not a spiritual device to secure eternal life or to play down the horror and finality of death. Nor is the after-life a desirable goal. For the individual the inevitability of death leaves room only for the hope of being respected after death, not to be excluded from the community, not to be lost due to fading memories, not to become a homeless spirit because of neglected funeral rites.

In a traditionalist community it is taken for granted that the status of the deceased in the community must be respected. Ancestors are not venerated because they have more life than the living, but because they are entitled to their place in the family hierarchy. It is not life as such which continues beyond death, but the relationships through which life is passed on. Therefore those who have come before have to take the lead over those who have come later. That is also why, just as in life, the most proximate superiors, one's parents or grandparents, are the most significant authorities when deceased. To deny superiors authority, whether alive or dead, is a sacrilege that has grave repercussions.

Because the existence of ancestors is located in their authority, not in their vitality, it is not confined to time and space. Sacrifices are given and libations are poured out reverently at designated places and at particular times. But the ancestors are not confined to these times and places. In terms of spatial location they can be perceived to be under the earth, in the sky, in the West where the sun sets, in a domestic shrine, in animals (snakes, hyenas, lizards, black bulls, goats), in the cattle pen, in a particular plant (e.g. the *titikwane* in Northern Limpopo Province), in heaps of stones and in many other abodes.

In terms of time, they are ever present, ever to be reckoned with. But it is not their past that matters. 'Historicity' presupposes an empirical approach to reality, while traditionalism is built on the mythical foundations of present day life. They explain and legitimate the sequence of generations - which again reflects the authority structure of the community. This authority structure grows upward, as the elderly pass through the ceiling of death and the young replenish the living from the bottom of the pyramid. All such shifts happen in the present. Those who have been in authority are re-installed into that authority through rituals called 'bringing home the dead', usually after a year. Similarly, validity is determined by what has always been, or what has been for a long time.

It is in this context that the traditionalist concept of "sin" has to be seen. Sin is not an offence against God, but against the complex structure of relationships within the community. It creates an atmosphere of shame, suspicion, envy, jealousy, resentment, and hostility. It sets evil forces in motion that undermine the health and prosperity not only of the offender, but of the community as a whole. Its evil effects can only be neutralised by elaborate rituals in which the offender, the offended, the living community, and the deceased are reconciled with each other. We shall come back to that below.

Ancestors, particularly those who have most recently died, are the prime religious

counterparts of the living. They underpin the hierarchical system, legitimate positions and uphold communal traditions. They make their will known, and express their displeasure in cases of transgression, conflict, or negligence in the form of droughts, barrenness or other mishaps in the lives of their descendants.

But ancestors are neither absolute nor omnipotent. In the first place, there are other spiritual forces around. In the second place, all spirits are part of a greater power structure that culminates in the Supreme Being. This higher canopy of power is not normally accessible to the living. Although the Supreme Being is usually mythologised and personified, 'it' is not necessarily experienced as a person. In many traditional religions the Supreme Being has no shrines, no priesthood, does not speak, makes no demands, accepts no sacrifices, does not respond to appeals and can thus hardly be understood as a person.

The fact that the Supreme Being is usually perceived to be high up in the sky is due to its inaccessibility. However, in life the power of the Supreme Being is neither absent nor remote. In fact, it is closer than one's skin. But one cannot approach it, nor make sense of it. It has a light, positive side, as well as a dark, negative side to it. It may be the personification of all truthfulness and purity, but it can also be the impenetrable source of fateful events that cannot be attributed to the wrath of ancestors or sorcery.

It is precisely this inaccessibility of the larger canopy of power that makes people relate to the authorities they know, that is, those who have been their immediate superiors when they were alive. Because ancestors are part of a larger hierarchy of power, it is natural that they are often perceived to be mediators between the living and the larger power structure epitomised by the Supreme Being. But this is a mythological expression of an existentially significant assumption. It signifies that superiors have greater access to the overall pool of dynamic power than the living.

Areas of experienced reality which lie outside communal and ancestral insight and control become the sphere of fear, taboo and magic manipulation. The Western concept of 'fate' too is frequently connected with what 'enlightened' Westerners consider superstitions within their own ranks: astrology, reading of hands, magic, spiritist practices, and the like.

To sum up, the relation between the living and the ancestors displays two overriding characteristics: authority and presence. Authority provides meaning, values and norms, acceptability, and the legitimacy of roles and statuses. Authority is existentially present. There is no distance between the deceased and the living in terms of space, time, or power. Ancestors no longer possess a recognisable physical presence and that, as a result, communication with them is indirect - through dreams, divination, omens, whirlwinds, hail, comets, animals such as snakes, and so on.

### **The liberating impact of the gospel**

African traditional religion has been impacted profoundly by the proclamation of the gospel. But in most cases, this impact has been partial and incomplete. That many African Christians live in 'two worlds' has often been observed and lamented. The Christ they came to know does not seem to cover their most pressing spiritual needs. The gospel and the sacraments, as proclaimed by the missionaries, convey the "forgiveness of sins". Sin is understood in terms of the relationship between a solitary soul and a solitary God. That just won't make sense in a communal society. Compared with its Christian counterpart, African traditionalism offers a much more comprehensive, socially oriented, and complex analysis of

sin and evil.

Whether conveyed through the gospel or the sacrament, an abstract "forgiveness of sins" will hardly make a difference in terms of African spiritual agonies, whether traditionalist or Christian. These agonies include the 'pursuing evil' set in motion by ill-feeling against others or a delinquent act. They also include the suspicions of witchcraft that permeate and poison relationships in many communities. Fear of sorcery and witchcraft, probably the most frightening forms of spiritual enslavement, goes along with guilt, envy, suspicion, accusations, secrecy, hatred, labelling, ostracism, outcasting, ritual killing, torture and death. Sterility can be seen as an indication that a woman is a witch). Accusations of witchcraft can be used against a personal enemy, or an unwanted elderly, or by the younger generation to neutralise the power of their elders and make room for innovation.

To be liberated from uncanny, enslaving, or detrimental powers, Christ must be perceived to be Lord over the spiritual forces that determine the lives of people, whether ancestors, sorcery and witchcraft, homeless spirits, even the inscrutability of the Supreme Being. If God is in control, and if God is unconditionally for us, not against us, as he has shown himself to be in Christ, there is nothing to fear in all creation (Rom 8:31-39). It is God's power of acceptance, forgiveness, and transforming love that subverts and overcomes the power of such forces.

In short: a Christ who is not relevant, is not present; a Christ who is not relevant is not present. Wherever there is a gap between Christ and the community, it will be filled with more proximate powers. That seems to be why African Christians tend to 'live in two worlds'. However, this statement must be further unpacked to make sense. And a solution must be found to the problem.

### **'Presence' in sacred substances: the Catholic approach**

There can be various forms of presence. One is the proclaimed Word of God, which is the classical Protestant approach. Another is Spirit possession, which the Reformers rejected in 16th century Europe, but which may play a legitimate role in Africa. Another is ritual presence. This is the form that this essay tries to investigate.

Catholic doctrine stipulates that, through the act of consecration by the priest (*ex opere operato*), bread and wine change into the body and blood of Christ (transsubstantiation). This approach seems to cater for presence, because Christ is deemed to be physically present in the host. But physical presence does not, in itself, cater for communication. The host does not speak and one cannot speak to the host. Luther rejected this doctrine, and all other Reformers followed suit. For them the presence of Christ was located in his Word addressed to the community of believers and the sacraments were the Word of God in an visible form.

The conflict is a prime example of conceptual confusion. During the Middle Ages the word "substance" changed its meaning from Platonism and Aristotelianism to nominalism and later to empiricism. 'Substance' means 'essence', that is, the quality of a thing that makes the thing what it is. What is this essence? It can be the idea it carries, its significance. That is the Aristotelian view. Say you have a piece of cloth with bright colours printed on it. If you use it as a scarf, it has a particular significance, namely the adornment of a person. If a government declares it the flag of the country, then its significance changes. It becomes a symbol of nationhood, but the material remains the same.

From an Aristotelian point of view it makes perfect sense to say that the 'substances' of bread and wine (= what is significant about them) change from those of food stuffs into those

of the body and blood of Christ given for us on the cross, while the 'accidents', bread and wine, remain the same. Bread and wine are 'accidents' because Christ could also have used fish and olive oil instead of bread and wine, if these had been part of the Passover celebrations. What changes is the meaning or the significance of bread and wine from food stuffs to Christ's body and blood given on the cross.

For nominalism, and particularly for empiricism, in contrast, 'substance' refers to the material itself, in this case the cloth of which it is made. Thus modern science speaks of 'chemical substances' such as fertilisers or drugs. When the concept 'substance' changed from 'significance' to 'material', the doctrine of transubstantiation had to be misunderstood. Now you have a miracle in which the matter of bread changes into the matter of the body of Christ, and a second miracle by which the bread continues to look like bread but is no longer bread.

### **The Protestant approach**

As mentioned above, Luther rejected the idea of transubstantiation. But again, the concept of 'substance' played its tricks. When Lutherans say that we receive the body and blood of Christ "in, with and under" bread and wine, we seem to be receiving two kinds of substance at the same time: the elements on the one hand and the body and blood of Christ on the other (consubstantiation).

For Zwingli the body of Christ had died on the cross. We cannot eat that body; we can only remember in gratitude what Christ has done for us. For Zwingli, Luther's insistence that we receive, and actually 'chew', the body of Christ in the Lord's Supper was nothing but cannibalism. For Luther this insinuation was ridiculous and he rejected it with contempt. That was certainly not his intention. Well, what was his intention?

It is clear that the phrases 'body broken for us' and 'blood spilt for us' refer to what happened on the cross of Christ. We receive an act, not a substance. You cannot have the act without the person. In the Lord's Supper, therefore, we receive not parts of the body of the earthly Christ, say his intestines or finger nails, nor some mysterious heavenly substance, but the person of Christ as he gave himself on the cross for us.

In the example of a flag, a tangible object is identified with an intangible meaning. According to Luther, the intangible meaning is God's promise of the forgiveness of our sins. Faith means that we accept this promise as trustworthy and make it our own. According to Luther, the meaning is conveyed to us primarily through the proclamation of the gospel. But by the grace of God, it is also identified with a 'sign' to make it more concrete for us.

The cross of Christ itself is such a sign. The baptismal water and the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper are secondary signs which reflect the primary sign. However, these carriers of meaning must have been identified with the meaning they carry by a person who has the authority to do so. So without the words of institution, the sacraments would be nothing but plain water, bread and wine. So the gift of the Lord's Supper is Christ himself giving himself to us here and now, as he gave himself for us on the cross.

Calvin was a critical admirer of Luther. He emphasised that the food we receive is the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. Bread and wine are the visible signs that depict the invisible food, which we receive from the sacrifice of the flesh and blood of Jesus, and which feeds the life that God has brought about through his Word. Calvin therefore rejected both the Catholic idea of transubstantiation and the Lutheran idea of consubstantiation.

### **Substances in African spirituality**

What does this debate mean in terms of African traditionalism? In Africa, significance is perceived neither in terms of eternal ideas (or universal concepts), nor in terms of matter, but either in terms of authority or in terms of dynamistic power, both of which are existentially immediate. Neither Plato, nor Aristotle, nor nominalism, nor naked empiricism make any sense to the traditionalist mind.

As far as authority is concerned, traditionalists are unlikely to have a problem with the presence of Christ in the Eucharist. The body of the deceased is buried and plays no further role. What makes the presence of a living or deceased person so awe-inspiring is his/her authority. Human mediation is also no problem. The deceased make their presence felt and their will known through dreams, omens, animals, divination and so on. The identification of an intangible meaning with a tangible object, event, animal or medium is nothing strange for the African mind.

What can cause confusion, however, is the perception that bread and wine, or body and blood for that matter, are 'holy substances'. In Africa, the significance of a sacred object or a symbolic act is constituted by the fact that it is charged with dynamistic power. This can happen with either good intentions through official rituals, or with bad intentions through sorcery. If the Lord's Supper is understood in these terms, bread and wine become 'medicines', amulets, or spells.

It must be stated that the empiricist approach of modern science must also have the greatest difficulty in comprehending the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation and the Lutheran idea of consubstantiation. What empiricists can understand, in contrast, is the fact that an intangible meaning or significance can be identified with a tangible object or action. An engagement ring, a flag and a bank note are tangible objects that carry an intangible meaning.

### **The 'real presence' of Christ in the Eucharist**

Zwingli said that the body and blood of Christ belong to a past phase of history (when Christ was crucified) and cannot possibly be present here and now. They point to an event at another time and another place like a signboard pointing to another place like Johannesburg. With that an unbridgeable chasm opened up between Christ and the celebrating community *in terms of time*.

Catholicism, Luther, and Calvin insisted on the 'real presence' of Christ in the Lord's Supper. According to Calvin, what matters is the unification of the believer with Christ and we need an outward representation of this unfathomable internal mystery. But Christ is physically in heaven and cannot be present as such. This creates a distance between Christ and the celebrating community *in terms of space*. It is the Holy Spirit which links us up with Christ.

Luther maintained that, in terms of time and space, Christ is *present* in the Lord's Supper. He refused to admit that "this is my body" could be a metaphor. Christ identified his self-giving act on the cross with bread and wine, just as a bank note is a piece of paper identified with a monetary value. The words of institution proclaimed in the Eucharist, "this is my body" and "this is my blood", are 'performative statements' that validate this identification for the celebrating community here and now.

In both cases the rationale of this identification is that the self-giving act of Christ can be *allocated*: "If I desire forgiveness of sins, I cannot run to the cross, because there I do not find it

allocated ... Rather I must depend on the sacrament or the gospel; it is there that I find the Word that allocates, grants, offers and gives me the forgiveness that was wrought on the cross”.

For Luther the 'real presence' of Christ was a matter of life and death. He experienced the 'real presence' of the devil (or the 'hidden God') in his endless temptations, afflictions, physical ailments, in the misunderstanding of his supporters and the hostility of the church and the empire of his time. And so he depended on the 'real presence' of Christ in his life here and now to release, comfort and strengthen his faith.

But this is a comprehensive concern. Rightly understood, Christ is God's healing, redeeming, restoring and empowering presence in the midst of all natural, social, and spiritual adversities, culminating in death. If we can rid the Lutheran understanding of its preoccupation with substances, we find not only the 'real presence' of Christ, but also the redemptive relevance of Christ in Luther's approach.

### **World-view assumptions**

While Calvin understood Luther's concern and rejected Zwingli's argument, he ran into a world-view problem. For him Christ rose bodily and ascended bodily into heaven. His body is, therefore, at the right hand of God in heaven – which means that Christ cannot be bodily with the celebrating community on earth. It is the Holy Spirit that performs the miracle of linking us up with the body of Christ which is in heaven.

Luther did not have this problem. God is in Christ and Christ is in God. If we have Christ, we have God; if we have God, we have Christ. For Luther God's 'right hand' was not located in an imaginary heaven; God's right hand was *the continuing creative presence of God* in all of creation. God was everywhere with his creative power, all around us, inside us and outside us, otherwise we would not survive. If Christ is with God, being God's instrument of redemption, he must likewise be everywhere. So Christ can be in the bread and wine as much as anywhere else in creation. As God is in nature as the Creator, he is in nature as the Redeemer.

Calvin could not agree. He maintained that *the finite cannot contain the infinite*. God's being must go infinitely beyond what we encounter in the human body of Jesus, which was, by necessity, limited. Luther could have argued, of course, that Christ promised to be present wherever two or three are gathered in his name (Mt 18:20), or where the disciples carry the gospel into all the world (Mat 28:18ff). He could also have argued that, according to Paul, what is sown a physical body becomes a spiritual body through resurrection and is no longer subject to earthly limitations (1 Cor 15:42-44).

Calvin was also inconsistent: if Christ's body was limited in terms of space, it would also have to be limited in terms of time (so he cannot be eternal) and in terms of power (so he cannot redeem the universe). The point to be made here is that physical presence differs from existential significance.

### **The presence of Christ in terms of African spirituality**

In African traditional religion, it is the authority of the ancestors that carries existential significance. In the Christian faith, it is the transforming power of Christ. The question is whether this transforming power of Christ ever touches ground.

In African traditionalism, the presence of the deceased is fundamental. It is also taken for granted. There is no distance between the deceased and the living in terms of time. Whether

active or inactive, whether alert or asleep, the deceased are present all the time. There is also no distance in terms of space. The body is buried and plays no further role. One may locate the ancestors symbolically below the earth, high up in the sky, around their graves, in their huts, in the cattle pen, in termite stacks, mole holes, or in shrines, but existentially one cannot escape their presence.

The deceased remain what they were before, that is, superiors. If they are visualised or appear in dreams, they retain their character, their appearance, their gait, even their clothes. For Christians, Christ is now what he was when on earth: the Redeemer who cured diseases, forgave sins, accepted outcasts and gave his life on the cross. What happened then, is expected to happen now. Presence is fundamental for relevance.

The Catholic doctrine seems to provide such presence. The question is whether it is the right kind of presence. This kind of presence does not provide a communicative relationship between Christ and the believer. The host is something sacrificed to God. It does not speak; it does not listen. For the believers its presence suggests quasi-physical proximity, rather than communicative presence.

In Zwingli's theology, an unbridgeable gap exists between the historical Jesus and contemporary believers *in terms of time*. The best one can do is to remember him and praise him for his act of salvation performed long ago and far away. In traditionalism, the ancestors are also remembered. For traditionalists, however, ritual remembrance does not bridge a gap in time but acknowledges presence and authority here and now.

Calvin's approach creates a distance between Christ and his followers *in terms of space*. Granted, he believes that the Holy Spirit bridges the gap. But the idea that Christ is at the right hand of God, and God is in heaven, is suggestive of the traditionalist idea that the Supreme Being is the inaccessible peak of a pyramid under which there are numerous lower levels of spiritual powers. These may even include, in many African religions, a 'son of God', who is equally remote.

Whom to turn to if this gap exists? Obviously to the authority immediately above. In Africa, this is the most proximate ancestor. In Calvin, the 'immediate Superior' is the Holy Spirit. If the Spirit is God, does this not suggest the presence of God for African converts? Not necessarily. Trinitarian speculations are too puzzling to have existential relevance. The Holy Spirit is a spirit among others, maybe a very high spirit, close to God and to Christ, but not Christ himself. What prevents God, Christ and the Spirit from becoming the peak of a hierarchy far too remote and inaccessible to be of practical importance in the agonies of life?

Relevance means presence. In terms of mythology, God, Christ and the Spirit may be considered to be the highest authorities in theory, followed by the prime ancestor and the long chain of ancestors below him. Existentially, however, the most proximate ancestors will continue to be in charge of life. Ancestor veneration is widely practised by Christians in Africa. An example is the ritual of "bringing home the dead" celebrated by Christians in the form of the erection of tomb stones usually a year after the burial. Where such a hierarchy exists in the perception of believers, nothing of significance has changed in the religious system. A parallel phenomenon is found in the Catholic veneration of saints.

In the Christian faith, the Holy Spirit must be understood as the Spirit of Christ, who permeates, redeems, transforms, and empowers the Body of Christ, and not something apart from Christ. The Spirit is, as the Protestant tradition has it, Christ present (*Christus praesens*). If it is really the *Spirit of Christ* that redeems people from malevolent spirits and other fears, Spirit possession may be an appropriate way of gaining presence in Africa, in spite of the

hesitations we might have as main line theologians.

What about Luther? If Luther's insistence on the 'real presence' of Christ in the Lord's Supper would be linked unambiguously to the person of Christ, rather than to a mysterious substance, it would indeed provide transformative presence: God had identified himself with Christ crucified. Christ, in his self-giving act on the cross, is ritually identified with the bread and wine. There is no space left for other mediators. Christ takes the place of the ancestors as the first instance of reassurance, praise, and appeal, particularly in the midst of severe adversity. Only when that happens can God in Christ become the source of meaning, acceptability, and authority to act.

What about modernity? Modernity does not know what to make of a "heaven above". It can also not comprehend the existential significance of historical events that happened two thousand years ago. At best, Jesus is recognised as a great moral example among others. But the identification of a tangible object with an intangible meaning does not lack plausibility. Through the ritual of identification Christ can become 'present' for people with a modern mindset.

### **Holy communion as a community celebration**

Ancestral presence is presence in community. Ancestors have no authority as solitary individuals but only as mediators of the life and prosperity of the evolving clan. What is the biblical counterpart? By the time of Deuteronomy, a powerful emphasis had been laid on the righteousness required by the law of God in the context of the covenant between God and his people. God would bless the obedient and curse the disobedient. The fact that this did not seem to happen in this life, led to the notion of the last judgment. Here each individual person faces a God who decides over his/her everlasting fate.

The concept of salvation of the Western church was informed by the concept of the 'last judgment'. It concentrated on one's righteousness before God as defined by the law of God. At best, believers would face a purgatory after death, where impurities were supposed to be burnt out; at worst, they would face eternal condemnation and everlasting pain. The Catholic idea that the Mass was a sacrifice given to God on behalf of individuals to relieve them from the pains of purgatory and hell obviated the necessity of a participating community.

The Reformers rejected the idea that the Mass was a sacrifice given to God by humanity. On the contrary, they argued, the Lord's Supper celebrates *God's sacrifice to humanity*. But the horror of the last judgment was also fundamental for Luther's understanding of the gospel: it proclaimed God's forgiveness of the sins of repentant individuals. The church was composed of forgiven sinners. He spoke with tongues of angels about the church as a fellowship sharing everything spiritual and material. But in the Last Supper, it was the solitary individual who stood before God and received the gift of grace.

During the age of Pietism and the Enlightenment, Luther's dialectic between individual and community changed into religious individualism. This is an aberration. As if sin against God was not always also a sin against fellow human beings, the community, the society, the coming generations, or the natural world! In Africa, there is no sin that is not a sin against the community. There is also no notion of a last judgment beyond death. Transgressions are sorted out here and now within the community and under the auspices of the ancestors.

Reconciliation of an isolated individual with a lonely God is fraudulent. It is the community to which sin is confessed, which pronounces absolution in the name of God through

its ordained representative, which accepts the sinner back into its fellowship, and which is willing to suffer the consequences of his/her wrong doing. The presence of Christ is, in Pauline terms, the presence of the whole of Christ - the head and the body - in its suffering, redeeming acceptance of the unacceptable.

The Lord's Supper must again become what it is meant to be: a joyful celebration of a fellowship based on God's unconditional, suffering, redeeming acceptance of the unacceptable. The unconditional nature of God's acceptance liberates all believers from spiritual and social bondages and involves them with all their gifts in God's redemptive enterprise. It cuts across all boundaries set up by gender, family, clan, ethnic, racial, class, or age loyalties. Gal 3:23-4:7 is the classical text in this regard: Here Paul derives the freedom of a Christian directly from the gospel itself. The result is that, in Christ, there is no Jew nor Greek, no slave or free, no male or female.

### **To summarise**

The fact that many African Christians 'live in two worlds' is due to (at least) two factors: the lack of relevance, and the lack of presence of the Christ proclaimed by the missionaries and their local successors. The two factors hang together: A Christ who is not relevant in terms of the daily problems of life is also not present. And a Christ who is not present is also not relevant. Our proclamation of the gospel must draw Christ out of an imaginary heaven into earthly experience or it will remain illusive and ineffectual.