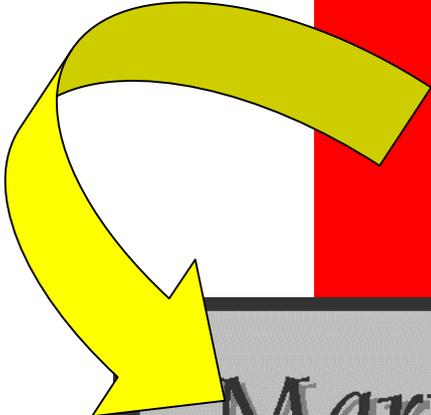


# *Two fascinating chapters from this book*

*Chapter 2 on the Word of God  
Chapter 6 on Law and Gospel*



**Martin  
Luther's  
message**  
*for us today*

*A perspective  
from the South*

*Klaus Nürnberger*

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## **Key words**

Martin Luther, experiential theology, Word of God, predestination, scripture and tradition, sin and salvation, law and gospel, sola scriptura, solus Christus, sola gratia, sola fide, priesthood of all believers, ordained ministry, baptism, Eucharist, two kingdoms, HIV/AIDS, prophecy and confession .

## **Description of the book**

This is not a historical account, but a critical analysis of Luther's experiential theology and its relevance for the globalising world of today. Traditionalist spirituality, modernity and their vibrant interaction seek reassurance and transformation in the face of oppression, violence, disease and meaninglessness rather than metaphysical speculation.

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## **Description of chapter 2**

For Luther God is the Origin of experienced reality. Experienced reality is highly ambiguous - both glorious and grim. We experience the power of God in reality, but not his redemptive intentions. God is present but hidden. Paradoxically the dismal catastrophe of the cross of Christ is proclaimed to be God's fundamental act of redemption. It is in the cross that God's redemptive intentions are revealed, creating reassurance, motivation and hope in the face of fate and affliction.

### **Key words**

experiential theology, concept of God, Creator and Redeemer, hidden God, revealed God, Word of God, cross of Christ, Holy Spirit, African religion, faith and science, hedonism, meaninglessness, idolatry, devil.

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## **Description of chapter 6**

Does God accept us into his fellowship on account of our excellent disposition and moral achievement (conditional acceptance)? That is called the '*law*' in theology. The *gospel*, in contrast, proclaims God's suffering, redeeming and transforming acceptance of the unacceptable into his fellowship (unconditional acceptance). Those who have been accepted, accept, suffer and transform each other in the fellowship of believers and are being liberated and motivated to take responsibility for God's world.

### **Key words**

Law and gospel, faith and works, fruit of the gospel, third use of the law, freedom and responsibility, *simul iustus et peccator*, discipleship, two kingdoms, situation ethics, new decalogues, unconditional acceptance, marginalisation, ostracism, legalism, justification by faith, prodigal son, church unity, salvation, spiritualisation, individualism.

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## The Word of God

### Light in the darkness of life

- 1. Can you say, in one sentence, what you think the word 'God' stands for?*
- 2. How can you be sure that such a God exists?*

#### **What is our task in this chapter?**

When thinking about God, Christians are thinking of three things: (a) God's creative power, experienced in the reality we encounter all around us, (b) God's redemptive concern, which manifested itself in the Christ-event, and (c) God's Spirit, who joins us to Christ in faith and involves us in his redemptive action. In a nutshell, this is the doctrine of the Trinity. All Christians agree that these three aspects are basic to their faith. But these statements did not drop from heaven as ready-made doctrines. They are the outcome of faith experiences, which we first have to analyze.

Luther and the other Reformers had no quarrel with the formulations of the ancient ecumenical councils concerning the person of Christ and the Trinity. Luther explicitly confirmed their validity. He was remarkably capable of dealing with this often complex and confusing set of propositions. But the heartbeat of Luther's theology did not lie in ontological speculations about God, Christ and the Spirit. Luther's theology is a theology based on the 'Word of God' as it is appropriated in faith. The ancient doctrines are valid because they are expressions of the gospel of Christ and for no other reason (cf Bayer 2004:209ff; 304ff).

In the previous chapter we have defined the Word of God as the living address of the living God to living people through the words, fellowship and actions of a living community of believers. While Reformation theology in general is a

theology of the Word of God, Luther's theology is a theology of the *proclaimed* Word of God. Luther called God's Word the living voice of the gospel (*viva vox Evangelii*). It is the task of this chapter to spell out the profound meaning of this fact. We begin with Luther's position (Section I), continue with its contemporary relevance (Section II) and finally add a few critical reflections (Section III).

## Section I: Luther's position

It cannot be taken for granted that theology must be a theology of the Word of God. Theology can also be based on empirical observation, on rational reflection, on the legitimation of social power structures, on the urge to attain freedom and justice, on the quest for health and prosperity, on the psychological needs of the human being, on the desire for knowledge, on ecstatic experiences, on mystical contemplation, on feelings of guilt, failure or inadequacy, and so on.

How do we know that God is a powerful and strict, but loving God who aims at the well-being of his creation? Luther's answer is that God reveals his true intentions in his Word. Luther was convinced that no amount of observation, introspection or speculation could tell us who God wants to be for us. If God did not disclose what he wants to be *for us* we would never have known him.

God has indeed disclosed himself in Christ. And Christ becomes present to us when the gospel of Christ is proclaimed among us in the power of God's Spirit. God chose to disclose himself to us by speaking to us in this humble, earthly form. That also means that Luther's theology is an experiential theology. He does not speculate, but analyses what happens when we encounter the living God in his living Word through the power of the Spirit. But this experience runs counter to the normal experiences of life. Let us see why this is the case.

### What do we mean when we speak of God?

The word 'God' is our name for the Source and the Destiny of reality as a whole. This is a matter of definition. God is where reality comes from and where reality is supposed to go. God in his power makes possible whatever exists and happens, and God in his wisdom determines what reality should become. That is what the word 'God' means. "From him and through him and to him are all things" (Rom 11:36).

If we take this definition seriously, it follows that God is present within us, God is present all around us, and God fills the entire universe with his creative power. Luther expressed this insight in the following way:

(God's right hand) must be present and active everywhere - even in the tiniest leaf of a tree ... It is God who creates all things, who brings them about and upholds them by his almighty power and his right hand, as our confessions say ... But if he is to create and uphold, he must be present ... in every creature, in its innermost and outermost being, all around, through and through, above and below, behind

and in front, so that there can be nothing more present, nothing more intimately connected with every creature than God and his power (Luther 1529 par 98f).

Once God is seen as the Creator of everything that exists and happens, the normal human experience of God is the experience of a vast constellation of powers that determine our lives and our world. Deism assumed that God created the world in the beginning and then withdrew, leaving it to tick on its own like a clock. In contrast, Luther assumed that God is busy creating reality as it unfolds (*creatio continua*). If God would withdraw his creative activity just for a second, the world would collapse into nothingness.

If God is defined as the power underlying everything that exists and happens, it is rather meaningless to ask whether God exists or not. You might just as well ask whether the air we breathe exists or not. Although philosophers such as Descartes, Feuerbach, Marx and Nietzsche have later asked this question, for Luther it was not a relevant question. God cannot be separated from life; he is experienced in life (*Deus in vita*). The critical question in theology is not whether there is such a God, but *what kind* of God he is.

And here lies the problem. The power of God that we experience in life is ambiguous. It can be felt in the beauty of nature, in healthy bodies and sound relationships. But the power of God is also experienced in devastating wars, earthquakes, droughts, when a person we love is killed in an accident, or when people are guided by evil motivations. Even then we are confronted with God, but in such instances we cannot guess what God's intentions are. The God whom we experience in ordinary life cannot be understood. When we are confronted with an inexplicable fate, or just with the cruel reality of death, the result is puzzlement, anxiety and despair.

### **The word 'God' can mean many things**

We said above that the definition of God as the Source and Destiny of reality remains ambiguous as long as we do not know what God actually wants to be *for us*. We could just as well say with modern science that everything that exists and happens is composed of energy particles or waves. Or we could say with traditionalism, that reality is composed of uncanny dynamistic forces. What difference would that make for the struggles we face in daily life? It is only when we know what energy particles or uncanny forces do to us that these basic assumptions gain meaning for us.

Is God nothing but the impersonal mechanism that keeps the universe in motion? If that were the case, our dear little planet would be lost in the infinite darkness of outer space and our lives were tiny sparks that glow for a moment and turn to ashes. Is God nothing but the sum total of dynamistic forces, or a blind fate which we shall never understand and which we can never resist? If that were the case, the only thing we could do would be to submit to our fate and wait until the storm was over. We refer to such attitudes as 'fatalism'.

Or is God a person who can speak to us and to whom we can respond? That is what Christians believe him to be. But if that is the case, is God a ruthless dictator who pounces mercilessly upon those who dare to ignore his decrees? That would be an oppressive God. There religious convictions, which indeed see God in this light. Or is God a sort of friendly grandparent who rejoices when we bother to speak to him, and who is all too eager to make himself available whenever we think we need him? That would be a puppy God.

### **God has disclosed his intentions in Christ**

Luther calls God, as we experience him in reality, the naked God (*Deus nudus*). He is 'naked' in his unfathomable power and majesty. He is ambiguous, even demonic. Sometimes he overwhelms us with gifts; sometimes he makes our lives miserable. There are unbelievable glories both in the natural and the human world and there are cruelties both in nature and in society that make us shudder. What must we think of such a God? What on earth is he up to? Is he a cynical tyrant? Or has he left the world to its own devices? No ways! For Luther God was present everywhere.

Without the Word of God, we know nothing substantial about God's designs. "Nobody has ever seen God" (1 Jn 4:12). God has to reveal his intentions for us. And he did so in Christ. In Christ it has become clear that, in his innermost being, God is the limitless power of unconditional love. His creative and transformative activity, the strictness and harshness of his will, his patience and mercy are all expressions of this his innermost being. That is the gospel, the 'good news' Christians have heard from Christ: God is light and there is no darkness in him. God is love and those who abide in love abide in God and God in them (1 Jn 1:5; 4:16b).

We now have to add something to our observation that, in his creative power, God is present among us and in the entire universe: he is also present among us and in the entire universe with his redemptive concern as manifested in Christ. If God is present in the entire universe, the risen Christ, who is at the 'right hand of God', is also present in the entire universe. For Luther, 'heaven' is where God is in his mercy. And we gain access to heaven, that is, to God's redemptive intentions, through responding in faith to his Word of grace.

He who would be freed from sin and delivered from Satan and death, must go where Christ is. Now, where is he? He is here with us, and for this purpose did he sit down in heaven, that he might be near to us. Thus, we are with him up there and he is with us down here. Through the word he comes down and through faith we ascend up (Sermon on Christ's Ascension, Mk 16:14-20, 1523. SL 11:931. Ages: Sermons of Martin Luther, vol 3, 170).

Here Luther used the words 'up' and 'down', because it was a sermon on Ascension Day. But they do not adequately reflect his views on where God is. God is everywhere. And because God makes his grace accessible in Christ,

Christ must be everywhere. We shall see in chapter 9 that this is how Luther understood the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper.

### **God's intentions are hidden in the normal experiences of life**

For Christians then, Christ is the ultimate Word of God to the world. And this Word of God becomes valid and present among us through the proclamation of the gospel of Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. When we speak of 'experience' in connection with our faith, we refer to the experience of the transforming power of the gospel of Christ among us here and now - and to nothing else. Luther simply took this experience seriously and rejected all further speculation.

However, the impact of the proclaimed gospel on our lives can only be understood against the background of the every-day experiences of life we discussed above. According to Luther, therefore, Christians undergo a twofold experience of God, which he calls the 'hidden' God (*Deus absconditus*) and the 'revealed' God (*Deus revelatus*). The hidden God is the ambiguous experience of God's *power* in everyday life; the revealed God is the experience of God's *grace* in the creative, redemptive and transformative impact of his Word. But the experience of God's grace in his Word again changes our experience of reality very profoundly. Let us spell out this dialectic in greater detail.

As mentioned above, the experience of God's power in ordinary life *as such* is not very reassuring. Yes, we do encounter wonderful things in life. We get up in the morning healthy and sound, we eat and drink, we enjoy fellowship, we live in a functioning state, we make use of the gifts of nature, we have the power to formulate goals, make plans and try to achieve them. Even if some parts of our bodies do not function as they should, myriads of others do and we never notice it. Even if society has its problems, it is a miracle that the aspirations and efforts of so many people dovetail sufficiently to make such a system work. It is a glorious world of which we are a part. We indeed have reason to thank and praise God for all his blessings. As Luther says in his explanation of the first article of the Creed:

I believe that God has created me together with all creatures; that he has given me and sustains my body and soul, eyes, ears and all my limbs, my reason and all my senses, together with clothes and shoes, food and drink, house and yard, wife and child, field, livestock and all my property, that he provides me daily and abundantly with all the necessities of this body and life, that he protects me from all danger, and preserves me from all evil. All this he does out of his pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness on my part. For all this I am bound to thank, praise, serve and obey him. This is most certainly true (Small Catechism, Tappert 1959:345, my translation).

What a wonderful hymn to the goodness of God! Luther never got tired of praising God for all his blessings in ordinary life. But that is not the full story. We also experience pain and suffering; sometimes we go hungry; we are

disappointed with those whom we love; we are treated unjustly by the political system; the economy marginalises us; people despise and ridicule us; there are droughts, floods and pests; our plans are frustrated; we do not reach our goals; some of us are imprisoned, become addicted to drugs, become infected with HIV. And in the end we all have to die.

What do we say when confronted with these realities of life? Do we still praise God? Do we deny that he exists? Do we attribute all these predicaments to some uncanny force other than God, such as the devil, the power of sorcery, a cynical monster, or an impersonal fate? No, says Luther. You either believe in God or you don't. There may be a devil around to pester us. As a medieval believer, Luther never doubted that the devil existed and pestered us wherever he could - particularly those who are committed to Christ. But for Luther the devil was 'God's own devil'. How could a devil pester you, if God did not want him to pester you?

As Bayer says, for Luther "the devil, humankind's bitterest enemy, who constantly and everywhere assails and afflicts people, is nothing other than the mask of the Almighty God in his dreadful hiddenness. In my profoundest *Anfechtung* (= affliction), God himself becomes my enemy (Jb 13:24; 16:7-14) and I can no longer distinguish at all between God and the devil and I 'do not know whether God is the devil or the devil is God'" (Bayer 2002:59). The buck ends with God, because God is the Source and Destiny of experienced reality as a whole. There is no other way.

Luther saw a world constructed in the most wonderful way by the loving God who revealed his true face in Christ, and Luther saw the same world as the playground of the most terrifying and abominable corruption in the grimace of the devil. It is the same world that can be open like paradise or closed like hell. It all depends on whether you see it through the spectacles of God's promise or through the spectacles of God's wrath (cf Bayer 2002:51ff).

So what is God up to? That is the central question. Believers may assume, for instance, that when a just and loving God hits us hard with occurrences such as an incurable disease, a crippling accident, or an unexpected financial disaster, he must be doing that to punish us. That was the argument of the friends of Job. Believers may try to appease such a wrathful God by meticulously keeping the law of God. This is what Luther tried to do, but he failed. He realized that living according to the law of God does not transform our inner being into what God wants us to be, namely the image of Christ, who is the image of God. Instead of loving God, Luther found that he hated God for imposing a commandment that we are unable to keep. So this is not a very satisfactory answer to the problem.

Believers may also assume that God is testing them with these predicaments. That is the assumption of the introductory chapters to the Book of Job. God wants to see whether we are faithful and obedient. If we are not, he will punish us severely. Again, it is the law that leads to such conclusions; and again we are pressed hard to achieve our salvation. But we suffer anyway - whether to be tested or to be punished. Again, this is not a satisfactory answer to the problem.

Believers may also assume that God is simply too great for us to understand. That is how the book of Job closes. Then the only thing we can do is to fold our hands and submit to our fate. But that is certainly not what the God of the Bible wants us to do. God stands us on our feet, motivates us and empowers us to face life courageously and victoriously. So this is not a very satisfactory answer to the problem either.

Luther simply observed that, whether in his anger or in his inscrutable majesty, God has hidden his face from us. He gleaned this expression from the Old Testament. Many Psalms speak of God hiding his face when believers get into serious trouble (Ps 10:1; 13:1; 22:24; 27:9; 44:24; 55:1; 69:17; 88:14; 89:46; 104:29; 143:70; cf Is 45:15). God is the Creator and Redeemer of his people. Where God is, there should be life, health and prosperity. When we experience injustice, frustration, misery, or disease, God seems to have turned his face away. Luther took his clues from these texts when he spoke of this experience as the 'hidden God' (*Deus absconditus*).

Luther called the recurring impression that God has turned against us 'affliction' (Latin *tentatio*, German *Anfechtung*). For the afflicted, there seems to be no escape, no future, no hope. For Luther, God is not hidden because he is absent. On the contrary, God is *present* in his wrath. He is the Creator of experienced reality. We experience his creative power in every breath that we breathe, in every leaf that falls from a tree, in every pain we have to endure. But this is a frightening closeness of God, a closeness that we would rather do without.

### **The hiddenness of God is a common human experience**

"Luther was the first theologian to admit (with a biting sharpness) that many things we experience in the world in which we live contradict the loving providence of God" (Pesch 1972:17). Thomas Aquinas too lived through difficult times, but he "apparently experienced no inner turmoil about God" (Pesch 1972:18). This can only mean that his concept of God was abstract, theoretical, removed from daily life. That is true for much of classical theology. In contrast, Luther's concept of God was experiential; it covered the entire ambiguous and impersonal network of forces that determines our lives (Bayer 2004:181ff).

The fateful hiddenness of God is not only a biblical, but also a common human experience. It is striking to see how closely Luther's observations match the concept of the Supreme Being in some African traditional religions. In the Sotho-Tswana cluster of cultures, for instance, reality is experienced much like a spider web of uncanny forces. We call such a worldview dynamism. These forces are neutral in themselves; they can be beneficial, but they can also be dangerous. Recognized leaders, using accepted rituals, can channel the flow of these forces to the benefit of the community. But sorcerers, using clandestine manipulations, can also channel it to the detriment of the community.

Significantly all this power is attributed to the Supreme Being (called *Modimo* in Sotho). The Supreme Being is present within us and all around us. Nothing happens without it. As such 'it' is unpredictable. It is like a thundercloud, brilliantly white on top, and threateningly dark at the bottom. Lots of myths are told, in which *Modimo* is generally personified, but it is rarely experienced as a person. It does not speak; it does not make demands; it does not punish; it does not reward; it does not hear prayers or receive sacrifices. It cannot be located in shrines, or served by priests. When asked what *Modimo* does, an old diviner replied: "He does nothing; it happens" (Nürnberg 1975).

Seemingly *Modimo* has no inherent rationale, except that it is the power that determines reality. In fact, the word *Modimo*, when used for the Supreme Being, belongs to the *mo-me* class of nouns that is used for impersonal forces. When the word *Modimo* is used in the personal *mo-ba* class, it refers to the ancestors. Therefore Setiloane, a Tswana scholar who worked on the concept, says we should not refer to *Modimo* as 'He', but rather as 'It' (Setiloane 1976).

In the secularized West we have similar concepts. People simply refer to 'fate', when trying to name the constellation of powers that determines our lives. 'Fate', or 'bad luck', or 'good fortune' is just as impersonal, unpredictable and inaccessible as *Modimo* is. You cannot do anything about it. It hits you from nowhere and you do not know why. Similar concepts are found in other religions, for instance in Islam. The experience of dependence, uncertainty and anxiety underlying the concept of God is very common in the world.

### **God's intentions are revealed in his Word**

The biblical faith is faith in a personal God. But how do we know that God is a God of justice? How do we know that he is a God of redeeming love? Going only by our experience, we would not get very far. The faith of thousands of believers collapses when they have to face inexplicable suffering and a meaningless fate. There must be another way. And indeed there is.

When faced with calamities, the Basotho appeal to the ancestors. The vagaries of *Modimo* cannot be understood, but the ancestors they know - especially those who have most recently died. The living members of the clan have received their lives, their culture, their moral precepts, their communal traditions and their social structures from their forebears. The ancestors can be expected to have an interest in the welfare of their offspring. That is why they are the first instance of appeal. As a result, the presence of the deceased is keenly felt; their ways are followed; they are given sacrifices to acknowledge their authority.

When calamities strike, the Basotho will try to become reconciled with the ancestors. They will also try to expose and overcome the powers of sorcery. Diviners are the mediators in both these pursuits. When all that does not help, however, they may say *Modimo o gona, ga re kgone selo* (now we are faced with *Modimo*, there is nothing we can do). As mentioned above, we call this kind of acquiescence 'fatalism'. A similar kind of fatalism can be found in Islam.

When fate strikes, you have to submit to the inscrutable will of Allah. It can also be found in many versions of the Christian faith: "Thy will be done!" Secularized people may say "tough luck!"

It is here that the approach of Luther departs radically from that of the Basotho, Islam, the secularized West and even that of many Christians. Biblical faith assumes that God is a person who speaks to us and listens to us. He has entered into a personal relationship, first with a particular clan, then a particular people, then with humanity as a whole. He has called Abraham, he has made a covenant with Israel, he has authorized kings to represent his benign rule, he has sent prophets, he has come close to us in Jesus Christ, the ultimate Word of God for us, he has made the new life of Christ in fellowship with God accessible to us in the Spirit.

In the history of Israel he defined himself as a God of justice. In Christ he disclosed himself as a God of redeeming love. The cross of Christ shows that God is unconditionally committed to our well-being and to the well-being of our world. God's Word makes God's self-disclosure in Christ present and valid for us in the power of the Spirit. It is in his Word that we meet God, therefore, not as the impersonal Source and Destiny of everything that exists and happens, but as a person who loves us, listens to us and wants to be in fellowship with us.

It is in his Word, Luther says, that we meet the true God. The proclaimed God (*Deus predicatus*) is the God incarnate in Christ (*Deus incarnatus*), the revealed God (*Deus revelatus*). So are there two Gods, one hidden, the other revealed? Certainly not! The revealed God is the very God whose power we encounter in our daily experience. The reality of God is the God hidden in the experiences of life (*Deus in vita*). The gospel *defines the intentions* of the God whom we encounter in the vagaries of life. He is a God of justice, a God of righteousness, a God of redeeming love - in spite of all appearances!

Therefore the disclosure of God in his Word has a profound impact on our experience of reality. The message of the gospel comes in the form of a promise. A promise must be trusted. It is when we let ourselves in for it, build on it, entrust our lives to it, that reality changes its character very profoundly. Our world, which seemed to close in so dangerously upon us, opens up; we can breathe again, we have an open future, even if the calamities of life do not suddenly disappear (cf Bayer 2002:55).

It is on this basis that Luther could praise God for his unending blessings in ordinary life. In fact, we believe in God as our loving *Father* because we have encountered him in the *Son*, who is present among us when he speaks his Word to us in the power of the *Spirit*. The Christian concept of God, the Trinity, is firmly based on the gospel, not on our general experience of reality, nor on metaphysical speculations (cf Bayer 2003:304ff).

As in many Psalms, this praise is the result of an agonizing, aggressive, demanding prayer in the face of affliction and temptation (Bayer 2004:313, 320ff). Luther said that faith *appeals to God against God*, to the God of love proclaimed in the gospel against the God of fateful experiences (Ebeling

1969:257ff). That was what the Psalmists did. When they felt that God had hidden his face, they appealed to what God had done for his people in past history and asked him to let his face shine upon them again. In the same way Christians appeal to what God has done for them in Christ.

### **God uses earthly means to speak to us**

How does God speak this liberating and encouraging Word? I love to use a picture at this point. Say you pick up the phone and your sweetheart is at the other end of the line. Before the phone rang, you were lonely, the world looked dark, you were not really at home. But suddenly all this changes. Suddenly the sun rises in its glory. It is as if she (or he) is here with you now. But how does this come about? It happens because you hear the voice of the person you love. Say the money runs out at the other end of the line and you are cut off. The voice is gone, so the presence of your sweetheart is gone. But your heart is full of what you have just experienced.

This is how God speaks to us. Before God speaks, he seems to be absent. You may suspect that God should be somewhere, maybe very far away, maybe very close, but you have no idea how to link up with him. Then you hear a voice. It is a human voice, the voice of a preacher, a congregation singing a hymn, a Sunday school teacher. Suddenly you are struck so deeply that you know that it is God speaking to you. He challenges you to follow Christ. He chides you because you misbehave. He forgives you when you feel bad about your failures. He consoles you in your agonies. He liberates you from anxieties. He gives a new direction to your life. He opens up the future. When that happens, God is speaking to you.

Note that the picture of the telephone highlights three aspects, the *hiddenness* of God, the *disclosure* of God and the *mediation* of this disclosure. All three are experienced by us. We do not *speculate* about God - his existence, his whereabouts, his nature, or his greatness and glory. We *experience* God, that is, we become aware of his disconcerting power or his reassuring promise. God is present as the powerful Creator in our earthly experiences, and God is present as the loving, redeeming, consoling Redeemer when he speaks his Word to us.

### **The weakness of the medium**

God's presence as the God of redeeming love is a mediated presence. Luther was convinced that we would not survive if God would come to us as the 'naked God' (*Deus nudus*) in all his glory. He has to hide his face as he did when he spoke to Moses and Elijah. So he comes to us in a very humble form, in a package, as it were. Luther calls such a package a 'larva' or a 'mask'.

God uses humble means to convey his message. The content of the Word is carried from person to person by earthly means of communication: the human voice, speech, song, an act, or water, bread and wine. It does not fall from heaven straight into our hearts; we get it from outside ourselves, that is, from

others who went before us, or who go through life with us. It is not the means that matter; it is the message.

Just as your sweetheart uses the telephone as a means of communication, God uses the thoughts, words, attitudes and actions of other believers to speak to us. It may be a good or a bad line; the main thing is that you hear your sweetheart speaking at the other end. Those who proclaim the gospel to you may be heroes of faith or scoundrels at heart, the main thing is that the Word of God reaches you, touches you, transforms your life and your world through their witness.

To highlight the inconspicuous character of God's means of communication, let me use another picture. In a stormy night you stumble across a rocky mountain pass. The rain is pouring. There is lightening and thunder all around you. You have lost your directions and you dread every step, lest you fall down a cliff. Suddenly you come across a humble cottage. You knock; somebody opens and lets you in. There is a little fire and a dim but cozy candle; a friendly hand offers you tea and bread; you are invited to stay and rest; in the morning you are given some food for the way and directions to proceed with your journey.

It is strange: the cottage is not an impressive hotel in the glitter of an urban night. It is part of the wilderness that has frightened you. It is made of the same rocks that made you stumble. It is subject to the same elements that you have been exposed to. And yet, what a difference does it make! It is strange too that you can easily miss the little cottage. Alternatively, having found it, you can be too scared to knock at the door and go in. How do you know what awaits you once you enter - a den of robbers, drug peddlers, slave traders, sex maniacs?

This is a good picture for the Word of God. It is a part of this world; it consists of stories, images and concepts taken from daily experience. Its form is not particularly impressive. It belongs to a past phase of human history. It may seem to be very old fashioned. You will not make much sense of it before you let yourself in for it. Yet what a difference does it make to those who have lost their way, for whom life has become meaningless, who no longer know who they are, who feel rejected and useless, who are afraid to take their lives into their hands and go forward with confidence and joy.

### **God's intentions hidden in the cross of Christ**

There is another complication in our faith experience. On what grounds can people muster the boldness to proclaim that God is unquestionably committed to our well-being? How do they know that God is indeed a God of justice, of righteousness and of redeeming love? Luther's answer is that, paradoxically, this can be gathered only from the cross of Christ. I say 'paradoxically', because the cross of Christ is part of the highly ambiguous experience of reality, and an extremely distressing part to boot. Of all events, one would not have guessed that God wanted to reveal his redemptive intentions in such a ghastly occurrence.

Here a most gifted man, in the prime of life, with the best of intentions, who wanted the kingdom of God to arrive sooner rather than later, who was totally committed to our redemption, whose life was used by God in the most astonishing ways, who had helped scores of people out of their various predicaments, whom his followers expected to be the promised Messiah - here this most gifted man was betrayed by a friend, captured by his enemies, deserted by his disciples, denied by the staunchest of his followers, found to be a heretic by the leaders of his religious community, condemned to death by the government of the time, tortured by his executioners, ridiculed by the bystanders and executed by the state as an instigator in the most cruel form thinkable.

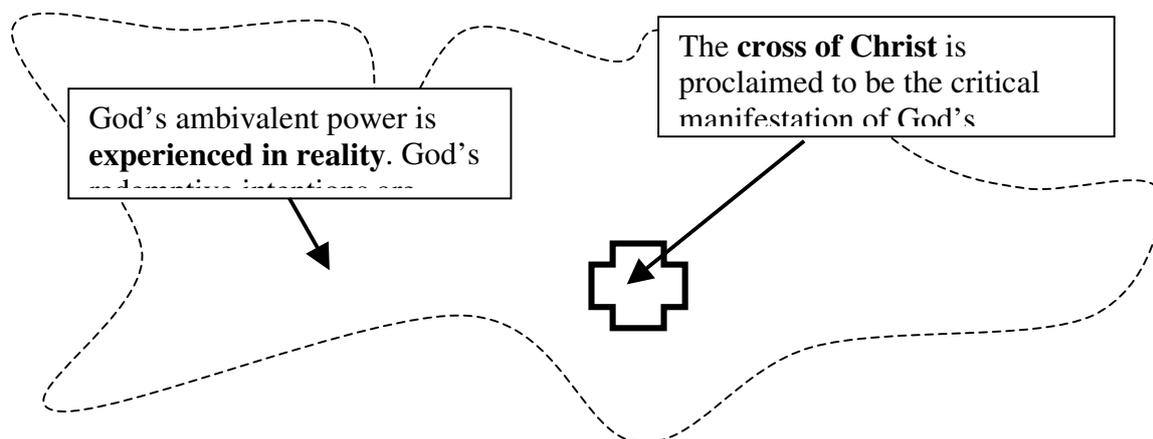
What a story! Anybody hearing it for the first time must shudder and turn away in anguish and revulsion. But then, surprisingly, there were some people who dared to proclaim this event to be God's pivotal act of salvation for us. Christ lived, suffered and died *for us*! For Luther, these two words "for us" (*pro nobis*) make all the difference. If God can transform the catastrophe of the cross of Christ into the one central event leading to the salvation of humankind, then he can also transform our own little catastrophes into what is good for us. And indeed he wants to do just that! There is nothing similar in the Sotho religion. And Western secularism can come up with nothing more dramatic than the psychological effect of "positive thinking".

It is clear that we cannot experience the fact that the cross of Christ is God's act of redemption for us. There is nothing that could demonstrate or prove that. The enemies of Jesus had a different interpretation of what happened on the cross. For the Jewish leaders the cross signified God's punishment of an impostor who blasphemed God and undermined his law. The Romans crucified Jesus as a political instigator who claimed to be the king of the Jews. The message is just not plausible. Paul says that it is scandalous in terms of the Jewish faith and foolish in terms of Greek wisdom (1 Cor 1:22ff).

Not very clever and not very impressive - but it does the trick! It creates faith; it unleashes the powers of hope, joy and love. And it does so precisely in the face of human catastrophes and predicaments. This is not just a nice theory; it hits home where we are hurting most. Luther said that God's love is revealed under the guise of its contrary (*sub contrario*). Genuine faith will never be without affliction. He did not believe in a theology of glory (*theologia gloriae*), but in a theology of the cross (*theologia crucis*). In fact, Luther was suspicious if things went too well with Christians. He would have had no time for prosperity gospels. He believes that God's grace is at work precisely where believers become thoroughly miserable. "The cross ... reveals the fundamental principle of God's dealing with man: God saves through destruction, he builds by tearing down; his strength comes through weakness" (Pesch 1972:19).

As the help of God is closest when true believers are closest to desperation, in the same way the demise of the godless is closest when they seem to be most secure and have reached the pinnacle of arrogance because success seems certain. The reason is that God cannot stand arrogance (Interpretation of Is 10:13f. SL VI 226).

To summarize, the 'hidden God' means that God's creative power is felt in our daily experience, but not his redemptive intentions; the 'revealed God' means that God's redemptive intentions are proclaimed, but the power of God is not experienced where the message of the cross is proclaimed.



### The power of the Spirit of God

The experience of the hidden God is immediate and direct. When trees grow and when wood burns to ashes, everybody can see it. The experience of the revealed God is indirect. It lies in the impact the message has on our lives. It is, as the linguists would say, not a descriptive word, but a *performative* word, that is, a word that creates what it says. If we open ourselves for the message, its content becomes valid and real and present for us. If we don't, it will remain inaccessible. This is what we refer to when we speak of the experience of faith (Bayer 1989:6; 196f, 2004:46f).

However, getting involved in God's redeeming action is in itself a gift of God, not something we have to perform on the strength of our own spiritual or moral resources. Because of our sinfulness, it is something that is unlikely to happen. It is a miracle. The theological tradition calls the redeeming presence of God in our lives, which is active in his Word, the *Holy Spirit*. The Holy Spirit is God speaking to us in such a way that his Word liberates and transforms our lives into the 'image of Christ, who is the image of God' (2 Cor 3:18; 4:4).

But this kind of transformation can also be ambiguous. You can be gripped by a wrong spiritual power and be transformed into something that is not in line with God's redemptive will. We can think of the 'spirits' of religious convictions, secular ideologies, cultural traditions, social movements, primary group pressures, collective interests or personal desires. Luther said that whatever you trust becomes your God. It can be money, or personal excellence, or public status, or papal authority (Large Catechism: explanation of the first commandment, Tappert 1959:365ff). We can add that if you trust or fear your ancestors, it is they who will become your gods.

Even the law of God can become such false god. The law is an important indication of God's redemptive will, but when standing on its own it enslaves, oppresses and discourages; it does not liberate, empower and motivate. Luther said that you have the God you believe in. If you believe in a God of the law, you will have to fulfill the law. If you believe in a God of freedom, you will share the freedom of God. If you believe in a God of wrath, you will face the wrath of God. If you believe in a God of mercy, you will experience the mercy of God.

We can add that if you believe in the God of the Ancient Near Eastern worldview that we find in the Bible, you will get a God who is out of touch with the modern world we live in - and thus lose the God who is always infinitely ahead of us and to whom the Bible witnesses (Peters 1992:26f). So it is for us to be critical and expose ourselves to the right kind of message, thus allowing the right kind of Spirit to transform us. "Do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God ... every Spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God" (1 Jn 4:1f). The Spirit of God is the Spirit that manifested itself in Christ as God's suffering, redeeming love.

### **The dialectical character of our experience of God**

We have discussed the two ways in which we experience God - in his incomprehensible power and in his redeeming love. We said we have to proclaim both God's mastery and God's benevolence. As the Source of reality, God keeps us going; as the Destiny of reality, God indicates the direction in which we should be going. His creative power is one thing; his redemptive vision is another. We come from him, we are maintained by him, and we move towards him (Rom 11:36).

We call this kind of saying "both ... and ... " a dialectic. A dialectic is not a paradox. It is a statement composed of two statements which seem to contradict each other, but which have to be said together to reflect the whole truth. A box has length, but also depth. The human being is an animal, but also the image of God. We must know where we come from (the past), but we must also know where we are going (the future). To emphasize only one part of a dialectic would distort the truth.

Life is full of dialectics; therefore faith is full of dialectics. We do not speak in the form of dialectics because we want to impress others with our sophistication, or because we claim to have access to unfathomable mysteries. We have to speak in the form of dialectics, because that is how life is experienced. We always have to say "on the one hand ... on the other hand ..."

We also have to determine in each case which of the two statements should be emphasized: do we allow ourselves to be sucked into the past, or do we want to conquer the future? Do we yield to our animal instincts, or do we fulfil our divine purpose? Do we need the whip of God's law, or the comfort of God's grace?

The task of theology is to determine the kind of God we are supposed to believe in, and what kind of consequences that would have. In this case we have

to determine the relation between the ambiguity of the hidden God and the clarity of the revealed God. Is God against us, or is God for us and with us? *That* is the question!

### Let us summarize

God is our name for the Source and the Destiny of reality. We experience God as the power that underlies everything that exists and happens, but on the basis of this experience we do not know who that God is, whether this God has good or bad intentions, or whether God has any intentions at all. In fact, our experience of life seems to suggest that the Source and Destiny of reality is nothing but an impersonal, ambiguous, even demonic fate.

We know the nature, attitude and intentions of God only if God discloses himself to us. God has disclosed himself in the history of Israel as a God of justice, as a person with strict but positive intentions. God has disclosed himself as suffering, redeeming, transforming love for us in the life, death and resurrection of Christ. This divine self-disclosure becomes valid, real and present for us when the gospel is preached in the power of God's Spirit.

The gospel proclaims the cross of Christ, the most horrific human catastrophe thinkable, as the pivotal act of God's redemption. It is a humble earthly entity. It is always mediated through human beings who are also in need of redemption. It is a promise. To become effective, it calls for a personal response of faith - which is itself a gift of God's Spirit. Such a response transforms the lives and the worlds of those who are involved in its dynamics.

#### ***What do you think?***

1. *Can you identify with the statement that God sometimes seems to hide his face on the basis of your own experience?*
2. *Say a friend of yours discovers that she is infected with HIV. How could Luther's approach help you to address this situation?*
3. *Here are two statements that are critical of what I say in this chapter: (a) "You Christians are playing games. There is no such God; our fate depends on inner-worldly processes and human initiatives, nothing more." (b) "How can God be the author of evil and, at the same time, want to overcome evil – it makes no sense!" How would you react?*

### Further reading

Luther 1520a On Good Works; 1529 Large Catechism - explanation of the first commandment.

Althaus 1966:9f; 20ff; 25ff; 105ff; 161ff; 274ff.

Ebeling 1970:226ff.

Atkinson 1983:75ff.

Pinomaa 1963:1ff; 22ff.

Wicks 1983:61ff.

Pesch 1972.

## Section II: Relevance

### Luther's experiential approach

We have said that Luther analyses what we experience; he does not speculate. Speculation is not a wild guess of what something hidden might look like. Speculation is a serious attempt to reach conclusions on the basis of assumptions that you believe cannot be disputed. Such assumptions can be gained from philosophical considerations, or from biblical texts. We also call this method *deduction*. The opposite of deduction is *induction*, which means taking your clues from actual experiences of life.

You can assume, for instance, that God is omnipotent (all-powerful) because the Bible says so. From this you may conclude that it is futile to try and do something about an unacceptable situation or development, such as apartheid or AIDS. If there is to be change at all, it is God who has to bring it about. If he does not, he probably does not want the situation to change. Then you have to succumb to whatever happens to you and give God the glory. But that is not what the biblical faith stands for. The fact that a situation exists does not mean that God wants it to continue to exist. Moreover, God's action does not disempower our action, but empowers it. He wants us to draw on his power and do something about the situation.

Metaphysical speculation especially has lost its plausibility in modern times. Today people want to know from where you got your assumptions. How do you know that God exists in the first place? Believers may take the existence of God for granted because they experience the impact of the Word of God on their lives and respond in faith. But whether they should engage in speculations about God is a different matter.

Speculation is dangerous because it can lead us to unwarranted conclusions. In the history of the church the weirdest conclusions were drawn from philosophical assumptions about God and from texts taken out of context. Such conclusions have often led to the most unacceptable actions and caused untold misery. Just think of the conversion of people by force of arms; the burning of witches and heretics; the crusades; the destruction of Latin American cultures; the belief that we can earn merits which will be taken into account in the last judgment; the belief that self-castigation, payments made to the church, or masses read on our behalf can shorten our time in 'purgatory'.

It is one of the strengths of Luther's theology that he does not speculate. He analyses what happens when we encounter God in his Word. To be honest, I am going to take Luther's experiential approach more seriously than he did himself. The reason is that, on occasion, Luther also engaged in speculative theology, as did the other Reformers. Usually this happened when they were attacked and they had to justify themselves on the basis of existing doctrines.

However, speculation is not where the heartbeat of the Reformation is to be found. For Luther, theology focused on the task of reassuring afflicted believers of God's power and benevolence. Theories about God's intrinsic nature would leave such people puzzled, helpless and bored. As mentioned above, Luther accepted the ancient Trinitarian and Christological doctrines and was able to explain their rationale. But Luther resented philosophical attempts to define and describe God. He stuck to experience - whether the experience made by biblical authors, or the experience of contemporary believers when the Word of God hit home in their lives.

That is also true, though to a lesser degree, for Melanchthon in his early days: "Let me ask you: what did the scholastic theologians achieve during the centuries in which they dealt with nothing else but these doctrines? ... Their folly could be ignored if, in the mean time, these foolish discussions would not have obscured the gospel ..." (H 22f). Melanchthon later tried to figure out the experiential truth content of these doctrines more seriously.

### **African traditional religion and Luther's experiential approach**

Luther's approach to theology makes it more amenable to contemporary worldview assumptions than many of its alternatives. African traditionalism, for instance, is intensely interested in the life of the community and whatever threatens its survival, prosperity and harmony. It is not a speculative kind of religion. There are mythological expressions of the deeper secrets of life; there are proverbs and parables; there are rituals to strengthen and protect; there are underlying assumptions which can be challenged by modern insights. But all of that is meant to convey a sense of what actual life is all about: social stability, human relationships, moral authority, health and vitality, protection against hostile forces, etc. (Maimela 1985:66-).

As we have seen, traditionalism is characterized by uncertainty when it comes to the deepest foundations of life. The Supreme Being, the power underlying experienced reality, is not known. Lutheran theology does not need to question this common experience. For Christians God seems to be absent as much as for anybody else in the world. Even Christ is reported to have prayed in the words of Ps 22:1 on the cross: "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" (Mt 24:46). Believers should not feel obliged to put on a happy and healthy face when they feel uprooted, alienated and miserable. There is a difference between faith and make-believe. It is hypocrisy to pretend, in an hour of affliction, that all is well. True faith is honest.

However, on the strength of the Word of God, Christians can call God 'Father'. They do not have to approach the deceased; they can talk to the 'living God'. When things go well, they can praise God. When things get tough, they can appeal to God. When there is uncertainty, they can trust God. They can become assured that God takes them with him on his way to ultimate fulfilment.

They can do all that in the face of the predicaments of life: poverty, conflict, drought, disease, infertility, or loss of vitality. It is not as if Christians have no fear - fear of the future, fear of ancestral wrath, fear of uncanny forces, evil spirits and sorcery, and fear of death. But the Word of God addresses and overcomes that fear. God is in charge and God is for us, not against us. God has led Christ through death to life, through suffering to glory, and he will do the same with us. It is this message that is able to liberate and empower traditionalists and modernists in the face of any calamity.

### **Scientific empiricism and Luther's experiential approach**

Modern science is much more radical in its emphasis on actual experience than African traditionalism. Science does not accept the authority of tradition, dogma or ideology. The human being is deemed to be autonomous and self-responsible. Humans have the right to see for themselves (empiricism) and think for themselves (rationalism). Power is located in what works (pragmatism). Truth is what can be shown to be true through observation and research. Trust is invested in what delivers the goods. Blessed are the successful. Mythology, metaphor and ritual are replaced with description, statistics and mathematics.

Empiricism is an inductive method. Science also makes deductions from the established results of observation and experiment, but these deductions are provisional and subject to confirmation by observation and experiment. When something serious happens, science analyses the causes and the effects of the incident; it will not search for its deeper meaning. In fact, it does not believe that there is such a deeper meaning. Science can do without the assumption of a transcendent Source of reality.

If we follow Luther's experiential approach, we do not have to deny the validity of scientific methodologies. Luther based Christian judgment in earthly matters on observation and reason. There is no question that science and technology have been, and still are, immensely successful in explaining the reality we experience, getting it under our control and utilizing it to our advantage. Christians also do not need to deny that Christian worldview assumptions have been irrational and superstitious in the past. They can learn from science and participate in science.

However, theologians have a unique contribution to make. Scientists, if they stick to their empiricist methodologies, can only analyze what exists and happens; they cannot provide us with a vision of what *ought* to exist and happen. They can extrapolate current developments into the future, but they cannot indicate in which direction these developments ought to be channeled. They can

register how the current situation came into being, but they cannot tell us how to cope with the fact that reality is not what it ought to be, whether due to human failure or to blind fate. If they want to do that, they have to resort to value or faith assumptions.

Science knows that, due to the interplay between centripetal and centrifugal forces, between gravity and entropy, between potent and spent energy, everything in reality emerges, evolves, deteriorates and decays. Where there is construction at some place, there must be deconstruction somewhere else in its environment. Death is not a punishment for moral decadence, but a necessary natural phenomenon. All living creatures survive at the expense of other living creatures. We shall indeed die, as the Bible tells us, but there is no chance that we shall rise from the dead. The world will indeed come to an end, as the Bible tells us, but this will happen gradually and there are no prospects that a new reality will rise from the ashes.

In short, there is no place in the scientific worldview for a world transforming vision. Expressed in Luther's terminology, the sciences excel in the analysis of the creations of the 'hidden God', but they have no idea of the 'revealed God'.

For humans to find their bearings, they need to be led by a vision of what ought to be. They also need to be empowered to overcome what ought not to be. They need a way of dealing with guilt, fate and catastrophe. Building on the biblical witness, Luther's theology is very realistic about the inescapable facts of human life, the death of human beings, the deterioration of all things and the end of the world. Even Christ, in whom the living God disclosed his true intentions, suffered and died.

But, getting his clues from the apocalyptic versions of the biblical faith, Luther posited a radical counter-proposition and pitted it against the facts of reality. If God is in charge, and if God loves his creation, death and destruction cannot have the last word. It will be our God, the Father of Jesus Christ, who will have the last word - and this will be a creative and a redemptive word!

The gospel is not a scientific description of reality, nor a theory about the potential future of reality, nor a prediction of what is likely to happen in terms of scientific insight. It is a protest against the cruel facts of reality in the name of a just and loving God. It transcends reality and thereby questions the ultimacy of reality. By doing so, it liberates us from anxiety and self-centredness. It creates assurance, hope and joy. It calls for respect and concern for those who would otherwise have to be written off.

Faith in the gospel may seem to be irrational but it works! It is essential for a relaxed and fulfilled human life in the face of injustice, fate, suffering and death. If faith cannot be defeated by traditionalist fatalism, it cannot be defeated by scientific realism. It develops a vision where nobody can see a way out. Without a future opening up before us, humans cannot live and die with confidence, joy and courage - not even the scientists themselves.

## Hedonism and Luther's experiential approach

Modernity claims freedom and sovereignty for the human being. It does not only reject authority; it also claims that humans have the right to pursue their self-interests. Empiricism, rationalism, pragmatism, the insistence on equal rights and economic liberalism are all part of the same emancipatory movement. While freedom is a legitimate consequence of the gospel, rootlessness is not, nor is selfishness.

In its popular form, the emphasis of modernity does not lie on truth, but on satisfaction. We call such an approach 'hedonism'. Desires must be fulfilled, moods must be taken seriously, demands to make sacrifices for the common good are rejected. The advertising and entertainment industries consciously dismantle convictions and inhibitions and promise instant fulfilment. They do so to make money, which is again spent on fun and happiness. The world is nothing but a quarry to be mined for personal gain. When something serious happens, this is 'tough luck' which only makes you look for satisfaction elsewhere.

Some 'postmodernist' approaches to reality have driven this attitude to extremes. They have no faith in all-embracing systems of meaning, no regard for lofty ideals, no use for grand visions. There is no truth; there are only truth claims and these are all equally spurious. One goes for what delivers the goods under present circumstances. Postmodern sensibility is "characterized by cheerful ahistoricity, contented rootlessness, guiltless consumerism, and low expectations of the future" (Lakeland 1997:xiii). In other words, the past and the future are immaterial, convictions and values are of no consequence, enjoyment of the latest offers on the market is all that matters.

Rootless people become defenseless against the power of their own desires and the manipulations of ruthless marketeers and demagogues. Serious strands in postmodernism dismantle what they consider to be oppressive assumptions and language games for the sake of justice, hospitality and democracy. Their focus on freedom and equal dignity is motivated by a strong sense of responsibility for others. This is, of course, in line with the Christian faith. But where there are no foundations, the question is why we should opt for justice, hospitality and democracy in the first place, and not for oppression, exclusiveness and brutal power, as Hitler, Stalin and Idi Amin have chosen to do.

Luther's experiential approach is capable of picking up the underlying need of this situation. And that is of critical importance. In his response to postmodernism, the Catholic theologian Comeau writes: "... by rediscovering the central importance of experience we can come alongside our contemporaries and return to the heart of the Christian faith. The Christian faith is not first a message that then becomes an experience. Rather it is foremost an experience that becomes a message." We must make room for religious experience and "help people discern what is the driving force behind their spiritual quest ..." (Comeau 2002:524).

Luther does not deny that the human being seeks happiness. But uncontrolled desire is a deadly temptation, a vicious delusion that can only defeat its purpose.

It does not liberate and empower; it enslaves. There can be no achievement without effort, no fulfilment without sacrifice, no happiness without pain, no life without death. If we enjoy ourselves, somebody has to pay the bill. As economists love to say, 'there are no free lunches'. If you want to see a new day, you have to go through the night. All that is plain common sense. But a hedonist culture prefers not to think too deeply. It wants to have fun.

In theological terms, God's redemption does not remove suffering; it operates through suffering. To make redemption possible, Christ suffered for us and involves us in his suffering for others. As mentioned above, Luther had no time for prosperity gospels. He pitted a theology of the cross (*theologia crucis*) against a theology of glory (*theologia gloriae*). Modern cosmology has realized that sacrifices are inescapable and essential for life to flourish (Nürnberger 2004:166ff). If we do not learn that lesson, and learn it pretty soon, the future of humankind is in the balance. Any enlightened environmentalist can bear that out.

### **Meaninglessness and Luther's experiential approach**

Luther's theology does not question, but confirms feelings of insecurity, anxiety and frustration. There are experiences that make no sense at all. Luther's concept of the 'hidden God' does not only encompass fear of the last judgment, but also inexplicable fate, blatant injustice, suffering and death. All these are tools of the 'devil', thus expressions of the 'hidden God'.

One can assume that catastrophic events must have a hidden meaning that will be revealed in God's eschatological future. But that is speculation. Why should God want to hide his truth from our eyes? More down to earth is the empiricist assumption that events have no meaning in themselves. They only have causes and effects. Causes and effects can be observed. If they acquire a meaning, it is a meaning that humans attach to them - or that God wants to attach to them.

As Luther taught us, believers do attach meaning to occurrences in terms of what they believe. Believe in a wrathful God when you are guilty or unfortunate, Luther says, and you will have a wrathful God. Believe in a loving Father and you will have a loving Father. If you believe in blind fate, you will be at the mercy of a blind fate. If you entrust yourself to a God who knows what he does and pursues your best, you believe in a caring God who is in control and your faith will comfort you.

Luther is convinced that, on the basis of the proclamation of God's benevolence, as manifest in Christ, believers are entitled to attach a meaning to experienced reality that contradicts the ambivalence of our experience. Believers do not have to conclude from positive experiences that God is for them, or from negative experiences that God is against them. In faith they stick to the promise that God is unconditionally for them and with them, and not against them.

But believers can attach that meaning to current events in two ways. The *passive* quest for meaning tries to penetrate the mysteries of the past and finds either no answers or spurious answers. The *active* quest for meaning develops a

vision for the future. According to the biblical witness, God never goes back into past history to rectify what has gone wrong; God always picks us up where we are and leads us into the future. Present reality, however it has come about, is God's point of departure for our journey towards his redemptive vision.

For Luther, the gospel is essentially a promise. Believers in a merciful Father will not ask why their God has allowed something to happen, but what their God wants to do with what has happened. They go forward, not backward. Based on the biblical witness, Luther's faith is a defiant kind of faith, a protest against experienced reality in the name of a God of life, justice and concern.

When blessed, we thank God; when in trouble, we know that Christ too was in trouble and the cross was not the end of the story. Social injustice, personal failure, misery, disease and death do not question the validity of our faith in a God of life, justice and love; they call us to *participate* in God's creative authority, his redemptive concern and his comprehensive vision for his creation.

### **Idols and the true God**

So are humans indeed the creators of their gods, as Old Testament prophets and modern critics of religion like Feuerbach, Nietzsche, Freud and Marx alleged? Not quite! It is true, of course, that our conceptions of God are creations of our collective minds and subject to all kinds of social, cultural and psychological influences. All believers should readily acknowledge this. None of our ideas of God is identical with God himself. If they were, God would be nothing but a bunch of idols, created by humans in their minds to serve their interests. The true God is infinitely beyond whatever ideas we might have about him.

The awareness that our concept of God is not identical with God himself gives us the freedom, the authority and the obligation to reflect critically about our own concept of God, and to struggle with each other for a concept which reflects as closely as possible what a true God for humankind might be.

There are vast qualitative differences between different faith assumptions. They show their colors through their consequences. If you believe in a god, for instance, who is committed exclusively to your own social class, your tribe, your ethnic group or your nation, your god is nothing but a psychological device set up to legitimate your collective interests. Then you will be able to go to war against others, conquer their territory, appropriate their resources, oppress them and treat your natural environment as a resource to satisfy your desires. Surely such a god is not the true God, but an idol.

Christianity, Islam, European imperialism, Marxism-Leninism, Nazism, apartheid and capitalist liberalism have all believed in such idols. Idols do not liberate, but enslave. Idols do not stand for justice, let alone for sacrificial love. They do not make us responsible for the whole of reality, but allow us to further our self-interest at the expense of others. Most important of all: idols make the divine part of this world rather than its Source and Destiny (Peters 1992:25).

The true God is the Source and the Destiny of reality as a whole. His vision covers the well-being of the universe, his concern is focused on any deficiency in well-being found in any section of the population, on any continent and in any dimension of life. He liberates us from self-centredness. He places our interests in the context of the interests of others and of the needs of the earth. In Christ, God suffers for us, and involves us in his redemptive enterprise for the world. If Christians embrace and live out that faith, they may have reasons to believe that they are serving the true God.

### Section III: Critical reflections

#### The concept of God

Luther's concepts of the hidden and the revealed God have been criticized for being dualistic and artificial. But these concepts are biblical. They also reflect very accurately what believers experience when the proclamation of the gospel overcomes hopelessness and despondency in desperate situations - whether in biblical times or today. So I cannot find fault with Luther using these terms.

My critique is directed against Luther's unproblematic use of the concept 'God' as such. As a child of his time, Luther took the existence of God for granted. During the outgoing Middle Ages, virtually everybody did. Since Peter Lombard and Thomas Aquinas dogmatics always began with the doctrine of God (Pesch 1972:4ff). Thomas never had a problem either with existence or the grace of God. For Luther God's grace became a problem, but not his existence. The question was what kind of God we believe in and on what grounds - a wrathful or a graceful God?

Today the situation has changed dramatically. The reality of God is no longer self-evident. God cannot be experienced. If we follow an experiential approach, we have to ask *why we should speak about God at all*. Why not speak of the unfolding universe, when referring to the world as a whole? Why not simply speak of 'positive thinking' when faced with inescapable predicaments?

Such questions would never have occurred to Luther. Nor does it occur to those traditionalists who have remained deeply religious in their approach to life. For them, as for Luther, God is like the oxygen we breathe. As the Source and Destiny of reality, he is in us, and all around us. But for many of our contemporaries the existence of God has become a problem. For many others it has *ceased* to be a problem. For them the question has been settled: there is no God!

How do we respond? The attempt to prove the existence of God has long proved to be futile. The appeal to revelation is also no longer convincing. If God indeed wanted to reveal himself, why did he not do so in a straight-forward and incontrovertible way? Why did the risen Christ not appear to his enemies in a show of strength and glory? The simple fact is that he did not. Instead, God becomes real only to those who believe in him.

If we understand revelation as objective information about God, we will not be able to answer our critics in a scientific age. There is no information about God that could stand the test of empirical evidence. *The term 'revelation' can only refer to an open invitation to entrust our lives to a promise.* There is no proof or guarantee. To let oneself in for such a promise is a risky business. Faith is trust, based on existential assurance, not on objective certainty. Our next chapter will deal with that.

The appeal to divine authority also does not work in modern times. Modern humans have come of age. They are critical of the claim that the Scriptures, the church, the state, or the ancestors represent divine authority. And rightly so! God did not drop his truth from heaven, but used fallible human beings as his means of communication.

Authors of the biblical Scriptures, bearers of ecclesial offices and political leaders have all been human beings. All human insight is provisional and situational. Theologically speaking, all human beings are sinners - whether Paul or Peter, bishops or presidents, pastors or lay persons, clan elders or children. To declare human authority to be divine is an attempt to absolutise the relative - and that is idolatry. It is normally done in the pursuit of security, power and influence. But it is a futile and deceptive exercise.

An appeal to the 'facts' of 'salvation history' also does not help. Facts are accessible, God's salvation is not. The gospel of Christ is not a description of facts, but an invitation to join a movement that heads towards God's vision. For Paul and for Luther, the gospel is a promise, not something we can hold, hand out, or possess. Faith is not certainty, but trust. We entrust ourselves to a God who has promised to be with us, a God who invites us to join him in his creative authority, his redemptive concern and his comprehensive vision for the world. Trust means that we abandon the desire for human autonomy and security and become part of God's redemptive enterprise.

What then must we maintain, if we can provide neither proof, information nor authority? The answer we glean from Luther is that faith is trust in a promise. A promise refers to something outstanding, not something that we already possess. Or in other words, God is not part of the world we experience. Anything ostensibly 'divine' that is part of the reality we experience, or that we imagine may exist as part of this reality, is an idol (Peters 1992:25). God in Christ, God his Word condescends and meets us where we are, but we will never catch hold of him, control him, make him part of our system of meaning. God is real for us in that he transcends the reality we experience. And humans need this kind of transcendence:

1. Transcendence is necessary for *human orientation*. Humans need a comprehensive system of meaning. In scientific terms we can say that evolution has produced a creature that has to transcend what is given in terms of space, time and power. Animals live for the moment, for their current location, for the resources at their disposal. Human beings cannot do that. Humans must understand the past; they must envision the future; they must get a sense of their

place in the whole and of the direction they should be taking into the future. To be able to do that, they must be able to go beyond that whole to *see it from above*, as it were. Go beyond where? Transcendence cannot be an empty space because as humans we cannot relate to empty spaces. We have to transcend our world towards an entity that we call, for lack of a better word, 'God'.

2. Transcendence is necessary for *human freedom*. Humans are part of the world. Human lives are embedded in a vast network of relationship on which their survival, health and prosperity depends. Human autonomy is an illusion. Being part of the world, we cannot be in charge of the world. We are entangled in complex networks of relationships, which, more often than not, get the better of us. To attain a sense of mastery, we have to *move beyond this prison* and participate in the power and authority of the one who can genuinely claim to be the Owner and Master of the world as a whole.

As we can observe all around us, those who do not participate in such a greater mastery, become enslaved by the world - whether in the form of natural forces, social structures, cultural imperatives, communal expectations or personal desires. Power seekers like Hitler, Stalin and Pol Pot, as well as the millions who hunt for the latest gadgets in the shopping malls, are neither free nor in charge of their lives and their worlds. Only those who can transcend the promises and pressures of the world towards the overarching freedom and authority of God can become masters of their lives and their worlds.

3. Transcendence is necessary for *ultimate responsibility*. The use of modern weaponry and intrigue by dictators and their cronies, the escalating discrepancies between the super wealthy and the marginalized, the rising crime rate, widespread indifference and negligence, the ecological crisis and countless personal tragedies all demonstrate how a lack of responsibility can lead to destructive and self-destructive behavior. To whom are we responsible? Certainly not only to ourselves, to our communities, or to society, because all these entities can be bogged down by self-interest. This kind of responsibility is not unimportant for a common life, but it is partial and provisional.

We can also not say that we should be responsible to reality as such, because humans are meant to be in charge of reality, not subject to reality. Humans must give account of their behavior to an authority *that is in charge of the world* they live in. And because humans are persons, that authority must be a person. We cannot be responsible to things. The Source and Destiny of reality may be much more than a person, but for us he must at least also be a person.

Orientation, freedom and responsibility demand at least a rudimentary awareness of a higher authority. The biblical faith calls this authority 'God'. Paul Tillich said that the concept of God indicates our 'ultimate concern'. We all have such an ultimate concern, even if it is very rudimentary. The point is not whether such a God exists or not. Of course, Christians assume that God exists, because they relate to God on a daily basis.

The point is, however, that human beings, as they have evolved, cannot do without an overarching authority that makes meaning, freedom and responsibil-

ity possible. It has been said that if there were no God we would have to invent one. And in fact the world is full of such inventions. Gen 1 says that the human being is created in the image of God, that is, as God's representative on earth. Humans can only be truly human, if they participate in God's creative authority, redeeming concern and comprehensive vision for the universe as a whole.

### **The concept of the devil**

A similar point of critique is the unproblematic way in which Luther took the existence and designs of the devil for granted. Luther saw the devil and his army of demons present all over the world, lurking behind every corner. Do we really have to believe in the existence of the devil and his army of demons? For Luther this was not a relevant question. The medieval worldview had no problems in assuming that devils and angels existed.

However, for Luther the existence of the devil was not a speculative proposition; it was a personalisation of adverse daily experiences in their endless variety of forms. The devil designed traps for humans at the most unsuspecting places and in the most ingenious ways - from the hostility of the Papists against the gospel to the nuisance of a crawling insect, from the charge that he (Luther) had broken apart the unity of the church to the intolerable pain caused by his hemorrhoids, from the encroachment of depression (German *Traurigkeit*) to the threat of the Turks. But according to Luther we are not called upon to believe in the devil but to resist and banish the evil he represents by believing in Christ.

The truth is that good and evil have always been experienced, and are always experienced, irrespective of what name you attach to them. What has mattered then and what matters now is how you deal with such experiences. Giving untoward experiences a name and speaking to them is a way of coming to terms with them. As Haile says, "Course language in treating of and with the devil was (for Luther) an appropriate way of showing contempt for doubt and despair. It also produced good humor, that most effective way of warding them off" (1980:195). Here are two examples of how Luther's course humor dealt with his afflictions:

When the devil comes at night to worry me, this is what I say to him: 'Devil, I have to sleep now. It is God's commandment for us to work by day and sleep at night.' If he keeps nagging me and trots out my sins, then I answer: 'Sweet devil, I know the whole list. Also write on it that I have shit in my breeches. Then hang that around your neck and wipe your mouth on it .... (quoted by Haile 1980:191).

"I have got one or two devils who pay special attention to me, really pretty fellows. When they can't accomplish anything in my heart they grab my head and make it ache. When I can't take it any longer, I am going to stick them up my ass ...." (op cit 194).

More seriously, Satan is for Luther another name for the experience of the hidden God (*Deus absconditus*). God is the Source and the Destiny of reality as a whole. One cannot believe in two Gods without becoming schizophrenic. God

is either for us or against us. In the evils of the world we experience him to be against us, in the promise of the gospel we believe him to be for us. To have peace we have to stick to the second in the face of the first.

In the Bible the word 'satan' means 'accuser' or 'public prosecutor'. We find that in the first two chapters of the book of Job, where Satan is one of the 'ministers' in God's 'cabinet'. We also find it in the Synoptic Gospels and Revelation, where it is the task of Satan to tempt and test people, but where he is ultimately dismissed from his duties (Mt 4:1-11 par; 16:23; Lk 10:18; Rev 12:10).

Rev 12:10 depicts the equivalent of a heavenly 'cabinet reshuffle': Christ is made prime minister and Satan is thrown out of office. That is a narrative way of saying that God accepts and transforms the sinner by grace rather than demanding righteousness on the basis of our own spiritual and moral resources. In Paul's theology it is the law that instigates, tempts, accuses and condemns us - and the function of the law comes to its end in Christ. For Paul and his school sin is located in the 'flesh', that is in our unredeemed humanity.

For Luther, as for most medieval believers, the devil was somebody very tangible whom he suspected of creating all sorts of havoc in this life. But Luther also knew of the function of the law to tempt, accuse and condemn. Moreover, he spoke of the hidden God, of whom we never know what he is up to. It is important for us to realize that these are alternative ways of referring to the same thing: God seems to want to destroy us. So whether it is Satan, or the law, or our own sin, or the hidden God - we have to hurl the gospel against all these 'entities' that undermine our confidence and joy.

In traditionalism, evil takes the form of asocial behavior, culminating in sorcery. In animistic cultures it may take the form of evil spirits roaming around in the world. In modern contexts, evil takes the form of uncontrolled desire that craves for wealth, power and enjoyment. It takes the form of thoughtless, irresponsible, or vicious behavior such as domestic violence, crime, corruption, or preventable diseases. It takes the form of misguided convictions, such as apartheid, adherence to cultural traditions such as female mutilation, or fundamentalist fanaticism leading to suicide bombings. It also takes the form of natural, economic, or ecological disasters such as shattering earth quakes, dehumanizing superabundance and dehumanizing misery, economic marginalisation and environmental destruction.

In short, there is no need for us to find a devil in all these phenomena. We can call them by their everyday names.

[Continues with chapter 6 on the next page.]

# 6

## The gift of righteousness

### Law and gospel

1. *Should perpetrators of apartheid in South Africa, who excluded blacks from social and political life when a white government was in power, be excluded from public offices in the country?*
2. *Should a young woman, who has become HIV positive through her own negligence, or through the irresponsibility of her lover, be rejected by her family and expelled from the church?*

#### Our task in this chapter

So far we have spoken about the Word of God in broad terms. Now we must become more specific. The Reformation focused on the central aspect of our faith, namely the relationship between human beings as sinners and a God of love and justice.

The biblical witness claims that we are not what God intends us to be. While God continues to maintain us, we are not in fellowship with God. We have no trust in him. We are out of step with what he wants to do for us, in us and through us. Similarly our life world does not seem to function the way it should. Our 'life world' is that part of reality in which we are embedded and which is relevant for us. The Bible calls this condition of human beings and their life world 'sin'.

How does God react to human sin? That is the question this chapter seeks to address. It deals with God's expectations and God's gift; God's law and God's grace; human failure and divine mercy; human autonomy and human trust; faith as fulfilling God's law and faith as entrusting oneself to God's redeeming grace.

If it is true that humankind is in sin, the problem is not whether or not we have to be transformed. That is taken for granted. The problem is this: do we have to be transformed *before* God accepts us into his fellowship? This would

make God's acceptance *conditional*. Or alternatively, does God accept us into his fellowship to transform us *in and through* this fellowship? This would make God's acceptance *unconditional*, although this acceptance would have transformative consequences.

Expressed in simple terms, is a changed life a *precondition* or a *consequence* of our acceptance by God? Essentially, that is the question that led to the upheavals of the Reformation and that has been at the centre of Reformation theology ever since.

It is important to note at this juncture that, in the Bible and in Reformation theology, sin is not just a moral derailment; sin is a broken relationship with God. And because God is the Source and Destiny of reality as a whole, any broken relationship within this world signifies a broken relationship with God. Just think of a few examples: deception in financial matters, abuse of sexual desire, lack of trust within a family, corruption in administrative bodies, violence, crime, international conflicts, imbalanced access to economic resources, social discrimination, carelessness in medical services, wastage of scarce resources, or the destruction of the biosphere.

Conversely, anything that goes wrong in our 'life worlds', suggests that our relationship with God has become sour, that God has turned against us. Again think of a few examples: a drought or a flood, hyperinflation, a crippling disease, the death of a beloved one, unemployment, bankruptcy, a broken marriage, a handicapped child, or meaningless work. When such things happen, the immediate question must be: Why that? What has gone wrong? How did we offend God? What is God going to do next? The question whether God is for us or against us has incredibly profound and comprehensive dimensions.

## **Section I: The biblical background**

### **Conditional acceptance**

Reformation theology is based on the biblical witness. Because the issue of 'salvation by grace accepted in faith' is so central to this theology, and because Luther believed it to be the decisive core of the Scriptures, I propose that we have a brief look at what the Scriptures say about this topic. You can find more detail in chapter 11 of my book, *Biblical Theology in Outline* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2004).

God's friendship with Abraham was unconditional, though it took for granted that friends would be loyal to each other. Yahweh's liberation of Israel from Egyptian slavery was not linked to divine demands, though it was presupposed that Israel would indeed leave Egypt and embark on the long journey to the Promised Land. Yahweh's election of Israel as his people was unconditional, though Yahweh expected that Israel would respect the fact that Yahweh was a God of justice.

It was the covenant of Yahweh with Israel, as spelt out most profoundly in Deuteronomy, which introduced formal and reciprocal obligations. Yahweh would be the God of Israel and Israel would be the people of Yahweh. Yahweh would care for Israel; Israel would witness to Yahweh by keeping his commandments. The commandments defined who Yahweh was, namely a God of faithfulness, undivided loyalty and communal justice. Unfaithfulness to Yahweh and to each other would not be tolerated within the Israelite community.

But the people of Israel could not fulfil their side of the bargain. At least that was the impression after the prophets and the deuteronomic authors had interpreted centuries of suffering as Yahweh's punishment for Israel's sins. In time a frantic desire evolved among earnest Jewish groups to keep the law to the letter. But there was also a sense of despondency: humans were sinners and would never cope. If anything were to come out of divine-human relationships, God would have to fulfil not only his side of the covenant, but also the human side. This is what the topic of law and grace is all about.

To see the contrast in stark terms, I want to compare two texts with each other, one from the Old Testament and one from the New Testament. Before you continue, kindly read Dt 30:15-20 (or Dt 28 if you have the time). The message is: If you obey Yahweh's law, you will be blessed; if you transgress Yahweh's law, you will be cursed. Note the critically important words: "if ...then ...!" The moment you say "if", you have posed a condition. So it depended on the moral capacity of Israel whether it would become a blessed or a cursed nation.

Strangely enough, Deuteronomy's argument is based firmly on the undeserved grace of Yahweh towards Israel. It is because of Yahweh's inexplicable love that he entered into a covenant with Israel. He could have stayed aloof; he could have chosen a more impressive nation. In fact, he chose Israel, the weakest nation that existed, uprooting much more powerful nations for the sake of Israel. He was not forced to do that. It was by grace, not on account of Israel's excellence (Dt 7:6ff).

At this juncture, we take note of the fact that grace does not have to be unconditional. If Israel proved unworthy of Yahweh's grace, the nation would be doomed. And that would have terrible consequences. What Yahweh granted to Israel was the privilege of a covenant. A covenant was a formal contract between two parties. Yahweh would be Israel's God and Israel would be Yahweh's people. This implied definite obligations on Israel's part. If Israel failed to fulfil its obligations, Yahweh was in his right to take Israel to task. And he would most certainly do that, because he was a holy God who wanted a holy nation.

### **Conditional acceptance in social terms**

The blessings and the curses are entirely this-worldly and they are spelt out in frightening detail. The law too is concerned with this-worldly behavior. God is the Source of reality; he does not hover in the sky above reality. Our relationship with God manifests itself in our relationship with earthly reality.

We should not be surprised, therefore, to see that God's conditional acceptance of Israel led to Israel's conditional acceptance of others. Take Dt 7 as an example. Here the Israelites are expressly forbidden to accept the Canaanites. The Canaanites had lived in Palestine for centuries before the Israelites came, but they were pagan and pagans had no place among God's holy people. They were to be driven out; their altars were to be destroyed; they were not to qualify for marriage contracts.

They had no right even to exist - except, of course, where it served the interests of Israel. There is a rather sinister remark in the text saying that, as long as the Canaanites were useful for keeping wild animals in check, they could be tolerated. But to the extent that this threat receded, they were to be exterminated like weeds or pests (Dt 7:22; Ex 23:29).

It has to be acknowledged that such hostile attitudes against outsiders are very common in group relationships the world over. Sociology calls this phenomenon the 'ingroup-outgroup' syndrome. A social group lays down certain rules that have to be kept. They are rooted in the group's identity. No deviation can be tolerated because it would threaten its existence. Those who cannot fulfil the conditions are not accepted as members. Conditions of entry form a security wall between insiders and outsiders. This wall is meant to keep insiders in, and outsiders out. Often these conditions and requirements are legitimated on religious or pseudo-religious grounds.

This was certainly the case in ancient Israel. But not only in Israel! Think of Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Macedonian and Roman imperialism during biblical times. Think of the atrocities of European nationalism and colonialism; think of German racism under Hitler; think of apartheid; think of tribalism, nepotism or cronyism in some African contexts; think of elites in Western capitalism; think of the party bosses in Marxism-Leninism; think of any Christian denomination, religious sect, or secular gang. It is not easy to find unconditional acceptance in this world.

As mentioned above, Deuteronomy powerfully insists that its election by Yahweh was a pure act of grace. Israel had not merited Yahweh's choice in any way whatsoever. But the phrase, "by grace alone", did not automatically lead to open doors. Here the reference to grace only served to strengthen Israel's claim to exclusive privilege. Israel was special; the others counted only as far they were a threat or a boon to Israel. Only foreign individuals within its borders, who were at the mercy of the Israelites, could expect to be treated justly.

As we have seen, the works of the law were demanded as a condition of acceptance and belonging. That was true not only for outsiders, but for the Israelites themselves. The national catastrophes of 720 BCE (destruction of the Northern kingdom by the Assyrians) and 586 BCE (destruction of the Southern kingdom by the Babylonians) seemed to bear Deuteronomy out. Yahweh had taken his unfaithful and unworthy partner to task.

Some prophets proclaimed the end of Israel; others gave Israel, or a 'remnant' of Israel, a second chance. But for those who picked up the pieces, it

was clear that the fulfilment of the law had to be the foundation of everything else. Without strict adherence to the law there was no hope for the people of God. The law was codified and interpreted in meticulous detail and those who wanted to belong to God had to subject themselves slavishly to all its ordinances and their further explications and implications.

### **Unconditional acceptance**

We find quite a different atmosphere in Paul's theology. Before you continue, kindly read Eph 2. Probably written by a disciple of Paul, Ephesians splendidly summarizes Paul's critical insight on God's acceptance of sinful humanity within a single chapter.

In the first part of the chapter (Eph 2:1-10) it is said that "all of us" were "dead in sin". There was no difference between Israelites and gentiles. But in his great mercy God accepted us into his fellowship, raised us with Christ from the death of sin and placed us with Christ in the highest status imaginable - sitting with him on his throne "at the right hand of God", as God's prime ministers, as it were, or God's representatives on earth. And the purpose of doing that was that the "immeasurable riches of God's mercy" would flow into our lives and through our lives to others.

Ephesians makes it clear that God's acceptance is not based on our achievements; it is a pure gift of grace. But it does indeed lead us into a new life. God's grace re-creates us in such a way that we do the good works which God himself has prepared for us to do (Eph 2:10). Now this is a clear case of unconditional, redeeming, transformative acceptance of the unacceptable: acceptance comes first, change for the better is a *consequence*, not a precondition.

However, God's acceptance of the unacceptable is not an easy way out, whether for the accepting God or for accepted humanity. For God it implies that he suffers what is unacceptable for the sake of fellowship and transformation. In Pauline theology, transforming grace is linked to the cross of Christ. The cross of Christ means that God suffers our sinfulness (Rom 5:8), while we are being transformed. For humanity the cross of Christ means that we have to suffer God's holiness - which means that our sinful nature has to die in God's presence (Rom 6). Death is a painful process. We have to give up what is dear to us, but unacceptable in God's sight.

As in the case of Deuteronomy, God's behavior defines authentic human behavior. God's unconditional acceptance translates into our acceptance of other human beings. This is expressed in the second part of the chapter (Eph 2:11ff). Remember that in Dt 7 the Israelites were expected to drive out the Canaanites on the basis of God's conditional acceptance. In Eph 2 the gentiles are invited into the fold on the basis of God's unconditional acceptance.

As a result, those who have been accepted into God's fellowship, Jews and gentiles alike, are now in fellowship with each other. The law, which always

posed conditions of acceptance between Jews and gentiles, has been suspended as a condition of acceptance. The wall of separation has been dismantled (Eph 2:13-15). We all belong to God's household, not just the Jews, but also the gentiles. A new united humanity has been created in Christ. This new community is God's dwelling place, not the temple in Jerusalem (Eph 2:19ff).

### **Is salvation earthly well-being or heavenly bliss?**

There is another interesting shift. In Deuteronomy, God's acceptance or non-acceptance manifested itself in the form of well-being or misfortune in this world and within our lives. However, the contention of Deuteronomy that blessings were the reward for righteousness, while predicaments were the punishment for sins, did not always make sense in practice.

On the contrary, the Jews made the disconcerting discovery that it is often the villains who lead a good life and their victims who have to suffer. The good fortunes of the pagan empires and the misfortunes of those Jews who had tried their best to live up to God's expectations, were a cause of great affliction. Moreover, there were wicked Jews who prospered and virtuous Jews who suffered. Was the prophetic and deuteronomic idea that God punished the wicked and rewarded the righteous wrong after all?

In later Judaism we find some bitter rejections of the deuteronomic explanation of suffering. The most powerful of these can be found in the book of Job. In the opening chapters, suffering is explained as a test conducted by Satan, who is God's public prosecutor. The closing chapters ascribe suffering to the majestic will of the Creator, who is too great for us to understand. But in the body of the book Job appeals to Yahweh's justice. He is convinced that he is blameless and tortured for no reason. It is Yahweh who has to explain himself.

Bolstered by expectations found in the Parsist (Persian) religion that world history as a whole drifted towards a giant battle between good and evil, the Jewish faith in Yahweh's justice turned forward into the future. The great 'Day of the Lord', the day of vengeance and retribution, would surely come. There would be a final reckoning. And if this did not happen in this life, then it would surely happen in another. Death cannot possibly frustrate the justice of a God who was himself the Giver and Taker of life.

These considerations led to the expectation that all people, whether living or deceased, would face Yahweh's judgment seat. Then the righteous would shine like the sun, while the evildoers would be thrown into a fiery pool. The idea behind the latter statement was that evil would be eradicated forever. This is the origin of the conviction that the dead will rise and that there will be a new heaven and earth in which justice reigns (2 Peter 3:13).

Initially there was nothing spiritual about this expectation. But under the impact of Hellenistic patterns of thought, 'resurrection from the dead' became the 'immortality of the soul'; the word 'forever' changed into the word 'eternal' and

the sudden and final cremation of the evildoers in a fiery pool became their never-ending torment in the fires of hell.

Note that the expectation of a resurrection from the dead to face judgment only emerged after the exile. Pre-exilic Israel knew nothing of a life after death. But by the time of the New Testament, the expectation of a last judgment dominated the scene. "Salvation" was no longer expressed in terms of our fortunes on earth, but defined as an escape from eternal condemnation. Under such presuppositions nothing mattered much in this world - the ultimate goal was to pass the test of the last judgment. It was fear of the hereafter that motivated one to do one's best in this world.

However, we also find another version of the last judgment in the biblical tradition. Older texts in the Old Testament had maintained that death itself was the "wages of sin". For them death was final. So death was taken to be the ultimate punishment for sin. Paul developed this idea further. According to him, we all have to die because we have all sinned. Death - the final and total rejection of the creature by its Creator - is already the punishment for sin. It cannot be surpassed; it is identical with the last judgment.

So if by God's grace we should rise after death, this would not be a resurrection to face judgment, but the gift of a new life. It would be an entirely new creation, brought about through the power of God's Spirit and resulting in a righteous human being. Now it was no longer fear that motivated the believers, but the joyful anticipation of ultimate salvation.

### **Bringing God's future down to earth**

Does this not boil down to the theology of a 'pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die' that is so often ridiculed by critics of the Christian faith? No, it is not. According to Paul eschatological hope has a profound impact on our lives in this world. In faith we identify with the death of Christ to the flesh and with his resurrection into the new life of the Spirit. With that we anticipate our own deaths and our own resurrection, thus leading to a new life already now. In the power of the Spirit we are being transformed into the image of Christ, who is the image of God (2 Cor 3:18; 4:4). And this has consequences in all spheres of life.

By the time Ephesians was written, however, Christians had begun to be disillusioned. Christ had not returned in glory to transform the world, as suggested by the apocalyptic frame of reference of the early church. All kinds of explanations were given: God is patient; the mission must first reach the ends of the earth; the return would come like a thief in the night, etc. Luke placed the Christ-event not at the end of world history, but in its middle, followed by the age of mission. John's gospel saw the last judgment happening in the encounter with the risen Christ here and now through the Spirit (Jn 3:18ff; 5:22-25).

The author of Ephesians had his own way of coping with the apparent non-arrival of Christ. He moved the glorious enthronement of Christ from time to space, from the eschatological end to the heavens above. Christ is *already*

enthroned in the heavens (Eph 1:20ff) and we are enthroned with him. Correspondingly, he moved the idea of dying to the flesh and rising into a new life from the point of physical death to the point of conversion. We were dead in sin until we found Christ, he says, and since then we live with Christ in his glory. According to Colossians, another Deutero-Pauline letter, our true lives are *already* located in heaven. This fact only has to be revealed (Col 3:1ff).

It is not what happens beyond death that matters, therefore, but what happens here and now. As mentioned above, we find a similar thought in John's Gospel, where it is said that those who accept Christ have eternal life already; those who reject him, have been condemned already (e.g. Jn 3:16-21; Jn 5:24). Ironically, even the parable of the Last Judgment in Mat 25:31ff bears out this approach: what matters is exclusively what we have done to those with whom Christ identified himself here on earth.

### **Heavy conflicts**

In all these cases the emphasis was placed on God's grace, that is, God's unconditional, redeeming acceptance of the unacceptable. The conditionality of Deuteronomy had been abandoned. All this should have been clear enough. Alas, it was not - not even in New Testament times. People stuck to the law as a condition of acceptance. Paul had a showdown with Peter in Antioch on this point (Gal 2:11ff). He also battled with those who wanted to impose the Jewish law on the gentile converts (Gal 3; Phil 3).

There are documents in the New Testament that reflect Jewish-Christian loyalty to the law, especially the Gospel of Matthew and James. Paul had his peace with that, as long as it was not imposed on non-Jews as a condition of acceptance (1 Cor 7:17-20; Gal 3:28). But when it functioned as a condition of acceptance by God, or by God's people, Paul maintained, Christ was forfeited and he had died in vain (cf Gal 2:21; 3:27f; 5:4).

Even among Paul's own disciples legalism (as we call the insistence on the fulfilment of moral precepts) slowly gained the upper hand. The Pastoral Letters (Tim and Tit) still quote some of Paul's insights, but their emphasis lies heavily on moral excellence and institutionalized offices. It is strange how the two always go together: where you find an emphasis on establishment of offices, you also find an emphasis on keeping the law. Institutionalized authorities are seldom too enthusiastic about personal freedom and responsibility for their subordinates. They prefer law and order. That is what happened in the further history of the early church.

## Section II: The Reformation

### The medieval background

It did not take long before the legal approach in our relationship with God re-established itself in the church even more fiercely than it had been in Judaism before. The church inherited Roman culture with its legal systems and structures of authority and the quest for power and money among the leaders of the church enhanced the process. Hierarchies established themselves, culminating in the bishop of Rome, who eventually claimed to be the earthly representative of Christ, the heavenly king (*vicarius Christi*). We come back to that in chapter 7.

Authoritarian systems usually serve collective interests. Believers were subjected to an ever-growing code of doctrinal and moral precepts. To scare subordinates into submission, the last judgment and its aftermath was again placed in the centre of attention. For all intents and purposes the Pauline gospel of justification by grace accepted in faith, rather than by good works, had been lost. Earthly needs and concerns receded into the background. The demand for social justice and freedom of conscience was decried as insubordination to divine truth and authority.

The agonies that would await transgressors in hell were pictured in drastic terms. The main portals to many great medieval cathedrals in Europe are still adorned with a depiction of the Last Judgment, often with gruesome details of terrified sinners being dragged by gleeful devils into the eternal fire. This is how you were supposed to enter the church - conscious of the horrors of hell awaiting you! Because even righteous people were not without blemish, it was claimed that we would all have to undergo a purification process called the "purgatory". Those recognized by the Church as "saints" were the only exceptions, because they were already deemed to be perfect.

Inside the church the clergy dispensed some relief from fear of the approaching torment for those who were ready to sacrifice their money, their time, their energies, their freedom, their sexuality, or their food. If you were serious about your salvation, it was claimed, you could buy off some of the agonies awaiting you in purgatory. You could go into a monastery. You could pray the Lord's Prayer and the Ave Maria over and over again like a faulty CD. You could pay for the mass to be read a few hundred times on your behalf or on behalf of a deceased person. You could appeal to the merits of the saints. You could collect merits for yourself or for others by donating large amounts of money, or by doing other 'good deeds'.

### Luther rediscovers the Good News

Today the prospect of going to hell no longer frightens the average person on the street, even if some evangelists try to rekindle the horror. But during the outgoing Middle Ages, the fear of hell was extraordinary. Many ordinary

believers went into frenzy. Anxious about their eternal fate, they forsook worldly possessions, moved into monasteries, flagellated themselves, or went on crusades. By the end of the Middle Ages the fear of hell and its abuse by unscrupulous leaders dominated the religious scene. The situation became so bad that many alert persons felt that both the church and the society had gone astray and needed some drastic transformation.

Luther too labored heavily under the fear of the last judgment. Without that background, his theology can hardly be understood. He was so traumatized by the prospect of eternal condemnation that he left his designated profession as a lawyer, joined a monastery and castigated himself severely. But he could not find peace. His most terrible affliction was the biblical commandment to love God with all one's heart, mind and strength. Being a man of deep integrity, Luther was unable to fool himself into believing that he loved God. On the contrary, he realized that he hated God. He could not help seeing God as a cruel tyrant who expected something from us that we could not deliver and then meted out horrific punishments to the defaulters.

There was one phrase that alarmed him more than anything else on earth: the word *iustitia Dei* found in Romans 1:17 of the Latin Bible (the Vulgate). It can be translated as 'righteousness of God' or as 'justice of God'. Luther naturally assumed that this word referred to God's incorruptible justice in the Last Judgment. He would have to condemn the sinner who had not attained the righteousness required by God and there was no escape.

Then Luther discovered that Rom 1:17 did not refer to the justice with which God would apply the law to our lives in the last judgment. It also did not refer to the righteousness God demanded of us. Rather, it referred to the righteousness with which God wanted to bring about our righteousness. It was not a demand, but God's free gift of grace! When he realised that, his whole life changed. Suddenly gloom and anxiety turned into gratitude and hope. He had found the New Testament meaning of the word "good news". It is this personal experience that laid the foundation of the entire Protestant movement.

What precisely was God's gift of grace? It was Christ's own righteousness that God allowed us to share; a righteousness that was not achieved by us, but by Christ; a righteousness that did not belong to us, but to Christ, thus an 'alien righteousness' (*iustitia aliena*). To those who believed in Christ, God granted participation in the new life of Christ in fellowship with God.

### **The ensuing conflict**

What a discovery! It changed the entire content and character of theology. It changed the lives of countless people. It led to endless spiritual, theological, ecclesial and political conflicts. It literally changed the course of Western history.

In Protestantism justification by grace accepted in faith (*iustificatio sola gratia sola fide*) became the foundational faith assumption on which everything

else was built. In contrast, the Council of Trent restated the Catholic position. Expressed in a nutshell, it says that God's grace, administered by the episcopal office, made it possible for humans to embark on a journey of sanctification, at the end of which righteousness would be achieved and the human being would be proclaimed by God to be just. Note that ecclesial authority is foundational for this approach.

Heavy conflicts ensued, not only between theologians, but also in the secular sphere. Almost immediately a debate began to rage between scholars, church leaders, monasteries, knights, princes and kings, the emerging capitalist elites in the free cities, the peasants and even among artists and musicians. Luther was excommunicated by the church and banned by the state. His teachings were forbidden, his books burnt, his followers threatened with the heavy hand of the inquisition. Alliances were formed on both sides, diplomatic games were played, wars were fought. If there had not been a few princes who protected the nascent movement by force of arms, it would have been smothered just as other reform movements had been smothered before.

It should be mentioned that in 1998, after long negotiations, Lutherans and Catholics arrived at a "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification", according to which it was no longer necessary for the two stances to condemn each other as heretical. This is most gratifying. But one should not overlook the fact that, for the Catholic position, it is still ecclesial authority that forms the basis of the church, while in Protestantism the basis of the church is the gospel of grace accepted in faith. This has far-reaching consequences for the understanding of the church, church unity, the ministry, the sacraments, the Scriptures, the status of the tradition and even for the truth as such. We deal with some of these issues in other chapters.

### **Calvin: the functions of law and gospel in continuity**

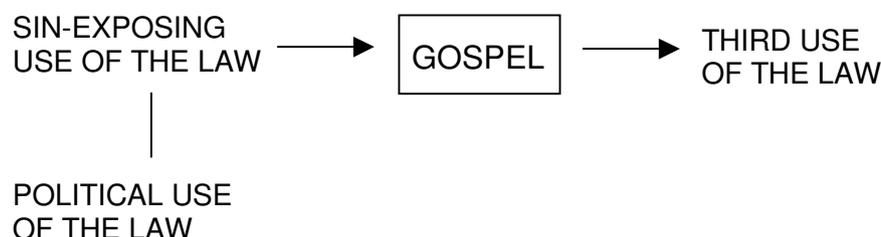
More subtle conflicts soon emerged within the Protestant fold. The Reformers had much in common, but they also differed substantially in their application of the new insights. Soon Protestantism had split into two streams, Lutheran and Reformed. On the Lutheran side the relationship between humans and God was based on freedom and responsibility - though Lutheranism was by no means consistent in this stance. In the Reformed camp, fulfilling God's commandments remained the central requisite for this relationship. We shall begin with the latter.

The Reformed stance can be observed most clearly in the theologies of Calvin and his successor in Geneva, Theodore Beza. It can also be found in the so-called Protestant Orthodoxy of the 17th century from where it spread throughout Protestantism. In this approach the law is taken to be the foundation of our relationship with God, just as it had been in Judaism. Human beings are meant to move within prescribed patterns of behavior as defined by clear-cut

precepts found in the Scriptures. The gospel is meant to make it possible for us to fulfil the law.

Calvin distinguishes three functions of the law. The first function is to expose and attack our sins. In theology this function is called the sin-exposing or theological use of the law (*usus elencticus legis* or *usus theologicus legis*). The second function is to keep order in society. In theology this function is called the civil or political use of the law (*usus civilis legis* or *usus politicus legis*).

The function of the gospel is to forgive our sins so that we can turn a new page. After the gospel has done its work, the law comes in once again. Therefore theology calls this function the third use of the law (*tertius usus legis*). The third function of the law is to provide us with directions in our new lives in obedience to God. Calvin considered this to be the most important function of the law.



### **Luther: the functions of law and gospel in dialectical relationship**

For Luther the Word of God is characterized not by continuity, but by a dialectic between the functions of 'law and gospel'. For Luther the law is indeed 'Word of God', but it has a preliminary and limited function, namely to keep sin in check, expose evil, accuse and condemn. It cannot redeem. Its work comes to an end when Christ has taken shape in our lives.

Therefore Luther recognized only two functions of the law. The first was to maintain order in a sinful world - and for Luther this was very important. The second was to expose sin and evil. (It does not make much difference that for Luther the 'civil' or 'political' function came first, while for Calvin the sin-exposing function came first). The function of the gospel was to forgive repentant sinners. So far Luther and Calvin agreed, but what happens next?

According to Luther genuine believers are in Christ. They know God's heart. The law demands righteousness, but cannot bring it about, not even after we have come to believe in Christ. Only our participation in the new life of Christ can make us righteous. As a result, there is no need for a third use of the law after the gospel had done its work. Calvin did not follow Luther in this respect; nor did Melancthon, Luther's closest coworker (Steinmetz 2001:52).

Moses teaches (the law), but he himself cannot fulfil it, nor give it to others to fulfil. If it is really to happen and be done, *the Son of God is needed with his fullness ...*" (SL XII 849f; my emphasis).

What does it mean that Christ is needed with his fullness? Here Luther distinguishes between two aspects. First, grace means that, in Christ, God accepts us into his fellowship and willingly suffers our sinfulness. Our sins are forgiven. Forgiveness means that the forgiving party 'gives' something. To make fellowship possible, he suffers what the sinner should have suffered. That is what the cross of Christ signifies. Second, in his fellowship, God grants us participation in the new life of the risen Christ through the power of the Spirit.

For the sake of him who has pure grace with God, we are also accepted by grace, although we have not yet attained full obedience to the law. Then after having been given that comfort and grace, we receive the Holy Spirit through his power, so that *we do not just have empty letters within us*, but attain truth and begin to fulfil God's commandment - but in such a way that *we scoop out of his fullness* and drink out of this spring (Sermon on 2 Cor 3:4-11 par 31. SL XII 849f. My emphasis).

### **The good fruits of a good tree**

So according to Luther, the gospel indeed forgives our sins, but that is not all. The gospel also plants a new tree in us that yields good fruit. The good tree is the new life of Christ. Although in our own, old lives we remain sinners, we are privileged to share in the new life of Christ. As mentioned above, this is a righteousness that is alien to us because it belongs to Christ (*iustitia aliena*). Yet it is effective in that it transforms our lives into that of Christ. In fact, it is Christ, the good tree, which yields good fruit in us and through us.

The intention of Karl Barth's statements that the law is the 'form of the gospel', meaning its concrete manifestations in the processes of life, and that this form must be derived from the contents of the gospel (Barth 1968:71ff), is akin to Luther's stance. But Luther would never call the fruits of the gospel a law because any law enslaves, accuses and condemns us (*lex semper accusat*).

The Word of God is the very first thing. This is followed by faith, faith is followed by love. Love then does all kinds of good works. (*On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, MA 2:175).

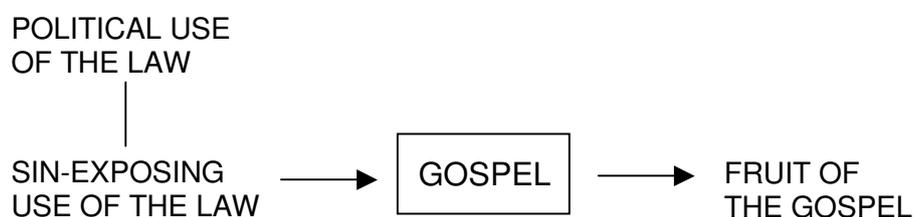
Salvation is indeed based on righteousness. Lutherans tend to forget that. However, it is not our own righteousness, based on the fulfilment of the law, which saves, but the righteousness of Christ in which we are allowed to participate. The gospel of Christ creates faith; faith then creates love, love creates genuinely good works. The law cannot do that; so it comes to an end. In which sense? The intention of the law (to express and bring about God's will) is fulfilled in Christ. It is fulfilled in Christ because it leads to love. The function of the law (to demand, enslave, accuse and condemn) comes to an end in Christ because it has become superfluous.

## The two functions of the law continue to operate

What then is the function of the law in the life of Christians? Christians know that humanity is in sin and that the law is needed to prevent destructive and self-destructive behavior. Being sinners themselves in their own old lives, Christians also need the law even for themselves. But in Luther's theology, the law does not figure a third time; it just continues with its first two functions.

The law continues to keep order in society. It also continues to spell out God's will for us. As such it continues to attack the sin of both unbelievers and believers as far as they are still in sin. These are its first and second functions. As far as believers are in Christ, they need neither. Because believers are never completely in Christ, however, they need the law in both its functions. And of course their sinful social environment needs it as well. So in their freedom Christians subject themselves to the law. Moreover, they take up responsibility for morality, public administration, justice, politics and the economy.

To me it seems that Luther followed Paul more closely than the other Reformers. Note that in Gal 5:13-26 Paul distinguishes between the *works* of the flesh and the *fruit* of the Spirit. Works we do ourselves, falling back on our fleshly resources. Fruit are brought forth in us by the Spirit of Christ. We are being transformed into the image of Christ who is the image of God, that is, God's instrument of redemption (2 Cor 3:18; 4:4).



## Freedom as the basis of our relationship with God

Let me use two pictures to demonstrate the difference between the approaches of Calvin and Luther. In Calvin believers are like a train, which is meant to move along pre-installed rails. If it jumps the rails, it ends up in a ditch and cannot fulfil its purpose. If it cannot be heaved back onto the rails, it has become useless and must be written off. Sin is just like a derailment. If it is not overcome, it must lead to death.

That is where the gospel comes in. The gospel is God's emergency measure that puts the train back onto the rails. After that it can continue to run along the rails and fulfil its function. From this picture we can see that for Calvin obedience to the law characterizes the human condition as intended by God. The law is the basis of our relationship with God.

For Luther's approach we have to use another picture. Say an eagle floats effortlessly in the air. He perceives his environment with exceptionally keen eyes. He knows exactly when to dash to the ground and pick up a prey or when to bide his time. This is the kind of disposition God intended for us as human beings. We are supposed to be free. But then, due to an unfortunate accident, or perhaps because it is not careful enough, the eagle hits a power line and breaks his wings. A merciful game warden picks him up, puts his wing into a splint and takes care of him. There he sits and cannot move. But the purpose of the exercise is to get him back into the air as a free bird.

In this picture, sin is also an accident. The splint symbolizes the law. In Luther it is the law that functions as the emergency measure, while in Calvin it is the gospel. The disposition intended by God for the human being is freedom and responsibility, not enslavement by a law. The gospel is symbolized by the care of the warden who does everything in his power to let the eagle regain his freedom. Once the eagle is healed, he is off again into the blue sky.

This picture is not quite appropriate because it suggests that the eagle is healed by his inherent biological processes, not by the game warden. It does not show that it is the health and power of the risen Christ through whom the believers regain their freedom, rather than their own innate possibilities. Every picture has its limits. So let us rather continue with the biblical picture of the tree and the fruit.

This picture suggests that righteousness could be our 'natural' behavior if only we shared in the new life of Christ. Genuine believers are not oppressed, forced to do what they do not fancy, driven by requirements to be fulfilled, haunted by fear and hunted by failure. Fruit are not willed or performed, they just happen, effortless, naturally, because it is the Spirit at work in human existence. Conversely, laws, life styles, or laws which do not subsist or happen in the power of the Spirit of God, "firstly exhaust the consciences, secondly torture the body, because they cannot be kept without great effort, thirdly they devour our assets and possessions" (interpretation of Is 10:1-2; SL VI:221, my translation).

### **Freedom and responsibility**

Both approaches have consequences and some of them are dangerous. The danger of Calvin's approach (and that of Protestant Orthodoxy) is that believers, in their endeavor to please God, become legalistic. Legalism leads to spiritual enslavement. History has borne out this fact. Some offshoots of Calvinism, such as the Puritans, have become as legalistic as Deuteronomy or even worse.

The danger of Luther's approach, on the other hand, is that believers become lax in their lives. God has done everything for their salvation, so there is no need to be overly concerned. Again history has borne this out. Lutherans are certainly much more free in their behavior, but also much too ready to take God's grace for granted. Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran who has paid with his life for his convictions, has attacked this perception of "cheap grace" in no uncertain terms.

Rightly understood, however, Luther's approach leads to freedom and responsibility. For Luther, who was a particularly keen follower of Paul, the basis of our relationship with God was the freedom of the sons and daughters of God. They share the sonship of Christ. In biblical times 'Son of God' was a title of the king (cf Ps 2), because he was considered to be the representative of God on earth. So in Christ believers are also representatives of God on earth. They share the full load of responsibility for God's creation.

As mentioned in chapter 3, Luther wrote a powerful treatise on *The Freedom of the Christian* in which he makes two fundamental statements: (a) Believers are free from everybody and everything; (b) believers are servants of everybody and everything. We are servants not because we are enslaved, but because we share God's redemptive intentions.

Where responsibility reigns, there can be no lack of discipline. As far as they are in Christ, they do not need a law, as Luther would say, because they know the mind of God and live accordingly. Expressed in my own words, believers share in God's creative authority, God's redeeming love and God's comprehensive vision for the world.

In as far as that is not the case, they still need the law to expose and attack their sin. Our 'old Adam' must be drowned on a daily basis in our baptism, Luther would say, so that the new person can emerge (Small Catechism on baptism). There is absolutely no room for complacency. To summarize: not the law, but freedom and responsibility mark our relationship with God:

**Freedom:** The law enslaves, while the gospel liberates. Under the law we are minors, under the gospel we are adults. But this happens on the strength of the new life of Christ in fellowship with God which believers are privileged to share. It is when we participate in the new life of Christ that we are adults, not when we continue in our own sinful lives.

**Responsibility:** Adults are characterized not by obedience to parental precepts, but by the concern for the welfare of the family. Christ is the Son of God, that is, God's representative on earth. In Christ we become sons and daughters of God, that is, fellow representatives of God on earth.

### New decalogues

Let us look at responsibility more closely. We have said that for Luther the civil function of the law and the sin-exposing function of the law remain in place when we become believers. However, they do not retain their old nature. Luther assumed that freedom and responsibility have always been the basic intention behind God's commandments (Rom 13:8-10). Therefore the 'fruits of the gospel', that is, our freedom and responsibility before God, must affect the character of the law in its first two functions.

Participating in the authority of Christ as the representatives of God, we are no longer under the law; the law is under us. That means that we are responsible for the formulation of the law. We have to spell out, again and again, what we

consider to be God's will for us and for others in concrete terms. We have to write ever 'new decalogues'.

If we had to lose one of the two, Christ or the law, then we would have to lose the law, not Christ. Because if we have Christ, we can easily make laws and have sound judgment in everything. Indeed, we could make new decalogues, just as Paul does in all his epistles, and Peter, and, most of all, Christ in the Gospel(s). And these decalogues are much clearer than the Decalogue of Moses, just as the face of Christ is clearer than the face of Moses ...

However, because we are not equally in the Spirit, and because the flesh is hostile to the Spirit, and (to counter) the Enthusiasts, it is necessary to stick to the certain commandments and the Scriptures of the Apostles, so that the church is not torn apart (1535 WA XXXIX/I 47f. H 94).

And indeed, this is what Luther did. Using the Ten Commandments as a basic grid, Luther wrote hundreds of pages on specific ethical guidelines and moral precepts. It is amazing how perceptive, comprehensive and specific Luther's examples are. Apart from his two Catechisms, his treatise, *On good works* is the most famous example of writing 'new decalogues'. Here he does not discard the biblical decalogue but interprets it in quite a fresh way. I strongly recommend this treatise.

This also means that believers, in trying to figure out what the redeeming will of God might be in any new situation, do not look up what the Bible says, but use their God-given powers of observation and reason. In doing that, they may remember what the Bible says about a particular issue and take that into consideration, but they may also listen to classical Greek or Roman authors.

It is useful to consult the wisdom of the fathers, but final responsibility rests with us. We are to judge, says Paul, whether something is good or bad (Rom 14:5). We are to judge the world, and even angels! (1 Cor 6:2f). We are to judge the truth of what the apostle says (1 Cor 10:15). We are sons and daughters of God and brothers and sisters of Christ. Participating in his sovereignty, we are sovereign. The followers of Calvin, in contrast, would be tied much more closely to what the Bible says about moral patterns of behavior.

### **Is the 'discipleship of Christ' gospel or law?**

So it is the gospel that redeems, liberates, motivates and empowers, while the law can only demand, accuse, enslave and condemn. Luther is keenly aware of the fact that even the 'discipleship of Christ' can turn into an enslaving law because that is what he himself has experienced. For Luther it would be a grievous misunderstanding, a 'really bad habit' as he said, to interpret the example of Jesus or the exhortation found in the New Testament as a 'new law'. They are indications of what Christian love means in concrete terms; if we treat them as a new law, we remain pagans!

Hold fast, my brother, to God's order, that is, that the mortification of the old human being, in which we follow the example of Christ ... should not come first ... but last. Nobody should try to kill his flesh, bear the cross and follow the example of Christ, before he has first become a Christian and through faith has Christ in his heart as an eternal treasure. This one does not obtain through works ...but through hearing the gospel (WA XVIII 136/9. H 76).

Note this remarkable passage! When you try to follow Christ, without participating in his new life, you might as well try to fulfil the law. In fact discipleship becomes a new law. You will again be enslaved. You will again despair because of your failures. In fact, the example of Christ belongs to the sin-exposing function of the law. It is the Spirit who grants participation in the new life of Christ and empowers us to do what Christ does through us. I wish that more committed followers of Christ would take that to heart. There would be less legalism, fewer agonies of conscience, more joy and more mature decision making among Christians.

### **Good works done in gratitude?**

Luther's concept of the "fruit of the gospel", if taken seriously, also does not agree with another concept widely found in Protestantism. We do good works, it is maintained, not to gain salvation, but to express our gratitude for the salvation which we have received by grace alone. This sounds very Protestant, but in fact it is not. The works done in gratitude to God are again something that we should do for God, drawing on our own spiritual or moral resources, an obligation we have to fulfil. But that is not what Paul and Luther intended.

To understand the character of gratitude, let us look at ordinary life. Somebody has rendered us an important and excellent service; we feel much indebted; it is quite embarrassing, indeed humiliating to receive such a gift. To restore the balance, we feel a strong urge to do something in return. With that we have regained our dignity. Equal dignity demands reciprocity. But this is not what happens between God and us. Due to sin, we have lost our dignity before God. It is God's undeserved acceptance into his fellowship, not our gratitude, which restores that dignity.

Good works done in gratitude can become legalistic if they are something we think we must do for God. Doing something for God, even if it were only praise and thanks, is not the same as God doing something through us for others. And that is what the concept of the fruit of the Spirit signifies. We do not pay back a debt to God; we are involved in God's own work for the benefit of others. The direction does not go upwards from us to God, but downwards from God through us to others. When that is clear, gratitude can become a joyful acknowledgement of God's gift; a gift meant to enrich others by flowing through us.

God's blessings must flow from one person to another and be shared by all ... From Christ who has accepted us into his life as though he were what we are,

they flow to us. From us they flow to those who need them - so comprehensively that I with my own faith and righteousness must stand in for my neighbour before God, covering his sins, taken them upon me and acting as though they were my own, just as Christ has done for us (1520: The freedom of a Christian, par 29).

### **Justified in Christ while still a sinner**

The fact that the righteousness we gain in Christ is an "alien" righteousness (because it belongs to Christ, not to us), means that a continuous battle rages between our old sinful lives, which are prone to sin, and the new life of Christ, which overcomes our sin. This struggle is expressed by the famous (or infamous) phrase that a believer is "at the same time justified (in Christ) and still a sinner (in himself)" (*simul iustus et peccator*).

Protestantism has spelt out the implications of this insight for the nature of the church. It says that the church is a mixed body (*ecclesia permixta*) because it is composed of believers and unbelievers; or an invisible church (*ecclesia invisibile*) because we do not know which members are in faith and how much faith the members have; or the church is constantly in need of reformation (*ecclesia semper reformanda*) because no form is ever perfect; or a struggling church (*ecclesia militans*) because it goes through suffering, affliction and temptation. Only in God's future will the church be triumphant (*ecclesia triumphans*).

The Catholic Church has rejected both the concept of *simul iustus et peccator* and its application to the church. Its idea that the church of Christ, in the person of its official representative, the pope, is infallible at least as far as its official doctrinal and ethical formulations are concerned, is foreign to Protestantism.

### **God's twofold rule**

One can extend this insight even to the world. Here Luther maintained that God rules the world in two ways: with 'his right arm' he rules within our hearts through the proclamation of law and gospel; with his 'left arm' he rules in society through institutions and offices. The first is the task of the church, the second is the task of the state and other secular agencies. The church needs the power of the state to live in peace; the state needs the prophetic ministry of the church to keep on track.

This is the famous (or infamous) two-kingdoms doctrine - one of the most widely misunderstood and contested of Luther's doctrines. We shall deal with it in chapter 11. Here it suffices to note that the two-kingdoms doctrine was never meant to signify a dualistic approach, as is so often alleged. For Luther it is the same God who rules in both dimensions of life and whose redemptive intentions have been revealed in Christ.

It is true that Luther made a distinction between private life and public office. But true Christians are motivated by love in both the private and the public realms. While private persons should suffer and forgive the sins of others, love demands that those who occupy public positions protect the lives and

property of people entrusted to their care. Evil must be exposed and punished; there is no place for long-suffering where the well-being of others is at stake. But Christians cannot be caring in their private lives and ruthless in their public offices.

It is also not true that in the church only the gospel was applicable, while in the public arenas of life only the law was applicable. On the contrary, the *structures* of the church belonged to God's rule on the left, and the *motivations* of the state officials belonged to the rule of God on the right. Nor did Luther ever teach that, while Christians honor God in their spiritual lives, in economics and politics they are entitled to serve their private or collective interests.

All these perceptions have been common in forms of spirituality influenced by Lutheranism. But they are based on an aberration of Luther's approach. The true intention of this doctrine is to insist that we need God's redeeming work both in our hearts and in the structures of society. The motivation of redeeming love can take on harsh and hard forms when confronted with the powers of evil - whether in our hearts or in society. If you get cancer, a doctor may have to cut it out. That is a painful exercise, but it is necessary for your own sake.

### **The ethical norm**

At this point another difference between the Reformers comes into play that we have already briefly touched upon. Because Calvin is more geared to a pre-formulated law, found in the Scriptures, the Calvinist tradition has also been more rigid, whether in private life or in public life. In the Reformed tradition there is a constant reference to the Scriptures. Luther, in contrast, did not see the Scriptures as a book of information concerning the will of God for all situations of life, but as a witness to God's redemptive intentions. To know what action a particular task or calamity demands, we should be motivated by love and use our God-given common sense, rather than searching the Bible for instructions.

In a very misleading phrase, Luther said that the Bible “does not belong to the city hall”. What Luther wanted to say is that the Bible is not a reference book for political decision-making. You do not look up the will of God for every concrete case in the Bible. Least of all do you abuse it as a sort of oracle, taking the next best verse that comes to mind as an indication of God's will for a pressing situation. Confronted with the necessity to take decisions, you use your God-given powers of observation and reason, figure out the advantages and disadvantage of each option, take a brave decision and go ahead with it, trusting that God will be with you.

### **Was Luther a situation ethicist?**

Of course, this does not only refer to politics. Whenever they are faced with moral decisions, Christians are guided, not by a pre-formulated code of conduct, but by a new motivation which is derived from participation in the new life of

Christ in fellowship with God. Yet, Luther's stance is not quite the same as that of modern situation ethics, such as that of Joseph Fletcher. In the view of the latter, there is only one rule, namely love. Everything else depends on the situation. In extreme situations love may demand that you lie, steal, or kill; it all depends.

Situation ethics has a point here, but these are extreme circumstances. We must have values and norms that are accepted in society and internalized in our consciences, otherwise chaos will take over. You cannot, in every single decision, argue out what line of action would be the most loving thing to do under the circumstances. A society must be guided by common patterns of behavior. Institutions must follow rules and procedures. Technology must be meticulous, otherwise airliners will come crashing down and computers will not work. Of course, Situation Ethics would agree with that. Yet situation ethics tends to overtax the capacity of the human being when faced with concrete decisions.

According to Luther we indeed need formulated guidelines, rules and norms. However, as mentioned above, situations change and we constantly have to draw up "new decalogues". In drawing them up, we do not have to depend solely on our own judgment. We can also be greatly assisted by the collective experience and wisdom of humanity at large. Here, Luther says, we can consult the Old Testament, but we can also consult classical antiquity. The Old Testament is only the Jewish counterpart to the *Sachsenspiegel* (= Saxon mirror, a medieval code of law for the use of princes).

With his contemporaries Luther referred to this collective wisdom of humankind as 'natural law'. To the princes he wrote the following about a particular legal case:

You must handle the question of unlawful possession, whether in secret or in public, in such a way that love and natural law remain the primary consideration. For if you pronounce judgment according to love, you will be able to settle and dismiss all legal cases without trouble and without legal textbooks. But if you lose sight of love and natural law you will never succeed in pleasing God with your judgment ... (Luther 1523a part 3, par 4).

### **The lesser evil**

Luther was also very conscious of the fact that life is messy and that it is not always possible to find the ideal way out. Often enough we are faced with only two alternatives, both of which are detrimental. In many such situations you will be faced with a choice - not between good and evil, but between a lesser and a greater evil. As Luther keenly observed, there are situations where you will become guilty whatever you do.

The group to which Dietrich Bonhoeffer belonged, for instance, knew that it was a sin to assassinate Hitler. But they believed that they would allow a much greater evil to happen if they allowed Hitler's tyranny to continue unopposed. Had they succeeded, millions of deaths and unfathomable destruction could have been avoided during the last months of World War II.

In such situations, Luther maintains, it does not help to withdraw into some pre-formulated commandment, ostensibly revealed in Scripture. It also does not help to withdraw from the decision altogether into your private sphere. It also does not help to get your clues from some secular ideology. For better or for worse, you are supposed to be an instrument of God's redemptive purposes, whether in your private or your public responsibilities.

So when you have analysed the situation carefully, when you have established the best line of action to the best of your insight and ability, "sin courageously and believe even more courageously" (*pecca fortiter, crede fortior*). If you take up responsibility in this world, your moral conscience will not always remain without blemish. Christ too did things that his contemporaries considered to be immoral. In the end it is redeeming love that counts, not to keep our moral garments clean.

### **Let us summarize**

Looking back over the argument we can observe three distinct characteristics of the Lutheran position: (a) While the law demands righteousness, the gospel grants participation in the righteousness of Christ. Both are necessary, but the law is superseded by the gospel in that the latter actually fulfils God's will in us that the former cannot do. (b) The nature of God's will changed from a pre-formulated code of conduct, whether found in the Scriptures or in ecclesial legislation, to the freedom and responsibility of mature sons and daughters of God who participate in the authority of God. (c) Freedom and responsibility imply that the contents of the law can be changed and have to be changed as times and situations change.

#### ***What do you think?***

1. *Do you search for God's will in difficult situations of life, or do you take your own decisions in responsibility before God?*
2. *To which extent are a democratic system and a free economy based on the principle of unconditional acceptance and to which extent do they pose conditions for acceptance?*
3. *How would you respond to the following arguments:(a) "To change a person or the society through unconditional acceptance is a pipe dream. If everybody were allowed to go to university regardless of their competence, it would be the end of all academic achievements." (b) "If all citizens were given the same income irrespective of their output, we would all be poor. The principle of justice demands that those who do their best be rewarded and those who abuse their freedom be punished."*

### Further reading

Luther 1520: On the freedom of a Christian.  
 Luther 1520: On good works.  
 Althaus 1966:224ff; 251ff.  
 Shaull 1991:25ff.  
 Ebeling 1970:110ff; 125ff; 141ff; 159ff.  
 Atkinson 1983:111.  
 Pinomaa 1963:61ff; 79ff.  
 Forde 1969: chapters IX and XI.  
 Maimela 1984: chapters 7 and 8.  
 Barth 1968:71ff (gospel and law).  
 Tappert 1959: 558-568; 71.  
 Braaten 1983: chapter 6.  
 McGrath 1999:101-131 (historical background).

### Section II: Relevance

It is rather unfortunate that, both in Paul's letters and in Luther's theology, the gospel is expressed in legal terms: justification by grace accepted in faith rather than by fulfilling the law. The gospel is far more accessible if it is formulated in communal terms. As indicated in the previous chapter, the most powerful example of a communal expression of the gospel is the parable of the two lost sons in Lk 15:11-32 (usually called the 'parable of the prodigal son').

There are two brothers and a father. The younger brother absconds with half of the possessions of the clan and squanders them senselessly. Then he returns to the father and offers himself as a laborer. According to ancient family law he should be disavowed by the family head and cast out of the clan. At the very least the son should have been disciplined and required to make up for his misdeeds before being re-accepted.

But in his joy to be reunited with his son, the father suspends the family law, accepts him back into the family and throws a party for him. Conditional acceptance makes way for unconditional acceptance. The dividing wall of the law is broken down (Eph 2:14). His dignity as a son of the father is restored (symbolized by the ring) and his life is changed (symbolized by the new garments).

The elder brother, however, who has been meticulous in his obedience (good works), insists on the validity of the family law. He is certainly entitled to do so. But in doing so, he is out of step with his father's redemptive intentions. It is now the elder brother who is "lost" to the father, in spite of his moral excellence. And the father goes out and begs him to come in.

What a wonderful way of expressing the life-giving gospel and its consequences in contrast to the life-destroying rigidity of the law! The gospel of

justification by grace, rather than through fulfilling the works of the law, is here expressed in narrative terms as *God's unconditional, suffering, transforming acceptance of the unacceptable into his fellowship*.

The significance of the cross of Christ lies in the fact that, in Christ, God suffers our unacceptability. Those whom God has accepted into his fellowship, although they are unacceptable to him, will find themselves in fellowship with others who have also been accepted. They cannot now put up conditions of acceptance for those who are unacceptable to God or to themselves. They will have to share in the cross of Christ or exclude themselves from God's fellowship. Acceptance is a costly exercise. We are meant to "bear each other's burdens", even to bear each other as burdens.

Once we have formulated the gospel in these terms, it makes profound sense. Psychology knows that parents have to accept a wayward child first, before they can hope to mould its behavior in a positive way. Spouses have to accept each other unconditionally, warts and all, otherwise a promising love relationship cannot last and bear fruit. Cultural and political minorities must be integrated into the main stream of society, otherwise they may become misfits, delinquents, even terrorists. Once we understand that, the relation between law and gospel develops an unheard-of relevance in ordinary life.

### **Our right of existence**

The legal expression of the gospel has an important function, however, which is not always recognized. Justification by grace, not by works, means that God himself, who is the highest authority, affirms our right of existence in spite of the fact that we are failures and sinners. In real life our right of existence is being questioned by discrimination, unemployment, failed examinations, minority ostracism, domestic violence, cultural inadequacies, drought, famine, civil war, stigmatization due to HIV and AIDS, rejection by one's lover, ridicule by one's peers, personal enmities and slights, retrenchments, bankruptcies, disease, old age - and so we can continue.

In all these cases we are rejected, ostracized, marginalized, or despised because we do not fulfil certain expectations. In each case it is a 'law', a set of conditions or demands which we cannot meet and which questions our right to be what we are and to be a part of the community. What a difference would it make if we all decided to join God in his suffering and transforming acceptance of the unacceptable! It would quite literally turn the world upside down.

Affirmation of a person's right of existence and belonging can take many forms. If you share your bread with a hungry person, for instance, you acknowledge that he/she has the same right before God to live and be healthy as you do. The same is true if you care for AIDS patients and orphans, lobby against discriminatory laws, prioritize job creation in business, propagate female emancipation, treat customers and citizens with respect and efficiency, spend money on bursaries, and so on.

Believers who have been accepted by God are meant to become God's instruments of acceptance. If Christians across the board would begin to understand that, the denominational barriers between them would be removed, they would suffer each other, correct each other, enrich each other, and transform each other. Moreover, they would become the light of the world that Christ wanted them to be. They would tolerate (= endure) cultural, economic, political and religious differences, make space for others, look after the interests of the marginalized and be ready to share resources. They would become instruments of God's peace.

### **Section III: Critique**

#### **The legal frame of reference**

As mentioned above, it is unfortunate that Paul and Luther formulated the gospel in legal terms. Their reasons for doing so are quite clear. Both Paul and Luther responded to a spiritual environment steeped in legal assumptions. They used a legal framework to contextualize the gospel. However, the outcome was an abstract and rather incomprehensible formula. How can God proclaim a guilty person to be righteous on the grounds that another person is righteous? To a novice in theology it just does not make sense.

Paul, who was a Pharisee, was eager to bring the gospel to his Jewish peers in a form that would make sense to them. Jews take their clues from the law, especially as it is formulated in Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy presents Judaism with a stark choice: obey and be blessed, or disobey and be cursed (e.g. Dt 30:15ff). God's justice was clear, incorruptible and fierce. It was designed to put fear into our hearts. The Romans too were very proud of the excellence of Roman law and tolerated no insubordination.

Building on some earlier traditions, the gospel of Christ presented a new understanding of God's attitude towards us. God wants to redeem, not to condemn sinners. The sick need the doctor, not the healthy, Jesus said. God wants to find and bring home those who have lost their way. That is what Paul wanted to tell his people. To win them over, he "became as a Jew to the Jews". That was the only way he thought he could participate in the gospel of Christ, because Christ had become a Jew to the Jews (1 Cor 9:19-23).

Luther got his clues from Paul's letter to the Romans. He worked within the legal atmosphere of the Catholic tradition. And so he too quite naturally used legal terminology. Moreover, Luther, Calvin and Beza had studied law before they became theologians. Again the legal framework was used to contextualize the gospel. Contextualizations are indispensable, but also dangerous. Instead of the gospel overcoming wrong views, wrong views can become part of the gospel and undermine it from within. Because God suspends the law in Christ, the legal frame of reference is no longer appropriate to express the gospel.

Indeed the gospel does not make sense in legal terms. This has become particularly clear in later Lutheranism, which spoke of 'forensic' justification (from Latin, *forum* = court of law). The idea was that God, the ultimate Judge, declared a guilty person to be righteous. The basis of this judgment was not that the guilty person was righteous, but that Christ was righteous. That is a peculiar idea. In normal judicial practice a judge finds accused persons innocent (= justifies them) if the charges against them prove to be without substance. In this case, however, the ultimate Judge declares somebody to be just of whom he knows that he/she is guilty, while he condemns someone of whom he knows that he is innocent.

That the sinner is justified because Christ is righteous also does not make sense. A guilty man will not be excused because his wife had maintained the highest moral standards. It is also not possible for his wife to go to prison or die on the gallows on his behalf. So if God justifies the sinner because of the merits of Christ, God cannot be just. He seems to commit a judicial error, or a miscarriage of justice, or blatant corruption. And that is not what one would expect from a Judge who is supposed to possess divine integrity and perfection.

The only appropriate way to understand the legal formula 'justification by grace accepted in faith' is to say that God justifies us because (and as far as) *we participate in the new life of the risen Christ through faith and in the power of the Holy Spirit*. This is precisely what Paul had in mind when he said that "in Christ" there is no condemnation. That is also what Luther had in mind when he spoke of the 'foreign righteousness' of Christ (*iustitia aliena*), in which we are granted participation. It is on the basis of his righteousness at work in us that God justifies, not on the basis of our own sinful beings.

Our own sinful lives continue to be condemned by the law. The fact that we can only be righteous in the eyes of God if, and as far as, we participate in the righteousness of Christ (*iustitia aliena*), implies that our own sinful lives are condemned. In fact, during Luther's time the term *Rechtfertigung* (justification) carried the meaning of executing a sentence, either by flogging or by capital punishment (Bayer 2004:300), a meaning that the term has lost in the mean time.

### **Misconceptions**

We should not be surprised, therefore, that the formulation 'justification by grace, accepted in faith and not on account of our good works' immediately led to grave misconceptions. Both Paul and Luther had to fight on two fronts: against those who were caught up in legalism and against those who abandoned all discipline on the basis of Christian freedom. There were those who were so impressed by the liberating message of Paul that they believed that "all things are allowed" and began to lead offensive lives (1 Cor 10:1ff, 23ff).

Those who defended the law, accused Paul of abandoning God's demand of righteousness, which they saw encapsulated in the Mosaic law. James rejected Paul's gospel of justification by faith rather than by works, as well as Paul's

interpretation of the justification of Abraham (James 2:18-26). The Gospel of Matthew attacked the contention that the law had come to an end in Christ (Mat 5:17ff). Paul had to defend himself over and over again saying that justification by faith did not imply that we allow sin to flourish (Rom 6:1ff; Gal 5:13ff, etc.).

Luther suffered a similar fate because it is at this point that the Catholic Church condemned the Protestant formulation of the gospel most vehemently. The stance of the Council of Trent seemed to make much more sense: God's grace initiates a process of sanctification at the end of which God can justly declare believers to be righteous because their lives have changed. But this again leads to spiritual uncertainty and legalistic tendencies. If we do not manage to bring about our sanctification, even under the canopy of God's grace, we will either have to endure the purgatory, or we will be condemned in the last judgment. But that is not what Paul's doctrine of justification says.

### **Saved through Christ**

It would seem, therefore, that the legal contextualization of the gospel was not altogether successful. There are better alternatives. The question is, if we cannot be declared to be righteous by virtue of the fact that Jesus was righteous, how could the sinlessness of Jesus help us sinners? We have already discussed the communal formulation of the gospel found in the parable of the prodigal son. Paul offers another interesting contextualization. There are two steps:

1. In Christ God exposed himself to sinful humanity and suffered the consequences. Forgiveness is the willingness to suffer what the guilty person should have suffered. The cross of Christ depicts God's willingness to forgive, to bear the burden of our enmity against him, to take over responsibility for our salvation, whatever the cost.

2. Christ can overcome our old sinful lives and draw us into his new life in the power of the Spirit. In Christ God does not only forgive our sins, but he also transforms us. How does this happen? In faith we identify with the death of Christ and so anticipate our own deaths, and we identify with the risen Christ and so anticipate our own resurrection (Rom 6). Luther echoed this:

(Baptism) means that the old Adam within us must be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires through daily remorse and repentance, and again come up and rise a new person, who lives eternally before God in righteousness and purity (Small Catechism on baptism).

Paul says: as far as we identify with Christ's death and with Christ's new life, we are "in Christ", "in the Spirit", "a new creation", or "reborn". As far as that becomes a reality in our lives, we are indeed righteous. For those who are in Christ, there is no condemnation (Rom 8:1ff). That is why Luther said that our righteousness is that of another person (*iustitia aliena*), not our own.

## What is salvation?

As indicated in the previous chapter, the Lutheran formulation of the gospel has another weakness: its underlying concept of salvation. We have inherited this concept from particular trends in post-exilic Judaism. Here salvation was understood as an escape from God's wrath in the last judgment. Again the legal framework was presupposed. This concept of salvation implies an individualized, privatized and spiritualized understanding of our relationship with God.

This was not how the biblical faith originally understood salvation. The Old Testament term for salvation is *shalom*. Although this concept is usually translated as 'peace', its meaning is much wider and can be translated much more adequately with the term 'comprehensive well-being'. Comprehensive well-being is another word for peace with God, the Source and Destiny of reality as a whole. If you had a quarrel with your neighbors, if your marriage broke down, if you got ill, if there was a drought, or if a battle was lost, there was no peace with God. In the New Testament this comprehensive vision of salvation is called the "kingdom of God".

But the Christian tradition has transformed this earthly and inclusive concept of salvation to an otherworldly and private spirituality. Through the sacrifice of the blood of Christ, it is believed, a bodiless soul is reconciled with a worldless God. All problems and predicaments we encounter in connection with our bodies, the community, the society and the natural world have nothing to do with salvation. They are relegated to the sphere of ethics. A clear distinction is made between salvation and "mere well-being". If you are sick with cancer or oppressed by a political system, this does not alter your status as a child of God.

We have to understand that *there is no such God and no such soul*. God is the Source and Destiny of experienced reality as a whole or he does not exist. The soul is the personal centre of a body embedded in a network of social and natural relationships or it does not exist. Sin and evil disturb the relationship between this overarching authority of God and this human person responsible for an entire life world. By necessity, peace with God implies a new human being situated in a new world. An eschatological vision informs and transforms our life here and now profoundly, or it is not worth the paper on which it is written.

Luther was afraid of the last judgment. His concept of salvation concentrated heavily on our situation 'before God' (*coram Deo*). The true object of theology for him was "the guilty and condemned person and the justifying and redeeming God". In his typical robustness he continued:

Whatever is sought outside that area of inquiry or object is totally in error and idle in theology, since in Holy Scripture we expect nothing regarding matters of property, health of the body, or welfare of the state, things given us to manage, and all of which are created ... Thus theology is not related to this life, but belongs to another life than Adam possesses (quoted by Jüngel 1988:16f).

Such radical statements can easily be misunderstood. And I find it quite probable that Luther misunderstood himself at this point, as he did when he posited a radical separation between God’s work (justification) and our work (good works), or between our status before God and before the world. It is true that for Luther ultimately nothing counted but our relationship to God, or rather, God’s relationship to us. However, this fact does not indicate a reduction of his theology to an abstract, purely spiritual relationship to God, but rather a *concentration on the basis of real life in this world*.

Why do I say that Luther misunderstood himself? For him, God was the Source and Destiny of experienced reality as a whole. Our relationship with God was not only questioned by the Mosaic law, our guilty conscience, or God’s wrath in the last judgment, but by any experience of life that seemed to suggest that God had turned against us: enmity, oppression, physical suffering, sudden pangs of fate. Similarly he attributed every adversity and predicament – from the hostility of the pope to the pain of his hemorrhoids – to the devil, and believed that the devil was no match for the redeeming power of Christ.

Because God is the Source of reality, any dangerous environment suggests that God has turned against us. Any human hostility seemingly confronts us with an angry God. If we are not in peace with God, we are not in peace with reality. Similarly, once we are reassured of God’s grace, the quality of experienced reality changes fundamentally. Suffering and adversity become the masks behind which we encounter the loving God. We have dealt with that in chapter 2 and 3.

However, since the advent of Pietism, this *concentration on the basis of reality* has become an *abstraction from reality* into a spiritual sphere that is “not of this world”. With that the gospel loses its relevance for the modern world where political power, economic success, scientific discovery, technological innovation and personal satisfaction are considered characteristics of a life worth living. Modern humans have no sense of a last judgment beyond death; they fear a loss of face among their peers, failure in the competitive game, bankruptcy, incurable disease, violent conflict, crime, and a sense that life passes them by. Has the gospel really nothing to say to these people?

The gospel also completely misses the needs addressed by African Traditional Religion and the African Initiated Churches: social conflict, disturbed family relationships, drought, poverty, disease, infertility, evil spirits, uncanny forces, sorcery, the wrath of ancestors, loss of vitality and death. “The consequence is that a large number of African Christians believe that the church is not interested in their daily misfortunes ... (and) often do not know what to do with their new, attractive religion ... which dismally fails to meet their emotional and spiritual needs” (Maimela 1985:68-71).

Christianity claims to be a redemptive faith. If it is not, it has lost its rationale. It has to overcome spiritualization or become redundant. To regain the comprehensiveness of the biblical concept of salvation, we have to realize that God has a vision for his creation as a whole, the vision of comprehensive well-being: a new body and a new soul, a new community and a new society, a new

heaven and a new earth. And so any deficiency in well-being in any sphere of life becomes the target of God's redemptive concern. Fortunately in many Catholic, Protestant and Evangelical circles the environmental, communal and social dimensions of sin and reconciliation are increasingly being recognized today.