

**CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION  
OF THE GOSPEL**

In the past, missionary work and missiology played a major role in cross-cultural communication. It was the era of the pioneers of missionary work. The vast differences between their own culture and that of the unevangelized peoples occupied the attention of missionaries.

**1 Levelling of Culture**

Since then, especially during the past generation, development accelerated towards one world culture. People don similar clothes, use similar vehicles, have similar jobs, live in similar homes, and serious attempts are made to level economic differences. In South Africa, where cultural differences were strongly accentuated by the SA Government during the forty years from 1948-1988, Black people, and especially the younger generation, reacted negatively towards emphasis on cultural differences, because they associate that with the hated policy of apartheid of a White government.

**2 The Tenacity of the Traditional Culture**

However, when the apparently new culture of Africans is studied, it soon becomes clear that the acculturation is mostly superficial. Admittedly, there is a percentage who has made Western culture their own, but the vast majority of Black people still think in terms of their traditional culture. Deep inside they have not changed. Studies, *e.g.* those of Schutte (1974), Durand (1970), Odendaal *et al* (1959) show that a large percentage members of churches with a western origin, still actively venerate ancestors, fear witchcraft, and in situations of crisis, approach their ancestors rather than Christ.

There are many thousands of independent Black denominations. Most of them are clearly syncretistic, and this indicates that the gospel in many cases did not penetrate into the hearts of Black people.

Add to this the fact that a large percentage of trained Black theologians, especially from Anglican and Roman Catholic sources, but also from other large established denominations, openly encourage the veneration of ancestors, and it becomes clear that the old African world view and concepts of God have not been replaced by Biblical truths. Southern Africa is, therefore, still a region where much cross-cultural communication of the Gospel will be necessary.

**3 The Unreached Billions**

When we look further than South Africa, it appears that, despite the marvellous expansion of the Gospel, there are still nearly three billion people, representing approximately six thousand cultural groups, which have not been in contact with the Gospel. That is, they have no Christian churches which can preach the Gospel to their own peoples and those who share their culture. It is estimated that there is in Africa and Asia approximately two billion persons who have never heard the Gospel. In Irian Jaya alone (the Western half of the large island New-Guinea) there are 380 language groups in whose language the gospel has not yet been preached (Winter 1975:227). There is also at least two thousand languages (note: not dialects!), in which not a single word of the Bible has been translated. What is more, in the so-called "Christianised West" there still are numerous cultural groups which, though not through their languages, but certainly through their own sub-culture are separated from the dominant cultures of the countries in question, and where the church is nowhere present. One thinks, for example, of the artists, the Mafia, the Hippies, many labour groups, etc. No wonder that Ralph Winter titled his address at the well-known Lausanne Congress: "*The Highest Priority: Cross-Cultural Evangelism*". (For all these particulars see Winter, 1975:213-241).

#### 4 **Three Models of Communication**

In this connection three communication models can be identified to cast light on the nature of cross-cultural communication of the Gospel. Ralph Winter (in his address mentioned above) called them: E-1, E-2 and E-3 communication.

E-1 communication is communication of the Gospel to members of one's own cultural group, that is, people speaking one's own language *and* whose cultural values are known to one.

E-2 communication is communication of the Gospel to people who either speak your own language but belong to another sub-culture than you, or whose language and culture is known to you and resembles your culture so that you can communicate without great effort.

E-3 communication is the communication of the Gospel to people of whom both the language and culture are unfamiliar to the communicator. Ralph Winter pointed out in his address, mentioned earlier, that this type of evangelization is still the most neglected type. In addition, he pointed out the shocking fact that by far most missionaries are engaged in preaching the Gospel to people belonging to the E-1 group, and furthermore, not to self-confessed unbelievers, but to nominal Christians within the E-1 group. One can deduce from this that, despite the phenomenal advance of the Gospel during the past two centuries, large segment of mankind has not yet

been reached and that no provision has been made to reach those people.

Cross-cultural communication should therefore be high on the priority list of all Christian churches, also in South Africa. In the light of the above it is a pity that the general tendency of churches in South Africa is to be concerned with their own needs first and foremost, and, *if* any time and resources are left, secondly to the needs of peoples already possessing their own churches, who are busy preaching the Gospel to their own people. It certainly is necessary and important, and good reasons could be advanced for the fact that South African churches concentrate rather on home mission than on foreign missionary work. It perhaps relates to the isolated international position of South Africa and to a certain extent to the poor economic position of our country when compared with many other countries. But this will have to change now that our international position has improved, and churches will have to again work to reach the unreached billions in this world.

## 5 **Theological Principles for Cross-cultural Communication of the Gospel**

### 5.1 *The Commission for Cross-cultural Communication of the Gospel*

When one speaks of cross-cultural communication of the Gospel, then the great commission of Mt 28:18-20 comes to mind: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations ..." To preach the Gospel to all nations, implies of necessity that cultural barriers must be crossed.

### 5.2 *The Principles of Cross-cultural Communication*

God stands above culture. He is *supracultural* (Kraft 1979:116f). Nonetheless, to save man, Jesus crossed the infinite gap between God and man (Php 2:5-11; Kraft 1979:173-174). The Lord Jesus became man and made all aspects of the Hebrew-Jewish culture his own. Culturally he was entirely a Jew. He used Aramaic, Hebrew and probably Greek, human languages, as his mediums of communication, that is, *he used cultural entities to express supracultural truths*.

The incarnation, when the Word became man, is the highest communication of God with mankind. *Revelation is communication*. A clear indication of this fact is that the Second Person in the Holy Trinity, in the Gospel according to John, 1:1, is called the Word. J B Phillips translated this verse as follows: "In the beginning God expressed himself. That personal expression, that word, was with God, and was God, and he existed with God from the beginning". Nida points out that what is unique in the christian belief, is that God does not merely communicate *facts* about himself, as is done in Islam, but that in Jesus Christ he communicates *himself*. "We may even say

that in the Incarnation God encoded his infinite qualities in the limitations of human language and human form" (1960:23).

When God reveals himself to man, it means that the supracultural is expressed in the restricted and restrictive medium of human history, language and culture. The Scriptures call it *kenosis* (self-effacement; self-emptying, Php 2:6,7), as happened in its extreme form in the self-emptying of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Because the *medium* of God's revelation as well as the *target* is restricted and restrictive, the revelation can never be absolute. God does not reveal himself absolutely. "Now we see but a poor reflection, as in a mirror" (1 Cor 13:12). God's revelation is *sufficient* for us, but *not complete*. God had always spoken to man in terms of man's culture, language, understanding, ability and scope of experience. This explains the anthropomorphisms of the Bible. God did not speak in supracultural terms, in divine language or the language of angels, but spoke to man in the restricted language used by man. Indeed, though we must realise that God is infinitely more than what we can grasp about him, we have no conceptual faculty to understand it, and God does not expect it of us. He speaks to us in a language and in forms we can understand. He is "receptor-oriented" in his revelation (Kraft 1979:169). We must gratefully make use of the anthropomorphic forms which God gave us to think about, to listen to Him and to speak to Him -- our Creator, Father, Sovereign, Redeemer, Lord and Rock, Refuge -- these are all intracultural terms used to express the supracultural. The theological implications of the above is that, as missionaries, we must be willing to relinquish our own culture and, like Paul following the example of Jesus Christ (1 Cor 9:19-23), one must become culturally a Mosotho for Basotho, a Bushman for the Bushmen, a Muslim for the Muslims who takes off his shoes and kneels when he prays, who worships five times a day, who does not eat pork, who carries his Bible in his right hand so as not to offend his Muslim friends or create the impression that he has no respect for the Holy Scripture, and who might even keep the fast during Ramadan in order to make friends of his Muslim neighbours, so that they may open themselves to his message. These adaptations are much smaller than the adaptations Jesus made for our sake.

Because the culmination point of God's communication with us was the *Incarnation*, our communication of the Gospel must also have the character of incarnation of the message into the receptor culture. For us the message -- hopefully -- is expressed in terms of our own culture. Incarnation of the message means that in the communication of the Gospel, norms for the receptor culture must not be the cultural forms we recognise, but it must be expressed in the own and distinctive forms of the receptor culture. In so doing we follow the principles laid down by God in his revelation of Scripture

and in the incarnation of his Son.

### 5.3 Culture is a Relative Entity

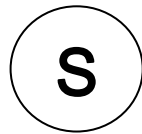
Cultural forms usually are religiously and morally neutral. It is the function of those forms which give it religious and moral values (Kraft 1979:99, 114). Take for example the paganistic Roman *Natalis invicti solis*, the Christian Christmas, and the commercialised "Merry Christmas" with its Father Christmas, which are all culturally related and are celebrated on the same day, but are religiously light-years apart.

## 6 The Structure of Communication

For a more detailed explanation of this matter, we refer to Nida, 1960:33-61. What follows, is mainly his approach.

In the process of communication three elements can be identified, namely the source (S), the message (M) and the receptor (R).

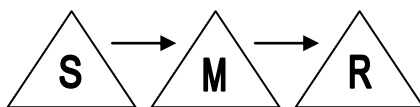
In the communication of the Gospel, God is the Source, which is indicated by a circle with an S inside.



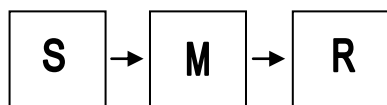
God reveals Himself, and that revelation was put into writing in Holy Scripture by a secondary source, the human writers, in terms of their own language, culture and ability to understand, so that the message, M, for the first receptors, the Israelites, could be understood. This can be explained in a diagram as follows:



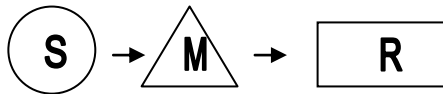
With the translation of Scriptures and "incarnation" of the Gospel into a West-European culture the process repeated itself, and can be illustrated as follows:



When missionaries with a Western European culture as their background, preach the Gospel to the Black people of Africa, then it can be illustrated as follows:



It is clear that the *message* is essentially the same and may not be adapted, and that is the reason why the *form* in which it is preached, differs from the form in which the intermediate origins is preached to the receptors in their own culture. This can be illustrated as follows:



Nida concludes from the argument which follows more or less the process stated above: "In other words, we want to be sure that R is able to respond to M within the context of his own culture in substantially the same manner as R responded to M within the setting of the biblical culture" (1960:59).

Paul, a man who was at home in two cultures, namely the Jewish and the Hellenistic, according to his own testimony in 1 Cor 9:20 and 10:33, had the gift to apply this principle. There is a clear difference in his approach to the Jews in Antioch (Acts 13:13-52) and to the learned heathens in Athens (Acts 17).

Should this not be done, crisis situations must arise whilst communicating, or malcommunication can even take place. People cannot absorb information when it does not fit into their own field of reference, they must integrate such information somewhere into their ideological equipment. Should the communication not have been successful, then, in the process of integration, it is often badly mutilated. In Acts 14 we read how the people of Listre regarded Paul and Barnabas as gods.

## **7 The Linguistic Model : Dynamic Equivalence Communication**

Language is the most common medium of communication between people. The semantics and art of translation are the sciences which specialize in cross-linguistic communication. The results of modern translation science shows that the most effective and accurate translation method available to us at this stage, is the dynamic equivalence method. Due to space limitations this point cannot be discussed further. We refer readers to Nida/Taber, 1974:1-32. Kraft argues convincingly that the principles which apply to language as the most comprehensive expression of culture, is also applicable to culture as a whole (Kraft 1979a:276-327).

In short, it boils down to this: God's revelation is targeted at the receiver (receptor) in his culture. The Gospel gives expression to eternal, timeless, universal truths, but the *form* in which it is transferred, is culturally determined. This applies to Hebrew-Jewish culture, as well as to the languages in which the Bible were written. Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek are not holier than, and are not better communication media than other languages. They share the defects

of the fallen human nature in the sphere wherein they function. What applies to languages, applies *mutatis mutandis* to cultures. The culturally determined aspects of the form in which the Gospel is cast, is therefore relative and can be adapted and changed.

Concretely applied to a few examples: forms of showing respect in prayer differ in different times and cultures. In the Old Testament it was expressed by lying prostrate on the ground. In some Afrikaans speaking churches it is respectful for men to stand during church worship, whilst women sit down. This also applies mostly when church officials formally visit White church members but does not apply when saying grace at meals. Black people who follow their natural customs of showing respect, show respect by remaining seated when talking, especially when talking to superiors, amongst which God must certainly be counted. It is therefore natural that Black people will sit whilst praying.

In the Jewish culture in the time of the New Testament, it was customary to conduct preaching of the Word in the form of a monologue. In many cultures in Africa and Asia it is more meaningful to do it in the form of a discussion.

## **8 Common Factors amongst all People**

In cross-cultural communication, due to the nature of things attention is given to the cultural *differences* of peoples. However, it must not be forgotten that there are also many similarities between peoples. Nida points out that the similarities between people as cultural beings are greater than the differences (1964:55). Even the biological differences identifying the so-called races are much less than the psychological differences between individuals of the same group, and, in addition, the psychological similarities of people from all nations are much more important than the differences, which are negligible. The mechanics of people's thinking processes are identical. The differences in this case have been learned whilst the similarities have been inherited. Besides, all people have the same basic spiritual needs, to wit: safety, love, esteem, acceptance, and a meaningful existence. The equal social needs bring the result that many universal factors are found in culture, for example social organization in family relationships, economic activities and agriculture (Kraft:1979:84-87).

But, specifically in the *spiritual* field the similarities amongst people are greater than the differences. The needs of every natural person is the same: he is estranged from God, he no longer knows God. He is a sinner. Eternal death awaits him. He must be reborn. The deepest needs of each person therefore does not lie in the field of the differences, but mainly in the common factors. Also, the Gospel of redemption is for every person basically the same (Van Rooy

1987:45). This makes communication with all people possible, in spite of the major differences.

## **9 A New Background**

The receptor in the communication process is not a blank paper onto which information is simply written, he is a cultural being with a completely integrated view of life. New information is not accepted in an unprocessed form. It does not hover somewhere in the air. To be meaningful it must be integrated into the complete philosophy of life of the receptor. Should this happen in isolated bits and pieces, then it has to be twisted to fit into the whole. That is why it is necessary to convey an integrated whole of the Gospel in as short a time as possible, so as to provide the receptor from the start with new spiritual terms of reference to form the basis on which to build the sub-sections of the message (Van Rooy 1976:107). This theme is discussed in following paragraphs.

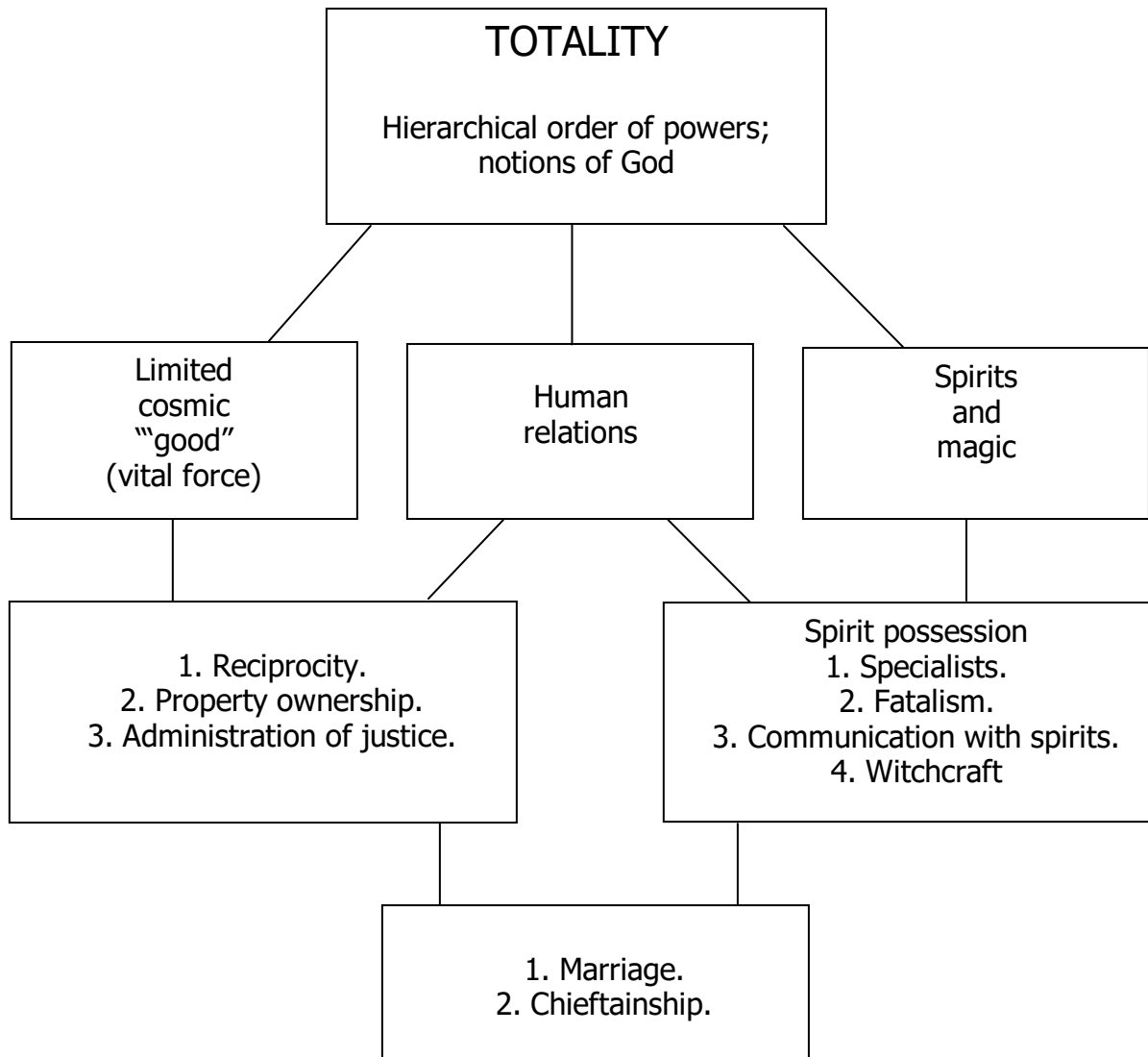
## **10 The Antithetical Aspect of Cross-cultural Communication**

When the Gospel is preached, then it is the Word of God which enters the culture of sinful people. Many aspects of that culture expresses attitudes and thoughts which cannot be reconciled with the Gospel. In other words, here it is not only the form but also the function which clashes with the Gospel. This is valid specifically in the aspect of religion and everything attached to it. Since we live in an African milieu, we take examples from Africa.

God reveals Himself, and that revelation was put into writing in Holy Scripture by a *secondary source*, the human writers, in terms of their own language, culture and ability to understand, so that the message, M, for the first receptors, the Israelites, could be understood. This can be explained in a diagram as follows:



10.1 A Schematic Presentation of the Traditional African World View



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This scheme is explained and motivated on the following pages. The reader should please note that this presentation is just an attempt to summarise the rich and varied philosophy of life of Africans and to link the various themes. It cannot, therefore, be totally complete.

10.2 Short explanation of the schematic presentation

The philosophy of life of Africans is not a jumble of queer and childish superstitions. Seen from its own premises, it is a strictly logical system, in which every sub-part links with the whole and emanates from the whole. Misconceptions contained in the philosophy cannot be ascribed to "unlogical" or "prelogical" methods of reasoning, but can be ascribed to wrong premises, which clash with Biblical revelation and the results of scientific research, but, seen from the angle of the cultural background of Africans are the only acceptable explanation for the phenomena encountered in everyday life.

The main theme is the *opinion regarding the totality*. Totality is seen as a hierarchy of powers, God is an inherent part of it and is positioned at the top. This main theme reveals itself in three subordinate themes:

10.2.1 The idea of "limited cosmic good" ("good" includes vital force, luck, prestige, but not of necessity material goods)

10.2.2 The second theme is that of the priority of human relations. The main theme reveals itself in this matter in more than one manner. For example, the emphasis falls stronger on the community of people than on the existence of the individual; also that a strict hierarchy exists in human relationships.

10.2.3 The third theme is the spirits and witchcraft. Here we see how the various powers in the hierarchy influence each other (witchcraft) and the place of the spirits in the hierarchy is defined.

In works in which the philosophy of life and the world view of Africans is discussed, it is customary to state the various phenomena as loose elements, without attention to their links with the whole. In this paper an attempt is made to state the connection in all cases. It is represented by a straight line from the three main elements which converge at a certain point. For example, the phenomena of reciprocity, property and administration of justice are mainly determined and branded by 1 and 2; the phenomenon of spirit possession is explained by 2 and 3, and right at the bottom we find the phenomena in which all three themes play an important role. Marriage is to the left because probably 1 is the decisive element, whilst in witchcraft, which is placed furthest to the right, the element of spirits and magic plays the major role.

The phenomenon of specialists and fatalism is determined in such a major manner by 3, that no lines run to the other themes, as shown in the scheme.

In the following pages the various aspects of the philosophy of life and world view of Africans are discussed in greater detail. The Venda model is the starting point, but with a few changes in points of lesser importance, it is valid for most African peoples, especially in the southern part of Africa.

### 10.3 *The Spiritual Life of an African Nation*

What is written here comes from practical experience mainly with the Venda. But the similarity in the spiritual life of Africans in South Africa is so great that it is in its main points also applicable to all African peoples in Southern and central Africa - what is sometimes called *Bantu Africa*. A missionary friend of mine amongst the Zulu wrote that one can nearly, sentence by sentence, delete the word "Venda" and replace it with "Zulu" or "Xhosa".

We must naturally bear in mind that Africans, as all third world nations in our time, are involved in the whirlpool of modern secularistic philosophies of life, and that all possible degrees of adaptation and acculturation are prevalent. Nevertheless, the traditional philosophy of life of Africans has remained remarkably pure, even including the intelligentsia and urbanized. The external forms in which the spiritual life manifests itself, may be modified but the basic themes have scarcely changed. The philosophy of life portrayed here is still applicable to the vast majority of African peoples. Perhaps the most incisive change is not for the better, but for the worse, namely that avarice and selfishness from the Western civilization took over, without the complement thereof, namely the striving for progress that accompanies it.

I do not want to say that everything said here about Africans are exclusive characteristics of Africans, and are not, in one way or another also present amongst Whites. If one looks for parallels they are easily found. But there is often an important difference in the background and motives of these apparent paralalled phenomena.

#### 10.3.1 The Basic Theme : the Hierarchy of Powers

Although one must not make it the only premise, the emphasis which J H Bavinck places on the *notion of totality*, is also applicable to Africans. The cosmos is seen as a hierarchy of powers, each with its own place in the totality and influencing each other mutually. Man has his own modest place in the hierarchy, somewhere between the spirits above and the animals and plants below him.

The feeling of *cosmic relationship* in this totality is very strong. In African fables persons can easily change into animals vice versa. The separating line is sometimes vague. Salvation, blessedness, peace, depends on whether man is integrated in this totality, and then in his right place. Human relations pivot on the important theme of

*interpersonal relations.*

The powers in this hierarchy can influence each other mutually, and act upon each other. This action can be manipulated by applying the right rituals. The theme of *spirits and magic* rests partially hereon.

This strong emphasis on *integration in the totality* explains the static nature of African community life. Against this background, ambition and progress are not virtues, but a perversity. However important the theme of *vital force* may be, it is more important to be integrated into totality than to possess more power than befits one's status.

The phenomenon of *taboo* arises from this. According to my observation, taboo is restricted to things high up in the power hierarchy and with which contact therefore is dangerous. Contraversing a taboo is tantamount to disregarding one's place in the hierarchy.

### 10.3.2 Notions of God

The notion of God is strongly determined by the basic theme of the hierarchy of powers. Because God is seen mainly as the highest power in the power hierarchy, and because lesser powers do not have direct access to stronger powers, he is unknowable and inaccessibly far. The notion of God is strongly deistically coloured: He does not give attention to us.

I shall try not to portray the various aspects of the philosophy of life of Africans as unrelated phenomena, but to show their mutual dependency. To obtain this I propose to first discuss the basic themes which emanate from the main theme, and then to discuss the phenomena in which more than one of these themes play a role.

These three themes are:

- *the limited cosmic good*
- *the priority of interpersonal relationships*
- *spirits and witchcraft*

### 10.3.3 The Limited Cosmic Good

"Good" here means life and vital force (power of life), good luck, influence in the community. It is a general phenomenon in static communities, like the traditional African community, that the idea prevails that there is a limited supply of cosmic good. One can only obtain more of this good by taking it away from something or somebody else. It follows that, when it appears that my vital force diminishes, luck evades me, and my influence grows less, somebody else must be taking it away from me.

Seeing that this "good" is seen as vital force, then *life and death*

*become relative notions.* When Africans are hungry, they say "I am dying of hunger", and then it is no exaggeration, because in effect, their vital force is decreasing, and this is, according to their view of life, what death means. When you inquire into the health of a person, he is likely to answer "We live just a little bit", meaning that there is a small supply of vital force left. When he has had to work hard for a meagre wage, then he can rightly say, "My employer is killing me" meaning he is taking away from my vital force, he appropriated it for himself and obtained more than his rightful share.

When two women with one husband both have children, and one of them observes that her children are frail or sick and the children of the other woman are strong and healthy, she is likely to conclude that her competitor is taking away vital force from her children and using it to strengthen her own children ("U dzula nga nne", say the Venda). It is the logical result of this theme of limited cosmic good.

#### 10.3.4 The Priority of Human Relations

"A person is a person through another person", "*Motho ke motho ka e mong*", is a Sotho saying. Shalom, peace, harmony, the ideal condition for an African is that where everyone is integrated and fits into the community. Features which are appreciated and cultivated in children are not honesty, openness, integrity, truthfulness, steadfastness, perseverance, but friendliness, obligingness, adaptability, flexibility, respect for seniors, modesty, willingness to share, willingness to compromise -- everything which eases relations with one's fellow-man, and which avoids clashes or eliminates them, which ensures peace in the community. It does not require great imagination to realise that this difference in emphasis frequently leads to misunderstanding and clashes between Whites and Africans. The White man sees the African as being false; the African regards the White man as being rude.

When somebody asks for a lift in your motor, and it is not convenient for you to give that person a lift, then you will not say that you cannot give him a lift. You will say that hopefully you will be able to give him a lift next time. When your father-in-law asks you for a goat, and you do not feel like giving him one, then you will not say, "Father-in-law, look for a goat somewhere else". This will be a grave insult. No, most Africans do it in a more refined manner. The son-in-law will agree to give his father-in-law a goat, and when his father-in-law later inquires about the goat then "he will still be looking for a goat". The father-in-law will understand what this means, but he will not feel insulted because the son-in-law treated him with courtesy and with respect.

The strong emphasis on willingness to share is expressed in the idiom

"the children of one man share even the head of a locust". Willingness to share is so strongly emphasized from childhood onwards that African children regard it as very natural that things are shared with each other. Stinginess is one of the greatest sins imaginable.

#### 10.3.5 Spirits and Magic

Africans believe that when a person dies, he continues living as spirit, or shade. The spirits are less happy and contented than the living people on earth, but they are more powerful. They do not sever ties with the living, but expect that contact with them should be maintained. They expect the living to make offerings e g, water which must be spit onto the ground, or the blood of a fowl, or beer, especially the beer from the first grain of the new harvest. From their side they make their wishes known through dreams, the appearance of snakes or through soothsayers, diseases, or deaths or even by entering a living person and living in his body and at times displacing that person's spirit.

Since as seniors they are more powerful, but at the same time less happy than the living, they tend to be jealous and people are scared of them. When one asks a traditional African about his well-being, one will never hear the response that everything is well. This would sound like rashness, arrogance and he might incur the jealousy of the spirits.

Concerning magic: The belief therein and the fear of it play an important role in life. Africans tend to search for a cause behind every event which in their mind is not normal. They look for a "primary" cause --- a spiritual cause. Any event or phenomenon outside the sphere of normal sense perception, e g illness, drought, lightning, infertility, death, exceptional competence or success of an individual, is related to magic.

A few examples:

When a person is killed by a lion, Africans are apt to ask the question: *Why* did the lion kill him? *Who sent* the lion to kill him? The lion could not have been at that spot by chance.

When it is explained to traditional Africans that malaria is spread by the anopheles mosquito, they will believe it but will come with a counter question, "Who sent the mosquito to me? Why did the mosquito infect me and not the man next to me in the same room?"

Magic thus has to do with the mutual action and influence of the various powers on each other.

The principles on which magic operates are usually called *sympathetic*

*magic*, which works through the power of *contact* and of *imitation*.

An example of *contagious magic* is found in the fear of man that a piece of clothing or something which was in contact with a person's body for a long time, could get into the hands of an enemy, who could use it to bewitch or kill one. At birth a child is given a carrying skin, a dressed skin of a goat in which it is carried on its mother's back, and in which it spends most of its first two years of life. This skin is meticulously guarded, because, should even one hair of it fall into wrong hands, this could mean the child's death. The enemy could, through this, come in possession of something which through contact has become part of the identity of the child, and could, for example, burn this article with harmful herbs, thus causing the death of the child.

An example of the imitative magic is found in the initiation dance of Venda girls, the *domba* or python snake dance. The python is a symbol of fertility because it can swallow a large animal, and the internal sexual organs of adults are also called snake, *nowa*. In the dance the girls form a continuous row like a python, and imitate the twisting of the python, and thus come to share in the fertility of the python.

These examples show that powers can be employed both for strengthening and diminishing vital force.

#### 10.4 *Some Aspects of African Philosophy of Life in which More than One of the Abovementioned Powers Figure*

##### 10.4.1 Property

Due to the strong emphasis placed on the togetherness of persons, it is expected of persons, children and adults to share their possessions with others, and especially with family members. "The children of one man even share the head of a locust". That is why it is regarded as a grave wrong when somebody amasses possessions for himself or invests in a bank in stead of sharing it. This is a socially unacceptable form of wealth. What really is acceptable is to invest in wives and children. That is why polygamy figures so strongly in Africa, because, according to traditional view of life this is an acceptable form increasing wealth. Because in this case one does not enjoy it alone; he shares it with his wives and children and in-laws; his power is reflected in the fact that many people are under his influence and indebted to him. He did not strengthen his power of life at the cost of others, he did not grab more than his modest share of the limited cosmic good. He can be a rich man without being an evil man.

##### 10.4.2 Reciprocity

The same two basic themes are prevalent in the strong feeling of compulsory reciprocity found in Africa. Every favour must be

repaid by a reciprocal favour, otherwise you can be accused of grabbing more than your modest share of the cosmic good and the unity of the tribe. Should one be too poor to reciprocate, then one can place a stick in the container of the original gift as a pledge that you would, at a later stage when times are better, reciprocate. When a Venda is down to having absolutely nothing to provide for his daily needs, then he says, "We are among the sticks".

#### 10.4.3 Marriage (1,2 and 3)

The strong feeling of reciprocity explains the tenacity of traditional dowry customs in Africa. When one family gains a wife from another family, then the other family loses a reproductive unit, and it is unthinkable, in terms of the view of life as explained above, not to return something in the place of the woman. That is why even a cultured and emancipated woman often feels that she does not really belong to the husband's family until the dowry has been paid. African customary law says, "the totem group is determined by the dowry", and therefore her children cannot belong to her husband's totem group when the dowry has not been paid.

#### 10.4.4 Witchcraft

Witchcraft belongs naturally and primarily under the heading "Spirits and Magic", but the other two basic themes also play herein a role. The witch is in African community the anti-social person, the rogue, the destroyer of life, the murderer of his own family, even of his own child. He could also be the one who grabs the vital force of his fellow man for himself and thus amasses more than his fair share of the limited good for himself.

Although there are various forms of witchcraft, we can say with a fair degree of certainty that the *witch* or *wizard* is a person, who, due to an inherent evil disposition, robs those around him of their vital force through his strong hatred and jealousy against his fellow human, and through magic formulas and magic rituals. He does this by burying harmful objects near their huts, or sends it to them through animals, e.g., hyenas or skunks. The objects call the lightning bird to their homes, or the skunks enter their bodies and gnaw at their bodies from inside.

Of cardinal importance and much more important than the rituals by themselves is the evil intention and the evil *word*, charged with power. The rituals do not operate *ex opere operato*.

Also, the *communication with spirits*, show features from all three abovementioned themes. It has the character of reciprocity as is found between living persons, which is now extended to include the spirits. For that matter, the spirits are also still part of the family. They are the family underneath the earth and in the air.



The phenomenon of *specialists* (witchdoctors, etc) also belong here. Specialists are those who have been initiated into the secrets of manipulating forces.

Finally the principle of *chieftainship* (chiefs, kings) must also be mentioned here. This is a cornerstone of the traditional African philosophy of life. The chief in the living tribe is at the top of the hierarchy of powers; he is the representative of the ancestor spirits amongst the living --- priest and king. He is the focal point of the vital force of the tribe. He is the father of the tribe, and according to tradition, he is expected to care for the widows and orphans according to tradition, he allocates the fields to members of the tribe, and they supply labour for his fields and that of his family. They give him a share when they slaughter a head of cattle, and also of the harvest of their fields.

#### 10.5 *Syncretism amongst Africans*

If you visit a Zionist church service on a Sunday afternoon you could be a spectator at a remarkable drama. Somewhere underneath a large tree, next to the bank of the river is a metre high circular wall, the floor has been spread with cow dung to keep it hard and clean, and a number of low benches built of clay form the pews. This is the local gathering place of "The Zion Christian Church" (ZCC, which in South Africa is strongly syncretistic and is not to be confused with the ZCC of Bishop Mutendi in Zimbabwe). Whilst approaching the place, you can see the whole community dancing ecstatically and rhythmically, to and fro, with the beat of drums. A singing leader every now and then chants a few words, and the whole congregation responds in repetitive chorus. It is clear that everyone enjoys the dancing tremendously. They can carry on for hours on the same note without tiring or getting bored.

At last an old man with a long white robe rises and walks to the trunk of the tree. The congregation sees this and becomes quiet. The leader calls out "Peace in the congregation!" and all the people respond "Amen!". This call and response are frequently repeated at intervals in the leader's address. The leader produces a Bible and jerkily reads a few verses from Matthew 5: "You are the light of the world". Then, with obvious relief he closes the Bible. Normally, he would not read from the Bible, but there are visitors and they must see and hear that this church is also "a church of the Bible". Fluently and energetically he addresses the congregation. He tells them about the power of the ZCC, the Zion Christian Church, and about the church's great leader, Lekganyane, with his two million followers --- Lekganyane, the keeper of the keys of the kingdom of heaven, who builds the New Jerusalem on this earth. Often when the name of the

mighty Lekganyane is mentioned, mightier than Jesus Christ or God the Father, then animal-like grunts come from the congregation, a sign that, when hearing his name, they are "filled with the spirit".

He tells them about the necessity to join the congregation. "Nobody will enter the Kingdom of God, unless he enters the circular wall. Nobody will enter the Kingdom of God unless he is first baptised in the river. Water in a container is dead. Flowing, living river water alone can cause a rebirth. Come and be saved. Convert yourselves and abandon your sins: witchcraft, theft, eating pork and using the medicine prescribed by White doctors. You will then be saved and receive the abundant life. Lekganyane will see to it that you get good jobs and that your employers trust you and promote you. He will make you happy. But do not drink strong liquor, or use tobacco". Thus does the leader conclude his speech. References to surrender to God, holiness, chastity and purity are carefully bypassed.

"Let us pray" is called out by the leader, and the whole congregation falls forward on the ground and join in polyphonic prayer. It is a loud chant, but each one prays loudly, fast and with enthusiasm, without being influenced by the surrounding noise. Some fall over backwards and pray in tongues, accompanied by snorts, barking, growling and bellowing sounds. When the droning slowly subsides and eventually stops, those with ailments and problems approach the leader and kneel before him. He lays his hands on them and prays or let them drink from a bottle filled with water blessed by Lekganyana. Then he calls out "Those who want to prophesy today, must quickly prophesy over there in the bush". With this the congregation understands that they must not "prophesy" in the presence of the visitors. Should there have been no visitors, a number of "prophets" would have risen to point out those guilty of witchcraft, or who have eaten pork, or have partaken of liquor, or have stolen. Or another would have forecast that a man and woman would soon be at loggerheads with each other.

The sun lies low when the congregation returns home, tired but contented.

One would now put the question, where is the origin of this church? Where do the more than 6000 separatist churches come from, some have more than a million members, some only twenty or thirty. The Bible is used here, baptism takes place, the name of Christ is invoked, but in spite of all these things the essential elements of heathenism are still prevalent.

Here we have a phenomenon which comes to the fore to a lesser or greater extent, covertly or overtly, wittingly or unwittingly,

wherever various religions meet on the basis, the sub-stratum of a primitive, monistic (Kraemer) religiousness, namely the phenomenon of syncretism.

Here, the message of Christ has been preached, the words that have been said were heard but not understood. They were re-interpreted in terms of the traditional life and world view of Africans.

Africans witnessed the way of life of the Whites, and were amazed by the abilities of white people. They ascribed it to a source of power, good luck, vital force available to them, and because Africans are religious beings, they explored this religion to find the source of power. Something similar to what happened to Paul and Barnabas at Lystra, also happened here, but then on a much wider and all-inclusive level. It grew into a syncretistic religion with a surprising vitality, like the religion of the Samaritans of which we read in II Kings 17:33,34. In "the monistic philosophy of life", of primitive peoples, according to H Kraemer, the truth or falseness of a religion is not questioned, but they search for *elements of power* to be added to their existing religion and can be utilised to serve the power of life of man. *The African independent churches are obsessed with one theme: that of power.*

The traditional Zulu doctors or witchdoctors, have a custom called *ukuthaka*. This means that a doctor takes of his own medicine and adds medicine from another doctor, believing that his own medicine receives extra power from the other medicine and vice versa. This is what happened here, and it explains the vitality and popularity of the syncretistic sects. The followers, according to their view, thus enhance their power through the merging of the best from two worlds.

With these sects everything turns around the main theme of *vital force*, as is the case in paganistic religion. This predominates ethics. What is acceptable in inter-personal relationships are those things that enhance vital force, and not what the Bible teaches. That is why most officials, even the bishops, have more wives than the common members. This is proof of power and influence, and that is why they are the right candidates to be ministers and leaders.

That is why the identification and destruction of witches are so important. Witches threaten the life of the community and must be eradicated.

That is why prayers consist of fast repetition, at the highest possible volume, of stereotyped, powerful phrases, in which especially the name of God, with a string of titles added, is repeated frequently.

That is why the long names of churches, in English, with the frequent repetition of terms like Christ, apostles, Zion, Jerusalem, God is so popular. Katesa Schlosser calls it "Namenzauber" (Name magic). For example "New Covenant Church of Christ and Apostles in Zion".

That is why baptism must take place in "living, flowing water, which is the only bearer of power". Baptism might be frequently repeated, sometimes under another name.

That is why a person who is ill cannot lay his hands on somebody else, because the negative power might be transferred.

When a Zionist is asked why he joined that church, the usual answer is, "I was ill. The Zionists prayed for me. Now I am well".

That is why there is such a strong emphasis on hierarchical order within the sect. In African philosophy of life everyone knows who is his superior, equal or inferior in rank or status. That is why the system to govern the church of the Zionists cannot but be episcopal, with a whole hierarchy of ranks and offices for men as well as for women. There are more officers than "laity". And the bishop frequently has such a high rank that ordinary members cannot meet with him. Miriri, the bishop of the "United Apostolic Church" may be seen only by his wives and a few superintendents. He is surrounded by more taboo than even the highest chief. He takes the place of the chief in the traditional community.

This is why taboo is such an important element in the laws of the sect. The taboo is even extended to the use of the sacrament of the Holy Communion. In the sacrament doctrine of the Zionists there is no place for communion. But there is place for baptism because there are analogies in their traditional ritual, but communion is either neglected or ruled out. Texts like 1 Cor 11:30 is used to reproach the churches that when celebrating communion they transgress an important taboo and that this will result in illness and death. Note, not the *wrong* celebration of communion, but the celebration *per se*, is criticised.

The work of the Holy Ghost is limited to a form of possession, because this also resembles something known in the traditional religion. It happens frequently, because African women are oppressed, that they tend to hold their own and raise their status through a form of hysterics, known as *malombo* or *malopo*. They then claim that a spirit of an ancestor takes possession of them, and speaks through their mouths in an unknown language which is the language of their ancestors and has been taught to them by the initiates. The "I"

of the possessed person is then temporarily displaced by that of the spirit which takes possession of her. Because of this she is treated with great respect, is even called "ancestor spirit", and it is believed that the spirit in her can prophesy. She also utters snorts, roars, grunts and breaks winds, which is seen as noises coming from the spirit in her. It does not require much imagination to draw the line through to being "filled by the Holy Ghost" which is prevalent amongst the Zionists and which was described above.

The *prophets and prophecies* which were described above, is just a quasi-christian form of divination as found in the Venda. Its function is exactly similar.

The notion of God of the Zionists is the only real new element in the Zionists. Although they throughout keep contact with the spirits of the ancestors, the emphasis in the ritual falls on the worshipping of God the Creator. But then God the Creator of the Zionists is marked by the deistic African notion of God. God is the mighty, the giver of power, the cosmic father, but not the Holy One who can become angry and can exercise judgement. In the Zionist sect he is superseded by the chief of the sect, the bishop, in whom converges the vital force and achievement of the tribe.

Here the traditional christian belief is mutilated to become a utility religion, linked to the traditional religion. It has lost its character as absolute revelation of God and has become an aspect of heathenism, even a naturalistic primitive religion. This is belief without conversion, religion without rebirth.

This judgement is proved by observing that in the Zionists the essential elements of the Christian belief are missing. The Bible plays a small role. Christ Jesus, and the unity of His church is of lesser importance; He is ousted by an African Messiah, Shembe or Lekganyane; the notion of sin is purely paganistic; it actually boils down to transgression of a taboo, personal seriousness with prayer is scarce, the holy communion, Biblical discipline and Christian provision for the poor is found amongst very few groups.

Although there is remarkable uniformity amongst the many thousands of Zionistic sects, to be just, one must say that there are exceptions, and that certain of these sects can be described as Christian churches, where the Bible and Christ are taken seriously.

It must be said that the established churches amongst Africans, including the Reformed Churches, are not free from pagan influences. The difference is that, whilst it is an unconscious synthesis in the case of the Zionists, it exists in a dualistic form amongst church members. In the official preaching of the church the confessional-evangelical

tradition is maintained; the official worship service is mostly a replica of that of the White churches. African Christians want it to remain so. But in their private lives paganism often reigns supreme. A G Schutte conducted a scientific survey amongst a flourishing African congregation in Johannesburg and found the following shocking results. The active church members (Gereformeerde) said the following:

84% see a link between God and the spirits of the ancestors

43% of the members openly admitted that they have regular contact with the ancestor spirits

77% do not regard it as wrong to have such relations (indeed, an elder propagated this at a conference of elders)

91% still believe in the power of witchcraft

a mere 33% believe that a Christian may not consult diviners, but half of these admit that instead of consulting diviners they consult Zionist prophets.

Investigation has brought to light that in some Reformed and Pentecostal churches the position is more favourable, but in some it is definitely not.

On these grounds it cannot but be deduced that in preaching the missionary churches in South Africa by no means take sufficiently into account the spiritual background of the listeners. Our experience is that the preaching in general is not targeted at confronting the African heathendom, and that frequently the listeners do not realise that there is a gap, and that a choice must be made between the old world view and the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The preaching, training and confessional moulding of Africans must advance this *choice*. Thus far, this has not been done thoroughly.

The Bible has a message also for those people. We hope to elaborate this message in the following paragraphs.

## 10.6 *The Communication of the Gospel Message to the Africans*

### 10.6.1 The Problem: The Strangeness of the Gospel

"The gospel I preached is not something that man made up", Gal 1:11. In this respect there is no difference between my own Frisian forefathers in Dokkum who murdered the Missionary Bonifatius, and the red Xhosa who looks with contempt at the Christian and his message, the Greek who finds it stupid, and the Jew who finds it a stumbling block. (Should one wish to read more about this subject, Kraemer, Hendrik, *The Christian Message in a non-Christian World*, London, Edinburgh House Press, 1947, pp 63 ff, could be read). The gospel is "abnormal" for all people.

That is why we need not be surprised that there are so few mutual aspects between the gospel and traditional African religion

and philosophy of life. It is presently the custom to look at the religion A T R with a very sympathetic eye, to find all sorts of positive elements and hidden truths to which the gospel needs only be added as a keystone to complete the building. If it would have been the case of being a "White man's religion" versus a "Black man's religion" then such an approach would have been acceptable. However, in the communication of the gospel the approach must be the meeting of the revealed truths of God with natural religion, whether Asian, European, American or African, to let the light of God shine in the dark. The light need not link up with the darkness, it must replace it.

It may be true that various peoples who received from God different gifts, when confronted with the gospel, will find different treasures which remain hidden for other peoples, to one day bring those gifts to the surface, to purify it and then to carry it one day into the New Jerusalem as "the glory and honour of the nations" (Rev 21:24-27). But I am sure that this "glory and honour" will not contain elements of paganistic religions.

When the International Missionary Conference of Jerusalem, 1928, came to the conclusion "We appreciate as part of the one truth the realization that the majesty of God and the resultant respect in worshipping which is so striking in Islam; the deep sympathy with the suffering of this world and the unselfish search for a road of escape which lies at the heart of Buddhism; the desire to make contact with the extreme reality which can be regarded as spiritual, which is prominent in Hinduism; the belief in the moral order of the universe and the resultant insistence on moral behaviour which is emphasized by Confucianism" (Quoted by Du Plessis H, *Geskiedenis van die Sendingwetenskap*, Potchefstroom, Pro Rege, 1960, p 118) --- and if all of these elements are regarded as rays of light emanating from Christ, then, in the light of the gospel, these "rays of light" are not acceptable. One can add: We admit as rays of light from Christ the longing for power and life, the urge to be integrated into totality and with society, which goes beyond the borders of death to the deceased, which controls the spiritual life of Africans. Especially in Anglican circles the idea is strongly propagated that worshipping of ancestors must in one way or another, be absorbed into the Christian church (e g Shropshire, Denys W T. *The Church and Primitive Peoples*, London, SPCK, 1938, p 345)

Holy Scripture teaches us that religion is not a basis on which to build, because religion is the result rather of man's fleeing from God than of his search for God. Indeed, "there is no one who seeks God" (Rom 3:11). Natural religion ends in stupidity and self-blinding. The translation of the American Today's English Version of the Bible is very clear and striking in Rom 1:21, "They know God, but they do

not give him the glory that belongs to him, nor do they thank him. Instead, their thoughts have become complete nonsense and their empty minds are filled with darkness". This is valid for African religion as well as the Old Germanic religion or Greek mythology, apartheid white theology or modern liberal "Christian" theology. One thinks with abhorrence of the attempts of Ludendorff, in Germany, to restore the ancient Germanic religion during the hey-day of Nazism.

It really looks as if the Bible has much less respect for the religion outside God's revelation, than what modern theology usually has.

Elijah ridicules Baal without any scruples whatsoever that he might insult the priests. The book Kings relates with relish that Jehu built toilets from the rubble of the temple of Baal. The Hebrew term used in referring to idols, (*gillulim*), literally means "faeces". Paul says (in 1 Cor 10:19,20) an idol and its sacrifice means nothing, but the heathens who offer the sacrifice, offer it for the devil, and whoever joins in its associates with devils". This is a short summary of what Canaanites, Israelites, Greeks and Germans, Venda and Xhosa did with religion. Natural man cannot but flee from God, and when He, in Christ, overtakes us, crucify Him.

Therefore, the gospel must sound strange, repulsive, insulting, offensive to natural man. When he *understands* the gospel, then usually quick reaction results, either acceptance or resistance. When this offensive gospel, this double edged sword of God, does not elicit reaction from the listeners, then it is because they did not understand it.

#### 10.6.2 Faulty communication

The question now arises: Why is there so little violent reaction to the preaching of the gospel. I think one must look for the answer in an article from J Vonkeman (*Genade, geregtigheid en geloof in die Skrif en in die Zoeloe (Xhosa) Bybel*, in "Referate Transkei, en Ciskei, Transkei N G Mission, 1972, Bk 1 p 39):

"It is our duty to broadcast the Bible on the same wavelength as the wavelength of the African, because 'Faith comes from hearing the message' (Rom 10:17). Only after this can the Holy Spirit work the wonder of conversion".

The lack of reaction can, in a sense, be attributed to the fact that the broadcasting happens on a wrong wavelength and that the message does not even reach its destination to create a reaction, whether belief or resistance. If the message really reaches its target, there will be more real resistance but also more real belief which will be seen by the reaction of the receptors of the message.



### 10.6.3 Must the Holy Spirit Rectify our Poor Communication ?

There is one answer to this problem statement which is totally unacceptable to me: Let us preach the Word; the Holy Ghost will see to it that the Word strikes the target. For many years it was a generally accepted attitude of missionaries. and the result is churches which are infested with syncretism. ("We see our labour of the past lying in ruins, and on the ruins a number of grimacing ghostly apparitions, who, delighting in another's misfortune, sing hallelujah songs around a large kettle of witches' concoction" --- a vision of the Rev A M Pienaar in his article "Die prediking onder die heidene in ons huidige sendingsituasie", in Referate Trans- en Ciskei, Bk 1, p 100). How can we blame Africans when a large portion of our church members --- not even to speak of pagans --- has never had to choose thoroughly and with meaningful motivation: either the gospel or the traditional belief? Very few of them realise what this choice entails.

It would seem as if the Spirit has not yet seen to it that the message reached the target. And to expect that He must do it, is a hope without Biblical support. To put it sharply: The Holy Spirit nowhere teaches us that it is the task of God's Spirit to give meaning to our meaningless message; it does teach us that the Holy Spirit enlightens us to extract a message with real meaning from the Word.

Let us be serious about Pentecost much more than we actually do in our church practice. Without being filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, who softens the hearts of listeners, the most thorough study of African languages and customs and of confronting preaching is fruitless. If we should put our trust in our knowledge of African culture, in stead of in the Word of God, then we need not even start. But, we should not make contradictory opposites of things which complement each other.

To be filled with the Holy Spirit means that sparks of communication fly when you speak, because you are on the right wavelength. The Holy Spirit does not change, between speaker and listener, a message which is on the wrong wavelength to a message on a better wavelength, no, He leads you to broadcast on the right wavelength. If He, with His miraculous power, does work the first mentioned, then it is not the normal manner which Scripture describes, but an exception, like when the simple Aramean hit king Ahab between the sections of his armour, without realizing what he did (1 Kings 22:34).

When one reads the sermons of the prophets, of our Lord Jesus, of John the Baptist, of Stephen, of the apostles, one notices that they were targeted at the specific needs of those specific listeners to whom the sermons were directed at that specific moment. That is

why all of us accept that good exegesis means to explain the Word in its context and against its relevant background. With the exception that, when the broadcast was aimed at an exclusive audience for some reason or other (Matt 13:11 !!!), the message was usually understood, and this gave rise to vehement reaction -- either complete surrender or fierce resistance -- so fierce that the people often wanted to kill the preacher, and many preachers did pay with their lives for their message. But both reactions are only possible when the message is *understood*. Persevering in prayer, asking to be filled with the Spirit, makes God's mighty Word in my mouth a sharp sword.

To therefore call on the Spirit to remedy our bungling, in stead of struggling in prayer and studying the Word to give us the right words to preach, is plain mental laziness. This elevates superficiality to a virtue (see also D J Bosch, *Julle sal my getuies wees*, Transkei N G Sending, pp 132, 3). This is a type of belief without which we really do not need.

#### 10.6.4 The Scarcity of Study Material on this Topic

In the light of what has been said above, one is surprised at the scarcity of study material and of any other literature in this direction. G C Oosthuizen says "The 'mission' churches have not really and honestly come to grips with the African world view, with their spirit world and magic, because of the superior attitude that it is evil or that it does not exist" (Oosthuizen, G C. *The misunderstanding of the Holy Spirit in the independent movements in Africa*, In: Van der Berg, J a o *Christusprediking in de volkerenwereld*. Kampen, Kok. 1965, p 164).

Also in material used for catechetical purposes, I discovered little or no real confrontation with the traditional religion and life view of Africans. It is either plainly ignored, or it is referred to with "don't", and a reference to a Bible text is regarded as being sufficient; Oosthuizen G C, in his thorough study, "Theological discussions and confessional developments in the churches of Asia and Africa" (Franeker, Wever, 1958, e g p 251 and the conclusion on p 284. See also Phillips, Geoffrey E. *The Old Testament in the world church*. London, Butterworth Press, 2nd imp 1948 p 120 and Du Plessis, H. 'n *Banier van die volke*. Potchefstroom, Pro Rege, 1963, pp 32, 3) mentions not a single example of a church, which in its preaching, formulation of confessions or literature, really addressed the problem of the traditional religion.

#### 10.7 *The Direction in which a Solution should be Sought*

If what has been said above is true, then it is high time that the church in Africa in its preaching, catechetical instruction and formulation of confessions, should give attention to African religions.

In the training of candidates for confirmation, the building up of church members and theological training, the message of the Bible must be conveyed in a form of meaningful confrontation with the existing view of life.

#### 10.7.1 A New Background

Here it is necessary in the first place to take account of those things that specialists in communication have taught us, namely that listeners do not necessarily always attach the same meaning to words as meant by speakers. Psychological tests brought to light that where the listener and the speaker come from the same language and cultural milieu, only 80% of the contents of the message is conveyed. One can picture for oneself how much is really conveyed when listeners belong to a totally different language and cultural milieu, for example when Whites preach to Africans. When westerners or westernized Africans convey the message of the gospel to other Africans, the target group cannot accept the message as loose pieces of information, but must fit it into the totality of their view of life. This view of life is totally different from that of the Bible. Consequently, they simply have to distort the message and restructure the meaning of the terminology to fit into the framework of their view of life. This is the only manner in which they can attach meaning to our words. (See for a further discussion and motivation Nida, E A, *Message and Mission*. New York, Harper, 1960, p 87. Also Sundkler, B G M. *The World of Mission*. London, Lutterworth, 1965, p 208).

Should we wish to convey the meaning of what we say as clearly as possible, without African listeners distorting it completely, and absorbing it into their minds in that distorted form, we must strive not to convey the Gospel message to them in loose bits and pieces, but to give them a complete image of the Bible in as short a time as possible, so that from the start they have a new frame of reference into which they can build further particulars of the message without first distorting it.

#### 10.7.2 Communication in an Historic Form

The most effective manner to construct this framework is to adapt the narrative form in which the Bible reveals the revelations of God to us. This form appeals to Africans, because this is a cherished and effective traditional form of communication of Africans themselves. When Africans want to typify somebody's character, they will, in stead of making a general statement, tell one or more anecdotes about him which will typify his character.

This is precisely what the Bible does. Biblical history is concrete by nature, and resembles the African manner of communication rather than a thematic, dogmatic, approach to

revelation.

The patriarchs, Israel, and the disciples of Jesus got to know God by seeing his works in history -- his mighty works of redemption which culminated in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The story of these deeds of liberation they taught their children and pupils, so that those could know Him, the same way as they themselves learnt about Him, (Ps 78, 111, etc). Should we follow a similar approach when we preach the gospel to Africans, then their preference and talent for telling stories, can be fully exploited and utilized to benefit the gospel.

Bengt Sundkler (The Christian Ministry in Africa. London, S C M Press, 1960, pp 283, 4) tells about the Easter sermon of Rev Michael Mzobe, in which this Zulu minister described Adam sitting on a high balcony in heaven whilst the history of revelation unfolds far below on earth. Every time, when he sees how sin carries on its destructive work, from the murder of Abel up to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, he cries out in anguish, "*Icala lami, icala lami elikhulu*" ("My guilt, my great guilt"). When he eventually sees Jesus ascend from the grave, he finds rest and peace, because he now knows that sin and death have been conquered. Here in one mighty sermon a wide spectrum of meaningful communication has been given. This speaks to the heart and spirit of Africans.

## 10.8 *The Importance and Contents of Introductory Preaching*

### 10.8.1 An Antithetic-confronting Approach

If we accept that the rendering given above of the Bible's judgement of paganistic religion is correct, then it is futile to search in African religion for something positive to build on. There is nothing to build on, at the most there are a few points of contact, e g when Paul, in his speech in the Areopagus, links up with the notion of an unknown God. It is interesting that Venda frequently close their "prayers" with a prayer to "*Iwe Thimudi*" (You, the Unknown). But it strikes that Paul uses this point of contact to prove that the people of Athens *do not know God*. This also applies to Africans: When they say "*Thimudi*" this actually is a confession that they do not know God. This is but one example of a point of contact.

The Bible teaches us that our approach must be confronting, in the sense of antithesis (see also Kraemer, H. *The Christian Message in a non-Christian World*. London, Edinburgh House Press, 2nd print, 1947, p 139, "... points of contact in the real deep sense of the word can only be found by antithesis"). Like Jeremiah, we get the order from God "to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow" and after this "to build and to plant" (Jer 1:10). It is remarkable that this is not a word for Israel only, but it is expressly said that it is a word for

"the nations and the kingdoms".

Picture for yourself that Jonah, when he came to Nineveh, would with great modesty, first have searched for something in the Assyrian religion to build upon. Do you think they would in that case have changed their minds and been converted? I do not think so!

Regarding ourselves, we must be humble. We must humbly, childlike approach traditional Africans and be prepared to learn from them. Otherwise we would never be able to become people of two worlds. Concerning the heart of the gospel we must realise: We must know African religion intimately and as best as possible, to know well enough "what to uproot and what to tear down", like Jeremiah. Else we place a keystone on a building which must eventually be broken down. And then the building falls down, because it was built on sand and on walls of clay. Everything we build before we have broken down, is in vain. It will only have to be rebuilt at a later stage, and this means that later there will be even more work in breaking down before the actual building can be started.

#### 10.8.2 The Pauline Kerugma

Bearing this in mind, I believe that the approach of Paul in his missionary sermons is still valid today. He frequently starts by preaching the judgement and the appeal to conversion. Quite unworried whether it could be false motives that move people, because they fear hell, to turn to God and to Christ, instead of turning to him in love. Indeed, he worries just as little as Peter worried, who on Pentecost day, "With many other words warned them; and he pleaded with them, 'Save yourselves from this corrupt generation'" (Acts 2:40). The matter is very simple to this apostle: you are in danger of eternal death, and the sooner you realise it, the better. The fear of God is a sound part of a healthy religious life (Ps 119:20). Seen from the angle of the listener, it is not an inferior type of preaching that rests on intimidation, it is common realism to see the threatening danger and to indicate how to escape the danger, namely Jesus Christ. When once you are with Jesus Christ, and are renewed in Him, the rest will be reformed in good time --- also your motives and your attitude towards God.

I do not want to say that preaching the love of Christ in his death at the cross, without motivation, is of no value and will not bear fruit. But, what I do believe, is that, as I have often heard it stated in missionary preaching, it lacks motivation from the gospel. The average listener does not realise that he needs redemption. Without the threatening judgement, without taking seriously God's righteousness, compliance with God's will is simply not relevant to him. He has no sense of sin.

It is understandable that Paul, the first missionary amongst the heathens, followed the nearly stereotype scheme in his preaching, of: God and creation - sin - judgement - conversion - redemption (cf also Dodd, C H, *The apostolic preaching and its developments*. London, Hodder and Stoughton, 8th print, 1956; Hf I; Floor, L. *In dieselfde spore. Potchefstroom. Die Evangelis*, 1964, pp 55-60; Van Heerden, C I "Die benadering in die evangelie verkondiging", *Op die Horison*, xx, 2 June 1958).

Let us first and in summary form examine this. In the examples of Paul's sermons to heathens contained in the New Testament, e g his preaching in Lystra (Acts 14:15), his sermon on the Areopagus (Acts 17), and his own summary of his gospel in 1 Thess 1:9,10, four motives can clearly be identified, in logical order:

- \* Firstly the **cosmological motive**: God is the Creator of heaven and earth, and reveals himself clearly in His works. Still, the people did not acknowledge Him as Creator (Rom 1:19-21)
- \* Secondly the **eschatological motive**: Christ will return as Judge to exercise judgement
- \* Thirdly the **kyriological motive**: Christ triumphed over death and He sits at the right hand of God, where He now reigns as King. His resurrection is proof of his kingship and office as judge. This is the climax of the message
- \* Fourthly (*and only fourthly !*) the **soteriological motive**: Although in the earliest apostolic preaching the element of reconciliation and satisfaction was eclipsed by the kyriological motive, the motive of the kingship, it was nevertheless implied in it. Christ redeems us from the coming judgement (1 Thess 1:10). Paul's gospel to the warden of Philippi who feared God, can be summarised in one sentence "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31).

If we could bring these four basic elements, with the victory of Christ over death and His kingship as main themes, home to the listeners, then the main matter of the gospel message is brought home. Genuine communication will then have taken place.

Personally, and with my fellow missionaries and Bible School students in Africa, I experienced the power of the onslaught of this Pauline theme. It is not abstract theories or speculation, it is simple, concrete, sober, but powerful doctrinal facts, *historical facts*, which call for a personal decision: accept it in faith or reject it in disbelief.

What is striking, is that in each of these elements lies a strong confronting, even an *antithetic element*. A person who has knowledge of the "information theory" (see e g Nida E A, *Message and Mission*. New York, Harper, p p 72, 3) will know that the antithetic nature of "information" increases the information value, that is, a person tends

to give more attention to "information" with which he disagrees, or which clashes with his traditional views.

#### 10.8.2.1 The Cosmological Motive

This motive provides in the first place the most obvious starting point for preaching the gospel, namely God's revelation in the nature. Here, one can refer to Ps 19:2 (The heavens declare the glory of God, the skies proclaim the work of his hands), or to Rom 1:19,20 ("since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities --- his eternal power and divine nature --- have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse").

Paul, and we, start by asking man to strain his ears for the language of creation, and to open his eyes for the wonders of God's handiwork (See also Belgian Confession, Art 2). Here it links with the sound educational rule of: from the known to the unknown.

This motive is a permanent element in missionary and evangelization preaching to the unchristian man at the end of time. We read in Rev 14:6,7 of the angel who flies at the end of time in the middle of the air proclaiming the *eternal gospel* to the inhabitants of this earth. And the contents of this eternal gospel is inter alia "Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgement has come. *Worship him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water*". The cosmological motive thus remains part of the gospel up to the end of time.

Africans, in general, believe in one Creator God. This God is so high up in the hierarchy of powers, that He cannot be reached, and is thus not a factor in our daily lives. He may well be the maintainer of the cosmic order, but there is no contact with him, no personal tie, no covenant, no cult, no relations, no prayer and no response from his side. Or if these do exist, they are reserved for special occasions. He is not a refuge and a protector. We have no responsibility towards him, and there is no chance that he will judge us. In one's personal life he plays no role at all. His place in your life as an African is empty. This shortcoming is met, to a small extent, by the attempts to communicate with ancestral spirits. (See also Mbiti, John S. *Near Testament eschatology in an African background*. Oxford University Press, 1971, p 138: "... He neither punishes them nor reward them for whatever they did in this life. On their part they do not thirst for His holiness or righteousness; nor do they have spiritual 'communion' with him ... the Akamba say characteristically, that 'Mulungu does us no evil; so why therefore should we sacrifice to Him'").

The message of the gospel comes with something entirely new:

God is *not* far; this Creator God declares that He clearly involves Himself with man in his everyday life; that he has created man with the objective of serving Him, and that he defends his honour, that He demands undivided loyalty, that he invites man to communicate with Him. It is not man in the garden of Eden who calls "Where are you, my God", but it is God who calls man, "Where are you?" (see Taylor John V. The primal vision. London SCM Press, 1963, p 84). Nothing and no one is as relevant as precisely this God.

In his preaching in Lystra (Acts 14:17) and Athens (Acts 17:25-28), Paul refers directly to the daily maintenance of creation by God, as a motivation for his call for conversion: "... because He himself gives all men life and breath and everything else ... For in him we live and move and have our being".

We hope to return to this discussion of the message of the New Testament, in which Christ teaches us that God the Creator even adopts human nature in Him.

#### 10.8.2.2 The Eschatological Motive

The second theme links with the first one. We must not make it an issue whether, when preaching to pagans, one must start at creation or at the last judgement; Paul combines these two motives to one whole in his approach to heathens: "Since what may be known to them was revealed to them because God has made it plain to them, so that men are without excuse" in the judgement (Rom 1:19,20).

Even though it may be unpopular, is denied and misrepresented, this message cannot be over-emphasized. In the eternal gospel of the angel who flies through the air at the end of time, it links with the cosmological motive: "Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgement has come. Worship him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water" (Rev 14:7).

*Two new elements* come sharply to the fore with this theme: The first is that of *accountability and judgement*.

Irrespective of the fact that God is for Africans --- also for most Christian Africans --- inaccessibly far and high above us, the notion many have formed of him, is that of a kind-hearted, obliging, cosmic grandfather. One thinks, in this connection, of the Venda saying, "Grandfather (or grandmother) is an ant-heap: whilst playing we climb up and down on it" (Makhulu ndi tshiulu, ri tamba ri tshi gonya"). He lets the sun rise over good and bad people, and he lets rain over good and bad people, and that's that. He never harms anybody. That he can judge a person is unthinkable. There is no separation at death, there is no separate destinations for the obedient



and the disobedient. The pagan, who has never searched for redemption by Christ, or who did not see any meaning in the blood of Christ which was offered to him, dies, believing fully that the Father of all will not create a man and afterwards reject him -- even though this man rejected the Father throughout his whole life. One even hears from elders at the funerals of heathens, in stead of calling on those present to turn to God, console them with the false consolation that God will never reject his creature.

This *false* trust is one of the first things which the gospel message must uproot and destroy. Else, there is no place for the true trust in the redemptive death and resurrection of Christ. We must not hesitate to follow the footsteps of the apostles and to confront the unconverted heathen with eternal death, which means to be left to oneself and to God's wrath.

The second new element which flows from this theme is that of *an end to come*. It is fruitful to give here attention to what John Mbiti has told us in his book, "New Testament eschatology in an African background". He points out that the Bible operates with a "three-dimensional notion of time", namely that of past, present and future. The Bible sees time as something that moves, from the past, through the present, to the consummation in the future.

This view on time gives rise to a *theological element*, a purposefulness, in the life of man and in his view on the world and the history of the world. A time comes for reckoning regarding good and evil (Rom 2:6; Rev 22:12) and of renewal (Rev 21:1). The three-dimensional notion of time is shattered, because the kingdom has come and the future of Christ is already working in the present, the kingdom of God must, in the fullness of time, come in perfection, but in Christ it has already come.

The important point is this: There is a future, where either eternal judgement or eternal life awaits us. The traditional notion of time of Akamba Africans, as shown by Mbiti, is two-dimensional. It actually is confined to the present, which progressively moves over into the distant past. The dimension of the future is lacking. (It is striking that in some Bantu languages, e g those who belong to the Western groups- (Herero, Mbundu etc), there is no grammatical form for indicating the future). Should we picture the dimension of time as spatial, then we can say that it does not move forward to a target in the future, but backwards in the direction of the past, because, for sure, present must become past. Man becomes a *mudzimu*, a shadowy something, he progressively disappears into oblivion into the far distant past. "Consequently, since man's orientation is towards the past" dimension of Time, the Akamba have no conception that this universe will ever change radically or come to an end, and the same

seems to be the case with other African peoples. Man looks back whence he came, and man is certain that nothing will bring this world to a conclusion. The universe is endless. There is nothing to suggest that the rhythm of days, months, seasons, and years will ever come to a halt, just as there is no end to the rhythm of birth, marriage, procreation, and death" (Mbiti, op cit p 25). Perhaps these views of Mbiti is not applicable to many peoples apart from the Akamba, whom he describes in his book. But for them at least the Bible comes up with an entirely new concept of time and history.

Because the traditional African community is directed to the past, it is also *static* in the sense that there is strong resistance to change, and that existing conditions, sprouting from the past, are normative.

Recently however, under the influence of the contact with European society and its view of the, the perspective on the future dimension is changing. One can everywhere notice dynamics, objectives and purposefulness. Happily, in certain aspects this makes it easier for Africans to understand the gospel, so that they can link up with these new perspectives and look at the future with Christ. This brings us to the third motive.

#### 10.8.2.3 The Kyriological Motive

This means: Christ is the Victor over death, and it is God's proof that He now reigns as King and Judge (Acts 17:31). This triumphant proclamation is the climax of Paul's speech in the Areopagus, and the apex of each sermon in the book of Acts -- the sermon of Peter on Pentecost (2:36), the words of Peter and John at the pillar of Solomon (3:15,26) and to Annas (4:10), the testimony of the apostles before the Jewish Council (5:30,31); the last words of Stephen before his stoning (7:55,56), the words of Peter to Cornelius and his assembly (10:40-42). Nearly half of Paul's address in Antioch deals with this (13:30-37). His often repeated defence while in prison was built on the fact: the risen and raised Saviour called me.

"And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith" (1 Cor 15:14. See also vss 15,17,18), are the words of Paul in the chapter in which he states that the resurrection of Christ from death is the focal point of the message of the gospel. "It is the focal point for Christianity and the very kernel of the Kerygma. Good Friday is flooded with meaning only in the light of Easter Sunday ..." (Mbiti, op cit p 161).

If it had not been for the resurrection of Jesus, then there would have been no message of the gospel, no outpouring of the Spirit, no missionary work, no church, no hope, no future for us. The

whole gospel centres round the resurrection. It must therefore receive concomitant emphasis in our preaching: He was raised by God -- like the endless refrain from an African song -- and therefore we shall also be raised.

Here one must guard against one danger, and that is that the future must not overcloud the reality to such an extent that the power of the Kingdom that has already come -- Christ who reigns *now* and the Holy Spirit with the powers of the century to come which we can *now* enjoy -- that this is pushed into oblivion, as so often happens.

When explaining the resurrection, strong emphasis must be put on the *real bodily resurrection* of Jesus, although in a different, spiritual body (1 Cor 15:44).

This climax of the gospel is very striking when preaching to Africans, especially because it is so new (regarding the impact of the resurrection message, Mbiti says in the above book p 163 "A Gospel based on the Resurrection must triumph. Ramsay rightly reminds us that 'it was the news of Jesus and of the Resurrection that first won the ancient world"). How new it is, and how strange it is in the traditional thoughts of Africans, is proved by the fact that many African church members and ministers do not realise this. It is my experience, that in the preaching of African ministers the death of atonement of Christ and an eternal life in heaven are being preached, but seldom or never the resurrection in a glorified body -- which actually is the final fruit of the death of atonement of Christ and which means more blessedness than mere spiritual continuation of life after death.

This can only be ascribed to a distorted or biased accent in our missionary preaching. I remember that a few years ago, I asked a blind woman, who had for a number of years regularly attended the church sermons and the catechisation classes, about her belief. She had a normal intelligence, but she did not know that she would one day rise with perfect eyes and see Christ. I picture for myself that this would be the first thing that a person would preach to a blind person.

This aspect of the gospel must be preached pointedly and antithetic-confrontingly against A T R, because it appears that for one or other reason this slips. Apart from possible neglect of this message in our preaching it could perhaps be ascribed to the fact that there is no analogy for this in A T R. With the survival of the spirit after death it is different. Although the element of glory and communion with Christ is lacking, all Africans accept the idea that death is not the end of everything. This is not news to them; indeed, their whole religion is based on it. It is familiar terrain for them; the whole of nature is filled with their spirits.

In so far as they have an idea of the world of the spirits, they believe that the spirits live in a world more or less similar to this world, with perhaps a higher status in the hierarchy of powers, more seniority, knowledge and influence, but still it is a world where the spirits have the same emotions and characteristics, even anti-social characteristics, which they had during their earthly life. A chief remains a chief in the world of the spirits, a thief or a witch remain a thief or a witch. A witch in the world of the spirits even helps his relations in this world to bewitch others (See also Mbiti, op cit p 72). But that world is not better than this one; possibly there is less happiness than here. The spirits are, despite their seniority in the rank order of powers, still dependent on the offerings of the living on this earth; they are not even immortal, they fade away into oblivion.

But the *resurrection* is something new! To explain the contrasting, redemptive message, I quote here a long extract from the book of Mbiti (op cit pp 168,9):

"The Resurrection ensures that the individual is not deprived of his being, by being worn out, washed away, dragged off, drained of being by the force of Time's backward dimension. It is only the resurrection of those in Christ which protects them from the subtracing effects of the *tene* period which, as we saw and as all experience drags the individual towards oblivion and obliteration, and robs him of his being. Now the Resurrection puts a halt to this process and reverses the whole momentum of Time..."

"But what makes this uniquely Christian is that the Resurrection is an intensely christological phenomenon, bringing everything into the present before God and Christ. For individuals it is the union between creatures and their Creator. Thus, the Resurrection is a personal experience, flooding mankind and the cosmos with the dimension of the present, in the presence of God, clothing them with immortality, incorruptability, unchangeableness and lifeness. It is a resurrection into a consciousness of and participation in the very presence of God..."

It will be wrong, however, to remain on this climax with an eye into the future, as if everything depends on the future. The Kingdom *has come*. *Christ is reigning presently*. *If he has conquered death, and sin and the powers of the devil, then it has meaning for today*. One of the reasons for the growth of syncretism and African messianism is the neglect of the powers of the future era. Christ's reign is also valid for our sin, and illnesses and demon-possession in *this* life. The message of the risen Jesus Christ and his Spirit binds us to do the works he did, and even greater works (John 14:12). In our initial preaching we need not scrap one jot or tittle of this promise.

May we pray for the power of the Holy Spirit, experiencing the kingship of Christ, the Spirit of the promoted Christ, that the exercise of this power in our missionary work do not stop at words, but in word and deed become a reality (we hope when discussing preaching of the New Testament, to come back to this point).

Without the real power of the Holy Spirit, all our preaching, how accurately it may confront the African religion, would be worthless.

#### 10.8.2.4 The Soteriological Motive

This motive is intertwined with the kyriological: because Christ is the living God, He is the Redeemer. "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31), means that you must bow before Him as King.

The idea that the king is also redeemer, was not strange to the ancient world. One of the titles of the Emperor August was "Soter, Redeemer". Like Jesus he was both "kurios" and "soter", "master" and "redeemer". The "pax romana" which he established, was the salvation state of an earthly saviour. Should we explain Christ as Saviour and Redeemer using the emperor as analogy, then it would mean that He has introduced the eternal kingdom.

However, there is a radically new element in his kingship and kingdom, which is symbolised from the outset by the rite of baptism by which one enters his kingdom. This is the element of *the redemptive suffering and death* of Christ.

One gets the impression that this element, considering the way things developed in the history of revelation in the book of Acts, gradually received more and more emphasis. In the preaching of Peter on Pentecost day it is not even explicitly mentioned, although it is implied by baptism (2:38). But when later he speaks to Cornelius and his friends, he preaches explicitly "forgiveness of sins through his name". (10:43).

It was clearly an element which was ever present in the preaching of Paul. In the oldest example of his preaching which we possess today, namely the sermon in the synagogue at Antioch (Acts 13:38) he says "that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you". In his summary of the gospel in 1 Thess 1:10, he says that Christ has delivered us from the wrath of God. In the great "resurrection chapter", 1 Cor 15, he states it still more explicitly as the main element of the gospel (vs 3), "For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures".

In sermons to the congregation, which to differentiate it from the (initial) preaching one can call "edifying preaching" this element is stressed more strongly: "For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor 2:2). In the only sacrament which was celebrated regularly in the congregation, the Holy Communion, the most important message is the redemptive death of Christ. It can therefore not be doubted that it is an important element of the gospel. *By believing this, one is saved.*

The problem is that this element mostly has a wrong place in the sequence of our preaching. It should not take first place. There it is meaningless for the heathen. To offer him reconciliation and redemption without him knowing something about wretchedness, guilt and judgement, jeopardizes communication in advance. He must first of all know that Christ came to judge, because he does not want to bow before his Creator and King and serve him; only then does the cross become meaningful as refuge. That is why the apostles, as a rule, preached the redemption through Christ only when the listeners already had an idea of the need for redemption.

As a *starting point* God's general revelation in the creation and maintenance of the world, has greater value than picturing God's love in Christ on the cross.

Concerning the *implications* of the redemption, the preaching should be aimed at the message of the resurrection. The first implication is that with this message the meaning of ancestor veneration disappears. That is why believers die with the request that after their death they must not be honoured, because they are with Christ. One thing which must here be borne in mind, is that the symbols used to describe our future with Christ, sometimes are interpreted differently from what is meant by the Bible. The images of "a house with many rooms" (John 14:2), a city (Hebr 11:10, Rev 21:22), a new earth ("new land" in many Bantu languages), and specially a banquet, are all symbols in which the fullness of the communion with God is illustrated (e.g Rev 22:3-5; 7:15; 1 Thess 4:17 b). But Africans may, in different ways and due to different causes, interpret the actual meaning wrongly.

This can happen because the focus of Christ and the communion with Him is neglected and the symbol of communion with Him is taken as something standing on its own and pictured in a broad materialistic manner. The "treasure in heaven" (Mt 6:20) is then, for example, explained in terms of earthly possessions (see Mbiti, op cit, p 72). Africans will be there just as rich as the Whites are here on earth. Frequently Luke 16:25 is applied on the White and the Black man: the Whites will there be poor because they enjoyed their good things on earth. The "fatherland" of Hebr 12:2 is depicted

as fertile haven where the spirits live, an idea which links it to the traditional conception of the place of residence of the spirits. This can be understood, in view of the lack of sufficient fertile agricultural land for people in the Black areas.

Also, the symbol of a banquet lends itself to a literal conception. Is there anyone who can enjoy feasting better than Africans? Then, the wedding meal of the Lamb can be pictured easily as a African feast with meat and porridge and plenty of beer!

One can carry on like this. Personally I do not see much harm in it to see the symbols literally. It is ultimately the manner in which God's revelation came to us, because we cannot think "completely spiritual". If God hid the Kingdom to wise and sensible people, and revealed it to children, then we need not be afraid to look with children's eyes or with concrete looking African eyes into the future. But here lies the danger: that Christ is, in our thoughts, removed from the symbol, so that He, later on, has no place in our expectations of the future, except to be the bridge through which we get there, after which he disappears from the scene.

Extra attention must be given in our preaching to the truth that *Christ is heaven*, and that eternal life is communion with God, also when we link up with the symbols of the Bible to explain it.

Another reason why the real meaning of a symbol can be lost, is that symbols or the words used in connection with it, elicits different associations for Africans than for the writers of Scripture.

One example: When the symbol of a "city" is used and this word refers to a city of Whites, it gives rise to associations of wealth and activity, of a constant rush, loneliness, the separation of father and family, and the lack of a real home.

If however, on the contrary, the African word for an African village is used, then all associations of family ties, of unity and communion, of commitment and safety, of warmth and rest, of being home, if the progressing of the circle of life, come directly to mind (see Mbiti, op cit p 76). One must keep this in mind when one mentions these things in sermons.

When we do not at this stage go further discussing initial preaching, we do not want to create the impression that it has only and exclusively value for the first contact with pagans and that we need not return to the topic later on. I tried to describe the importance of the initial preaching, because it is so important to create *a new total image* at the first contact with the listener, the receiver of the message, so that further teaching in the message of the

Bible do not reach him in loose disconnected portions, but that he should have terms of reference to fit each portion, like embroidery material, with the exterior lines of the pattern marked on it, and which must, in the course of time, be filled up and rounded off.

Especially at festive times, like the Passiontide, Pentecost, ascension, Easter, Baptism and Holy Communion, there are valuable opportunities for returning to the essentials of initial preaching and to amplify it.

#### 10.8 *Other Aspects of the Message of the New Testament*

The history of the Old Testament stretches over thousands of years, that of the New Testament is condensed into a few years, and the climaxes even into a few weeks. The main matters regarding this have already been dealt with in the "Initial preaching". The New Testament must naturally in linking with the Old Testament and as keystone on the Old Testament, be discussed to preserve the historic character of our approach.

We can, besides the "initial preaching" add a few themes by way of illustration of the antithetic confronting message of the New Testament.

##### 10.9.1 The Kingdom

###### 10.9.1.1 The Kingdom as a New Totality

It seems that we can rightly say that Africans see man, nature, the spirits and God, all these, as primarily part of the totality. Man's highest objective is to fit into this totality. His highest bliss is to fit into the right place, to be involved in it and live in harmony with it. This is even more important than to have much vital force, because to have more than your fair share of life force disturbs the harmony and transforms you into an anti-social being, a witch.

We learn from Genesis 3 that the totality and its harmony was distorted by the fall into sin. The whole of nature sighs, awaiting the renewal, because it is subject to condemnation (Rom 8:18-25).

With the coming of Christ the Kingdom came. This is the new totality, of which Christ is the Head. God, "of his will according to his good pleasure" (Eph 1:9) resolved "to put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment -- to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ" (Eph 1:10). Man's salvation lies in the fact that he finds a place in *this* Kingdom (Matt 5:1-12). The purpose of his life is to be of service in this Kingdom and to be involved in it (Matt 6:33).

It is of extreme importance to preach the truth that not everyone is automatically incorporated into this new totality, but that



*repentance*, becoming a new creature, is a *precondition* of incorporation into it.

Jesus became the head of a new mankind. He brought reconciliation (a known notion for Africans with their strong feeling for human relations -- reconciliation between man and God, and between people who belong to Him, members of his "family". This is a known notion with a rich content). One can really read Eph 2:14-22 and use the temple as symbol.

#### 10.9.1.2 The Kingdom as New Dominion

With the coming of Christ and his Kingdom he obtained the power over the spiritual powers. That is why in Matt 12:28, he can say "But if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you". And in Luke 10:18 "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven".

For Africans these powers are a real and daily experience. Possession cults are to be found among many peoples. To discard these things and to laugh away the belief therein as being "childish superstition," merely hinders communication. Indeed, it may perhaps reveal our own ignorance regarding the work and the guile of the devil. We must learn again to see the reality and activity of the devil, like Luther, who one night awoke from a loud noise and lit a lamp, and on seeing nothing, said, "Oh its you" and turned over and slept on. Is there anything which prevents the devil to get the people in his power who open themselves to the work of spiritual powers?

A message related to this, which has meaning not only for Africans, but also for Whites, but which is very much neglected in preaching, is that of the authority which Christ gave to his congregation over demonic powers. This authority was not only given to the seventy disciples two thousand years ago (Luke 10:17), but to his church, also now.

Paul, in his "twin" letters, Ephesians and Colossians, discusses this matter at length. In Eph 1:20-23 it is said that Christ's seat at the right hand of God in the heights, means that He now rules over all spiritual powers. In Eph 2:5-7 it is said that we, already now, in principle sit at the same seat with Him. That is, we share in his dominion. Further aspects of this are mentioned in Eph 6:12, Col 1:16 and 2:15.

One of the reasons for the progress of the Pentecostal Churches and the "independent churches", is that they take serious cognition of demonic powers and their work. They do not hesitate to accept this authority or at least to pretend that they accept it. Where it is accepted in Reformed circles and practiced, it receives God's

blessing.

### 10.9.1.3 The New Law of Life of The Kingdom

An element which apparently plays a major role in the African world view, is the notion of "limited cosmic good". With "good" is meant power of life, achievement, good luck, rather than material goods. Because this "cosmic good" is limited it means that man can only get more power, life or good luck by taking it away from somebody else.

Actually this is the adjustment to life of the natural, non-reborn man: life *at the cost* of your neighbour or others. It is remarkable that the Englishman C S Lewis in his well-known book *The Screwtape Letters* (in which he describes the training given by a "senior devil" to a "junior devil"), possibly without knowing about the widespread notion amongst primitive peoples, indicates precisely this as the basic philosophy of life of the devil: life at the cost of others.

The new law of life proclaimed by Christ when his Kingdom came is the direct opposite, "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it" (Mark 8:35). He who seeks to increase his own vital force, good luck and achievement, and wants to be a self-made man, will lose it. The kernel of wheat must first of all fall onto the ground and die to bear fruit (John 12:24, perhaps this text can be used as a starting point to preach the new law of life).

In this Kingdom, the natural hierarchical order is changed. It is given to the little flock (Luke 12:32). The poor, the meek, the persecuted -- they may enter (Matt 5:3,5,10). The first will be last and the last first (Matt 20:16). He who bows the lowest before others to wash their feet, will be elevated the highest by God (Matt 20:25-28, Phil 2:7-9).

Especially White missionary workers should demonstrate this law by living according to it, only then will the spoken word have authority.

### 10.9.2 The Nearness of God

Nowhere is the nearness of the high and elevated God so distinctly pictured as in the New Testament. And it must be a focal point of our preaching of the gospel.

For most African peoples God is far away. He is the "*Deus absconditus*", the hidden, absent God. There is no possibility of true communion with Him or of love for Him. The degree of communion

and the whisp of a trust relationship that exist regarding a higher power, are reserved for the ancestor spirits. They are, after all, relatives.

#### 10.9.2.1 Christmas

The clear answer of God to this, which is a complete answer, is Christ the Child in a manger: Immanuel, God *with* us.

There, when Jesus became man, the hierarchical scheme of the African world view was nullified. An important person according to that can have no contact with nonentities and vice versa even less. There is a Venda saying, "Water does not pass a hole". Important people, if they should ever be approached, should be approached through mediators. It cannot even be dreamt that the Almighty can be approached except through mediators. But, here comes Jesus, God Himself, over the vast distance which separates us from Him, to us. He pushes the hierarchical order, and everything attached to it, aside, and He becomes one of us, born as one of us, our Brother, our Relative, weak, helpless, small, like ourselves. Then, from our side, we can no longer maintain the supposed distance.

When God comes to us over such a distance, and bends so low over us, then we need not look for another refuge. This message is highlighted by the apex of Jesus' life of humiliation: the cross. If God "did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all -- how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things" (Rom 8:32). If He even died our death for us, then no further proof is required of his love, reliability and approachability.

#### 10.9.2.2 Ascension

Together with the revelation of the Kingdom of Christ, the "kyriological motive" herein is included the element of the nearness of God. One thinks of the Heidelberg Catechism, in the answer to Question 49 regarding the meaning of ascension, says "We are represented in heaven in our flesh being a security that He as Head, will gather us to him". Perhaps, when preaching, one can take as starting point the vision in Daniel 7: the Son of Man who came on the clouds to the Ancient of Days.

Pentecost conveys the same message and highlights another message regarding the nearness of God, namely his residence in us.

The need of Africans to have contact with a god, is inter alia, revealed in the "possession" cult which occurs so frequently among them. This cult is has been copied by the syncretistic sects, who call it "being filled with the Holy Ghost".

Pentecost teaches us that God the Creator does not only in

Christ reside *amongst* us, but even as the Holy Ghost, takes residence *within* us. This is the legacy of each church member of Jesus Christ. But the objective is not to transform us into soothsayers or to supplant our personality, it is to equip us with power to withstand sin, and without hesitation and without fear be witnesses of Jesus Christ -- fountains of living water. Because the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Christ who reaches out and takes us up to the completion of his Kingdom, and thereby actively works to build his church.

He makes us useful citizens of Christ's Kingdom, disciples who receive the grace to renounce themselves. The Holy Spirit makes us holy, that is: separated from sin, dedicated to God's service.

When sanctification is strongly emphasized, then the danger of sectarian abuses as mentioned above, arising in the church, will be much less.

### 10.9.3 The Sacraments

The sacraments are God's visual teaching to us, although it is much more than teaching. As a medium for communication it is highly effective for conveying spiritual truths, which rest on historical facts, via all our sense organs -- hearing, vision feeling, taste and smell (See Mbiti, op cit p 91, "... the most effective media of demonstrating, via material objects, those eschatological and christological realities which are conveyed only in part on the conceptual level").

"Sacraments" are unknown to A T R. There are many rituals, but they are merely forms of magical manipulation, not forms of communion. It is even the case when praying. Mbiti states it thus "God is "utilized" rather than worshipped..." (op cit p 95). *U rerelela* means to pray and bring propitiation sacrifices, but at the same time to pronounce a magic formula. Nowhere does one find the idea of cleansing of sin or guilt. It concerns only the magical removal of disease or ritual uncleanliness or contamination.

#### 10.9.3.1 Baptism

This sacrament is very rich in revelation content. It tells of the death of a condemned person (Rom 6:33 ff, Col 3:3 ff), of the new life, of rebirth and the resurrection to eternal life (Rom 6:4,5,8, Tit 3:5), of the cleansing of our sins through the reconciliatory blood of Christ (Acts 22:16, Hebr 10:22). Referring to baptism Paul says: "When anyone is joined to Christ, he is a new being; the old is gone, the new has come." (2 Cor 5:17) and Eph 4:24: "... and you must put on the new self, which is created in God's likeness and reveals itself in the true life that is upright and holy."

Among paedobaptists, these elements of revelation should be

more clearly emphasized when baptising children and teaching people about it. This is concrete, visual training. According to our "reformed" view the sacraments are not active by themselves, "ex opere operato", but their effectiveness depend on the *faith* of the person partaking, which means that there must be *understanding* of the revelation content thereof. Our faith has content, it is not just a simple acceptance of a number of dogmas which has been accepted by "the church" and of which we have no clue regarding the contents.

Should we wish to develop more understanding in Africans for the rich revelation content of the sacraments then it might be necessary to encourage them to formulate new liturgical forms. The existing liturgical forms are precious documents of faith against their own cultural and church background. They are moving documents in their touching exposition of the meaning of the sacraments. But they carry an unmistakable Western-European mark, with its characteristic strong argumentative character. This makes them less useful for Africa. It perhaps does not behove Whites to give too many indications what it must be like. It is certainly sufficient to suggest that the forms, if they are really necessary, must to a great extent bear the character of comment, if need be in the form of singing, even antiphonic singing, as part of the actions. There are many possibilities to make the forms more meaningful to Africans in this manner, and in so doing bring the idea of sacraments home, to strengthen the religious life of Africans.

Although sacraments are unknown in A T R, there is more than one cultural trait of Africans which makes linking possible with the introduction of sacraments. Regarding baptism, the idea to some extent links to the so called "transition rituals" which have such an important place in the life of Africans.

The first occurs very soon after the birth of a child, and it serves to transform a *thing*, "a baboon" which has been born, into a *person* and incorporate it into the tribe. Baptism is a definite Christian incorporation ceremony (e g 1 Cor 12:13), and when baptising children, reference can be made to this analogy, but, of course, with explanation of the difference. Should it not be done in such a confronting manner, then the temptation must be great to conduct both the baptism and the pagan incorporation ceremony, to assure the benefits and protection of both for the child.

Africans love to give new names, either to themselves or to others. Among many African peoples a person can, in different stadia of his life get new names, up to four times. With the Akamba it can happen as many as ten times (see Mbiti, Eschatology, p 110). The new name indicates that something has changed in a person. It may thus be wise, when baptising a person, to give him a new name as

testimony of his rebirth. It must preferably be a meaningful African name and not an Afrikaans or English name, else it can point in a greater extent to identification with the new culture than identification with Christ (see Mbiti, *Eschatology*, pp 111, 117, 8). The idea of a new "family" which the baptised has joined, is also expressed herein.

The *initiation rituals* are also transformation rituals (Mbiti, *Eschatology*, p 122). Certain ceremonies bound up with this are exactly similar to Biblical customs. One can think of circumcision, which was replaced by baptism (Col 2:11,12). For Africans the meaning of the circumcision ceremony is that childhood is now behind and that the participant is now fully incorporated into the adult world.

Certain characteristics in the preparation for baptism can easily be made analogous to characteristics of the initiation ceremonies. One can think of the time of seclusion. It might be useful to seclude persons being prepared for final instruction and for baptism and confession of faith, in a youth camp. The missionary or minister may then teach them the responsibilities of a believing adult. The christological character of baptism should, obviously, never be lost sight of.

It strikes one that the syncretistic sects regard baptism as an absolute condition for redemption. For them, it is synonymous with rebirth. It can perhaps be explained in this way, that there are many elements in baptism which remind them of ceremonies in their own culture, whilst this is not the case with Holy Communion. That is why they are frequently embarrassed by Holy Communion and disregard it.

#### 10.9.3.2 Holy Communion

In Scripture communion is just as important as baptism, just as rich in revelation content. Mbiti says "The Eucharist is a one act drama portraying comprehensively all the events, both historical and supra-historical, from the Incarnation to the Glorification (*Eschatology*, p 104). This refers backwards to the suffering and death of Christ, but also forward to the eternal feast at the end of time (Luke 22:16-18). But it not only points forward to the eternal feast, it is, in a certain sense, already a realization of it. Jesus, actually is the Bread of life, that came from heaven and which is eaten by us (John 6:53-59). Holy Communion is a Messianic meal which brings us together and blesses us.

It is a pity that Holy Communion in African churches frequently is a deterrent and not a happy communion with Christ. The words of Paul in (1 Cor 11:29), "That is why many among you are

weak and sick and a number of you have passed away", is explained in a magical way, just as if a dangerous curse rests on Holy Communion, which operates automatically, rather than that God's personal judgement comes down on the sinner because he takes part in the table of the Lord without any intention of repentance.

Furthermore, there is a widespread belief amongst Africans that words can be magical by themselves, and the introductory words can easily be interpreted as magic-charged words, so that even after communion, the bread and wine remain holy and still are signs of the body and blood of Jesus Christ. This magical wrong interpretation must clearly and specifically be disproved, also in the form. Here it is not man who manipulates powers with his magic-charged words, but God, who, by his grace, uses the humble prayer and acts of man to share in the wealth of his grace (see also Mbiti, *Eschatology*, p 121).

When one reads these things, then the question may come up in one's mind, "How can one ever try to preach the gospel to Africans if one does not know all these things". But still, thousands and thousands of workers surged forward and harvested a rich crop, without knowing most of these things. How was this possible?

Surely, due to many reasons. Perhaps the most important, is that their own lives preached the gospel in distinct language, and they reflected the serving love and victorious power of Christ. This is the important matter. Without it words are hollow sounds.

But let us not forget the large masses of semi-heathens in the sects and inside the churches. Where do they come from? Surely to a great extent from messages which was half or misunderstood. That is why our message must be confrontative.

## **11 Accommodating Preaching**

There is *not only discontinuity* between the Gospel and receptor cultures, but there are also aspects where there are *continuity* (Inch 1982:30-31). Indeed, God willed it that mankind may become aware of Him. There are also positive and neutral aspects of the culture of Africans which, in the preaching of The Word "must be taken possession of" (Bavinck's "possessio" 1954:182-194) and must be used in the preaching of the Gospel.

The preaching can tie up with the receptor culture, namely regarding the *form* as well as the *content*.

### *11.1 Formal Accommodation*

#### 11.1.1 Narrative Style (Weber 1957:39-41)

The peoples of Africa communicate by telling stories. To describe the character of a person, often a number of anecdotes are

told of the person in stead of making vague and general statements about his character. This is also the manner in which the Bible reveals God to us, namely through the history of his deeds of redemption.

11.1.2 Dialogue (Weber 1957:79; Kraft 1979a:281) (See also Stott, 1986, p 58-80)

The problem with narrative communication is that the listener can sit and listen in a passive manner. This problem is solved when the preaching is done in the form of dialogue, as was the case when Jesus and the Samaritan woman met (John 4). This involves the listener actively with his intellect and will. The practice of preaching in monologue form, which apparently for West-European Christians is so sacrosanct, is not necessarily the only Biblical model (Kraft 1979:281).

11.1.3 Group Dynamics

The subject here is not the so-called "sensitivity training", but the processes through which people, when discussing Scripture, together find the meaning and application thereof. In Africa people tend to communicate and think as members of a group rather than as individuals. *Communication* is often mainly *participation*. Especially for semi-literate and illiterate people this is a far better form of communication of the message than a poor sermon by a barely literate, untrained evangelist. It is also an important form of Christian *koinonia*.

11.1.4 Symbolic Acts

A missionary amongst the Bushmen relates that, whilst preaching, on the spur of the moment, he lighted a tuft of grass to illustrate the fire of God's judgement. This manner of communication has nothing to do with the so-called "mute images" which the Heidelberg Catechism contrasts with the living Word of God. Here it does not involve the use of images of saints as "books of the laity", but it means presenting the living Word in non-verbal form. *Ezekiel* built a small model of Jerusalem and placed siege equipment around it (Ez 4), *Jeremiah* had to wear a linen garment and to hide it in a crevice, *Hosea* had to wed an adulterous wife. Those are not, according to Scripture, "mute images", but still the living Word of God. God instituted the *sacraments* as visual symbols to confirm his Word, and they are not "mute images".

11.1.5 Song and Dances

Some nations, e g the Bushmen, communicate quite effectively through dramatic song and dances. These are religiously neutral forms of communication, and this function can be effectively utilized when communicating the Gospel. Nida (1960:174-177) mentions the example of nations who evangelize their neighbours by composing



songs of the main elements of the Gospel and then teaching it to them.

### 11.2 *Positive Linking with the Contents of the Receptor Culture*

Kraft (1979:153) relates the example of a dignified old chief who told the Missionary that God became estranged from mankind due to a careless woman giving God's Son food on a dirty plate, with the result that He has withdrawn from mankind. Then the chief asked "White man, can you say how one can again be reconciled with God?" Kraft here recommends that the question be answered first, namely to refer to Christ's incarnation and death on the cross, without, at the outset, to correct the wrong view regarding God's estrangement from mankind.

The strong notion of the people of Africa regarding the *totality* ties positively with the Old Testament. Here also the whole is more important than its parts. The kingdom of God must be proclaimed as a new totality of which Christ is the Head and wherein each believer is integrated in his destined place and finds his highest fulfilment.

It is further of great importance to the Church, especially in the disrupted urban community, that the church must present a new community, where people can find a spiritual haven and where they can serve, build, and love each other and render charity. There is a well-known Bantu saying "A person is a person through other persons". In the church a new dimension can be given to this saying by sanctifying it in the light of the love of Jesus Christ and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

## **12 The Person of the Communicator**

In his epoch-making book "The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World" Hendrik Kraemer, whilst discussing various aspects of the missionary approach, says that the most correct message and the most eloquent presentation will be of no avail if the person of the communicator, by himself, does not gain the trust and sympathy of the listeners (1938:307). "*Who* is saying this?" is more important to the listeners in the mission field than "*What* is he saying?" (Nida 1960:16).

God's method is person-to-person communication. The chief model is One who is much more than a mere model, namely Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who shed himself of his glory, emptied himself and became a servant of man. He renounced himself and became part of man's culture. The missionary must renounce himself in a similar manner and must be at home in the language and culture of the receptors of his message. This requires more effort and talent, not to mention the renouncement of oneself, than the highest academic achievement. It requires sincere love, interest, sensitivity for the feelings and thoughts of strangers, so that the communicator

can become an appreciated friend of the receptors.

It also requires the ability to exercise self-criticism, and the willingness to acknowledge when established methods and policies no longer work.

Finally, it is only the conformity to Christ which makes it possible for the communicator to fulfil his task. This, as well as the fruits of his message and the full understanding of it, are finally the work of the Holy Spirit, without whose blessing no communication is possible.

QUESTIONS ON CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION  
OF THE GOSPEL

- 1 (On 4) Discuss the three models of communicating the Gospel and indicate which should have the priority and why. (10)
- 2 (On 5) Discuss the theological principles for cross-cultural communication of the Gospel. (20)
- 3 (On 6) Describe the structure of communication of the Gospel.(20)
- 4 (On 9) Why is it so important to provide a new background in communicating the Gospel ? (5)
- 5 (On 10.1) Draw a diagram to illustrate the traditional African world view. (25)
- 6 (On 10.3.3) Discuss the notion of the *limited cosmic good*.
- 7 (On 10.4) Discuss the phenomenon of syncretism in African churches. (25)
- 8 (On 10.6.1) Discuss the strangeness of the Gospel that is communicated. (15)
- 9 (On 10.8.2) Discuss the value of the Pauline kerugma for communicating the gospel in an African context. (30)
- 10 (On 10.9.1) Discuss the preaching of the Kingdom of God as an element in communicating the gospel in an African context.(20)
- 11 (On 10.9.2) Discuss the preaching of the nearness of God in an African context. (15)