

## **4. THE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN S.A.**

### **4.1 Introduction**

The survey conducted among individual members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA) led to the following conclusions:

1. The beliefs with regard to the person of Jesus Christ are rather vague.

Only two thirds of the members affirmed the divinity of Jesus. Most of the respondents had difficulty in differentiating between the work of the Father, the Son and the Spirit.

2. Jesus Christ is viewed mostly as a provider of things that are desired for everyday life (health, prosperity, etc.). He is not primarily seen as an authoritative figure in people's lives and faith. He appears to be a rather remote figure for many members.

3. The answers given suggest a legalistic trend among Lutheran church members. 'Doing what is right (according to the rules of the church)' would, generally, better describe the attitude of Lutherans than 'being led by Christ (through his Word and Spirit)'.

4. Confusion was found among Lutheran church members regarding the attitude towards traditional beliefs and practices. Some reject these beliefs and practices totally, others accept them without reservation, and many seem to be unsure.

In order to shed more light on these issues, a more qualitative type of research was employed in the second phase of study. Two methods were used: content analysis of written material, and field research (primarily: in-depth interviews).

#### Content analysis of written material

A variety of written material was studied:

- books on Lutheran theology and missiology
- missiological and theological books, lectures and articles in theological magazines (e.g. *Credo*, a Lutheran Theological Journal for Southern Africa, and *ELCSA News*)
- handbooks and materials for catechism classes in ELCSA

- regulations for church practice and discipline in ELCSA
- articles of a more popular (pastoral and devotional) character, written by Lutheran pastors.

The latter was found in *Tšhupa-mabaka-a-kereke*, a yearbook published by churches that originated from the Berlin Mission Society. For the purposes of this research fifteen yearbooks (published between 1951 and 1973) were used. After the 70's the yearbooks did not contain anymore articles.

### Field research

The field research consisted primarily of in-depth interviews with some twenty Lutheran church members and church leaders, a few of which I visited more than once. Among those interviewed were two elders in the local congregation, two serving ELCSA-pastors, and two retired missionaries.

I also attended two church services and listened to some taped sermons.

## **4.2 Two church services**

I visited two ELCSA-church services, one in Soshanguve, Block H, the other one in Mamelodi-East. Both congregations have a large church building. Services start at 8:00 a.m. Inside the church building is a liturgical centre on stage, with an altar, candles and a cross on the wall. The pulpit is also on the stage, but off centre and to the side. There are traditional European pictures on the walls, depicting Jesus in different situations: as a child with His mother, with His disciples during the last supper, Jesus on the cross, etcetera.

The congregational members seem to be middle class people from the black community, a lot of them reasonably 'well off', with leaders who have enjoyed good education, people who love discipline and order. In both services there was a healthy mixture of all age groups.

The Lutheran character of the church is evident in many aspects of the liturgy: the garments, the burning candles, the hymns with their distinctly Lutheran tunes, the cantor

singing parts of the liturgy and the congregation answering. For a visitor used to the liturgical style of African Independent churches, it is a peculiar experience to hear these medieval sounds in an African ambience.

The Soshanguve service was a normal one, going through all the elements of the Lutheran liturgy: introitus, gloria, confession and forgiveness of sins, hymn singing, Scripture reading, announcements, collections, sermon, prayers and blessing.

The Mamelodi service was a lengthy one. The day I visited this congregation, new members of the women's league were installed and Holy Communion (held monthly) was administered.

In both the Soshanguve and Mamelodi services I felt that the reading of the announcements – halfway through the proceedings – interrupted the continuity and intruded on the atmosphere of the church service.

The sermon in Soshanguve was delivered by an elder. He preached on Mark 10:35-45, the story of John and James asking the Lord to give them a place in his kingdom, one on his right hand side, the other on his left. The language was mainly Sepedi (Northern Sotho) with a little bit of English added every now and then. He was an eloquent and lively speaker who cracked a few jokes and used examples from everyday life. The sermon did not contain much exegesis. Instead the preacher went straight to the application: Should anybody wish to be a leader in the church, he must be humble, leading by example. The approach was quite legalistic. Jesus Christ did not figure in the sermon except in the form of an admonition "*Jesu Kriste a e be backbone ya gago*" (let Jesus Christ be your backbone).

The sermon in Mamelodi was delivered by the pastor of the congregation. He spoke Setswana. The pastor chose John 21:15-19 as his text, the story of the Lord Jesus reinstating Peter as a disciple. He pointed out that Peter had probably lost his faith and had returned to his previous life of fishing. He immediately applied this to the lives of church members: "How many of you have fallen back after Jesus Christ called you?" He then stressed the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ who came looking for Peter, forgave his sins, and reinstated him as His disciple. This was also applied to the congregation: everybody should fulfil his role, especially the leaders of the congregation. We should

tell those who neglect church attendance and are therefore nominal members only, to come back and play a part in church work. During the last part of the sermon the pastor came down from the pulpit, walked up and down the aisle while talking, and entered into direct dialogue with some of the members. This produced some humorous moments but I felt that it also detracted from the authority of the message.

It struck me that in both church services there was a lot of involvement of church members. The church choir would be asked to sing a few songs. A brother or sister would be asked to do the Scripture reading. People would come forward to put their offerings on a table. During Holy Communion in Mamelodi two young girls were involved in serving the bread and wine.

Evidently a well known order of liturgy is followed, although things seem to happen quite spontaneously in both services.

Apart from these church services, I was not able to get hold of enough sermons (taped or printed) to give an objective opinion on the preaching in the Lutheran church. In the sermons I listened to, the life and work of Jesus Christ was certainly mentioned, but it focused on his earthly ministry, not on his present work as the exalted Lord and Saviour. I found that there was a tendency towards a moralistic type of preaching. People were told not to gossip, to speak the truth, not to be jealous, to care for one another, etcetera.

A sermon on the words of Jesus at the cross 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Mat. 27:46) was applied in this way: When we are in trouble, we must pray to our heavenly Father, just like Jesus did on the cross.

A sermon on the words of Jesus to his mother 'Dear woman, here is your son' and to John 'Here is your mother' (John 19:26-27), was given this application: We must care for one another, just like Jesus wanted his mother and disciple to care for one another.

This type of moralistic preaching seems to be widespread in African churches (not only in the Lutheran church).

### 4.3 Perceptions of Jesus Christ

I studied 15 volumes of *Tšhupa-mabaka a kereke*, the yearbook of the Lutheran churches among the Pedi-speaking people (Berlin Mission Society). During the 1960's and 70's these yearbooks contained many articles written by Lutheran pastors, as well as a few by missionaries. I analysed 70 articles to find out what perceptions of Jesus Christ existed. The amazing thing was that I found none. The articles were in different categories. Some articles, especially those written by missionaries, aimed at giving guidelines for the upbuilding of the church (for example: how to do home visits) or putting forward the Lutheran teaching on a specific subject (for example: baptism). I found an article about the work of the Holy Spirit, but none about the person or work of Jesus Christ. Neither did I find an exposition of the relationship between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (the Trinity).

The majority of articles, especially those written by black pastors, were aimed at giving practical guidelines for the Christian life. Quite a few warned against the dangers of drinking too much and even more were aimed at urging church members to trust God and to serve Him. Some pastors did this by narrating real life stories (sometimes used allegorically), others used fables to make their point.

A 'real life story' with a message was written by Th. Mamešša: *Mo xohle thušo ke ya Modimo*<sup>14</sup>. The writer recounts how, as a young boy of 17 years, he was on his way home with a cart and three donkeys. He had to cross a river but as a result of heavy rainfall the water had risen to such a level that it was too dangerous to cross. So he spent the night there, on the river banks. He had nothing to eat and nowhere to go. The next day he decided that it was of no use dying of hunger, and he prayed to God: "God, help me so that I may cross this river, because You can see that I have no food left and there is no place where I can go to ask for it. But if this is the day You have fixed for me to leave this earth, I pray that You will receive my spirit. If it is not the day, I pray that You help me to cross this river." After this prayer he went down into the river with his cart and donkeys and, although the water was wild and dangerous, they were miraculously saved and arrived on the other side. The lesson of the story: "Let all Christians realize that the God who they

---

<sup>14</sup> *Tšhupa-mabaka a kereke* 1953:37-39.

trust, is a mighty fortress, therefore we have to pray to Him and trust Him, because He is everywhere and He governs all things under heaven.”

Another story, this time with an allegorical application, is the one written by I.M. Rangata: *Motho wa go hwela lefsifising* (The man who died in darkness).<sup>15</sup> It tells of a white man searching for diamonds in a cave. He took with him a light and a very long rope. He tied one end of the rope to a rock at the entrance of the cave and then, trailing it behind him, entered the cave. The rope would enable him to find his way out again. Inside the cave he found many diamonds, so he put his light and rope aside in order to collect the treasures. However, the light went out, he was in total darkness and he could see nothing. He felt around for his rope but could not find it. He was trapped inside and could not find his way out of the cave. Hours, days, weeks went by and eventually he died of hunger and thirst. The people who came searching for him, found the rope at the entrance of the cave. They entered and by following the rope they found the dead man with his pockets full of diamonds.

The application: “Many of us are like that man. We are looking for a treasure on earth, and we forget the light of our spirit which is the Bible. The rope that has been mentioned is our salvation. It is near to us, but we do not see it. The Word of God aims to take us out of darkness and to draw us to the light of life.”

An example of a fable is the one written by the same I.M. Rangata: *A o mmankgagane naa?* (Are you a bat?).<sup>16</sup> The story goes:

“There was once a war between the birds and the animals. When it appeared as though the birds would be defeated, the bats sided with the animals. Except that when the animals were being defeated, the bats sided with the birds. After the war was over, the bats went to the birds, only to be told: Although you can fly, we do not like you because you are animals. When the bats went to the animals, they were told: Although you have four legs, you are not animals. Therefore, even today the bats do not know where they belong. The bat is neither a bird nor an animal.

A hypocrite is a person who tries to walk two paths. When he is with Christians, he is a Christian. When he is with pagans, he is a pagan. He loves to sit on the fence. Read 2 Cor. 6:14-15. In prosperous times you will find many Christians, but when Christianity invites

---

<sup>15</sup> *Tshupa-mabaka a kereke* 1957:23.

<sup>16</sup> *Tshupa-mabaka a kereke* 1959:38-39.

suffering and threats you quickly discover who are the real Christians. On occasions when pagans have difficult work to do, for instance, to collect money for some cause, you will see that people suddenly become Christians. There are some who come to church so that they can marry a daughter of a believer, and then, when they consider their duties fulfilled, become backsliders.” After some more examples, the writer concludes by saying: “You who have read these things, are you a bat, or what are you?”

The conclusion after analyzing these articles had to be: There was not one article to be found that contained a meaningful Christological exposition.

The question is whether this absence of articles with a christological content is accidental or whether it represents a broad trend in the Lutheran churches in southern Africa.

Evidence gathered from other researchers and from my own interviews, suggests that there is indeed a Christological flaw in the faith of Lutheran Christians. Though the name of Jesus Christ is used frequently, especially in formulas (“in the name of Jesus Christ”), He often remains a vague figure.

Lutheran church members told me that their pastors preach about God, but that they do not stress the person of Jesus.

Dierks, a Lutheran missionary among the Tswana, was speaking from personal experience when he said (1986:132): “Vergeblich habe ich in meiner langjährigen Tätigkeit als Missionar auf spontane christozentrische Glaubenszeugnisse bei Tswana-Christen gewartet” (During my many working years as a missionary I have waited in vain for spontaneous Christocentric testimonies of faith by Tswana Christians.)

Interviews I had with different Lutheran church leaders and church members, generally pointed in the same direction.

One of the Lutheran pastors I interviewed opined that knowledge of Jesus Christ is lacking in his church. Our church members, he said, “know that Jesus has died for the sins, but it ends there.” According to his own experience lay-preachers mention the name of the Father and the Holy Spirit in their sermons, but “*ga ba bue thata ka Jesu*” (they don’t speak much about Jesus). Although the doctrine of Christ is taught during confirmation class, the understanding of it fades on completion of the classes. It does not permeate the lives of believers. He explained: “In confirmation class I teach the children

that Jesus Christ is *Modimo ruri le motho ruri* (really God and really man) but after confirmation it somehow falls away. If you ask people: What does Jesus Christ do today? they don't know."

This pastor also felt that the doctrine of the Trinity is poorly understood by the majority of Lutheran church members. In his explanation of this he said: "We should not blame the people. It is the church that gave inadequate teaching. *Re tlogetše batho* (we have let the people down)."

Exemplary of the fact that church members have no clear view of Jesus Christ, is the complacency exhibited towards sins. "*Ga go sa na dihlong*" (there is no sense of shame anymore), the pastor complained. "*Ge ba wela sebeng, ga go na dihlong*" (when they fall into sin, there is no sense of guilt). Should the church wish to exercise discipline, members misuse the words of Jesus 'let him who is without sin, be the first to throw a stone'.

When dealing with a girl who bears a child outside wedlock, this pastor stresses that she should acknowledge her sin: "*o swanetše go ipona molato*" (you should acknowledge your sin), but he often feels that this involves no real repentance and that it remains an external gesture only.

Neither is stealing seen as a grave sin anymore. "People started stealing from the whites (they would say: the whites have enough), but now they steal among themselves." This pastor partly blames the time of the struggle and the influence of politicians for the corruption of township lifestyles. "*Ba be ba diriša bana ba sekolo go senya; le kajeno ba sa ntse ba tswela pele ka mošomo wa bona*" (They used to use school children to destroy; today these children still continue with their 'work').

The solution to the problem is that "*re swanetše go lemoša batho gore Jesu o teng*" (we must make people realize that Jesus is there). "*Jesu o re lebile, fela, batho ga ba lemoge*" (Jesus is watching us, but people don't realize it).

The feelings of this (black) pastor were echoed by a (white) missionary who stated: "I have continually tried to stress that Jesus Christ is fully God and fully man, but every time I teach or preach, it seems that I have to start all over again."

Although one would have to wait in vain for a “spontaneous” christocentric testimonial (Dierks), this does not mean that the Lutheran Christians have no basic Christological convictions at all.

In response to a general question (“What does Jesus Christ mean to you?”) the answers were similar to those given in the survey: The most popular answer was: “He is our Saviour” (*Mophološi*). An explicit reply explaining that Christ saved us from our sins by dying on the cross, but that He continues to be our Saviour by helping us in the difficulties we experience on earth, also occurred.

I found that the more well trained Lutheran members (elders, pastors) were able to differentiate between the Father and the Son, but that average church members often found it difficult to do so. An awareness of the Father and the Son being one, yet not identical, was present. Only one man called Jesus ‘our Father’, while others distinguished the Father from the Son by denoting Jesus as the Son of God, or the Messenger (*Moromiwa*, the one who is being sent) of God. It seems that differentiation becomes still more problematic when considering the distinct roles of the Father and Son.

Activities ascribed specifically to Jesus included: He prays for us, He prepares a place for us. But some other works mentioned could have been attributed to the Father as well: He helps us, He looks after our needs, He gives us power.

Specific questioning about the meaning of the kingship of Christ elicited a varied response.

An elder referred to Philippians 2 and said: “it means that the Father has given the glory to Jesus Christ.”

Another man mentioned two things: in the first place he said, “*ba bangwe ba ka re timetša; Jesu o a re tsamaisa*” (other people may lead us astray; Jesus keeps us on the right track); and in the second place, “*Jesu o a re protecta*” (Jesus protects us). On querying from what does Jesus protect us, he mentioned witchcraft.

One of the pastors explained that the kingship of Christ meant: “*O godimo ga tso tšohle*” (He is above everything) and then he referred to Psalm 121: “*ga a lape, ga a lwale, ga a hwe*” (He does not get tired, He does not become ill, He never dies). When asked whether we are Jesus’ slaves, servants or children, he replied: “*Re bagwera ba gagwe, ka gobane*

*Jesu o boletše a re: ke mogwera wa badiitsana le bahlologadi*” (we are his friends, because Jesus said: I am the friend of orphans and widows).

The other pastor explained that to him the kingship of Christ meant: “*o gohle*” (He is everywhere), “*o a buša*” (He is reigning), “*kereke ke ya gagwe*” (the church is His), “*pušo ya gagwe e teng lefaseng*” (His reign is here on earth).

When I asked for examples of how the kingship of Christ functions in their personal lives, I received the following:

“When there is harmony (*phedišano*).”

“When there is an illness: you believe, you pray and you are healed.”

“When you are protected from dangers” (*go tswa dikotsing*).

“When you wake up in the morning, you know that this day has been given to you by Jesus Christ.”

### Evaluation

Evaluation shows that the work of Christ is understood primarily in terms of creation/providence and of protection. The notion of Christ as the Owner of His believing subjects, Who has authority over their lives, did not figure strongly nor was it entirely absent.

It is important to note here that ‘protection’ is not so much thought of as a protection against spiritual dangers (like falling in sin, temptations) but rather against earthly dangers (accidents, bad luck).

One of the missionaries I interviewed, confirmed this. He felt that Jesus is primarily seen as a Provider (of good fortune, life force) and a Protector (against dangers, back luck, disease).

## **4.4 Salvation and Holy Communion**

Members’ perceptions about the position and work of Jesus Christ are influenced by their views on salvation, and vice versa. It was considered worthwhile to try and get more information on the views of salvation among ELCSA-members.

In order to do this an investigation of beliefs about Holy Communion was carried out. This sacrament is an important part of church life in ELCSA and is normally celebrated every month. What type of salvation – physical, spiritual – do members expect from Holy Communion? Do they experience a close bond with Jesus Christ when taking part? After all, when Jesus instituted Holy Communion He told his followers to eat the bread and drink the wine in remembrance of Him (1 Cor. 11:24-25).

Questions asked were:

- Do you enjoy taking part in Holy Communion? If yes, what do you like about it?
- What is the ‘work’ of Holy Communion? What does it give us, or what effect does it have on us?

Here follows a list of answers given by Lutheran members.

- *“ge ke fetša go ja Selalelo, ke ikwa ke lokologile”* (after taking part in the Holy Communion I feel relieved)
- *“e tloša dibe tsa rena”* (it takes away our sins); mentioned by several respondents
- *“ge o feditše go ja, dibe di tlogile”* (when you have finished eating, the sins are gone)
- *“ke tswa motho o mofsa ka mehla, ke tswalwa lefsa”* (I always come out as a new person, I’m born again)
- *“e nthusa go gopola Jesu Kriste”* (it helps me to remember Jesus Christ)
- *“e re fa maatla a Moya o mokgethwa”* (it gives us the power of the Holy Spirit); this woman explained that she has a drinking problem, but on the day that she takes part in Holy Communion, she is strong, you won’t find her drunk that day
- *“se bontsha gore ke ngwana wa Modimo”* (it shows that I am a child of God)
- *“se tliša Moya o mokgethwa”* (it gives us the Holy Spirit)
- *“se re fa maatla”* (it gives us power); mentioned by several respondents
- *“ge o ja Selalelo, o gopola Morena Jesu, dibe di tla tloga ge Modimo a ka go swarela ka go confessa”* (when you take part in Holy Communion, you remember the Lord Jesus, you confess your sins, after which God forgives you and the sins depart)
- *“se bontsha botee mo kerekeng”* (it shows the unity in the church); mentioned several times
- *“se ka fodiša motho”* (it can heal a person)

The answers reflect a variety of effects Holy Communion is perceived to have on personal and congregational life. A striking characteristic is that Holy Communion is expected to 'do' something. It works. The believer's faith is not remarked upon, neither is the act of God. Nevertheless Holy Communion has its effect.

Do these answers reflect an 'ex opere operato' tendency (which means, that the sacrament is believed to do its work irrespective of the faith of the participant)?

One of the pastors I interviewed, stated that there are many misinterpretations of Holy Communion among his members. The expectation that Holy Communion may heal a sick person, is especially something against which he battles. "As a pastor you may receive a message from somebody asking for *Selalelo* (Holy Communion). On investigation you may find that the person is a backslider or not even a church member, but that his family wants him to receive *Selalelo*." At other times he is pressurized: "People tell me: *Go nale molwetsi kua sepetleleng, šiana, o mo fe Selalelo!*" (There is someone ill at the hospital; quick: give him Holy Communion!) Should the pastor not go, he may be held responsible for the person's death, which makes it very difficult for him to refuse. The pastor I spoke to says that his first question is always: "*Ke tla botšiša: why all of a sudden motho o nyaka selalelo?*" (I will ask: why all of a sudden does this person want Holy Communion?). He will tell the person "*nka go rapelela, fela, nka se go fe Selalelo*" (I can pray for you, but I can't give you Holy Communion). His teaching in the congregation is: "*Selalelo ga se magic, ga se sehlare*" (Holy Communion is not something magic, it is not a medicine).

One of the missionaries I interviewed, confirmed that Holy Communion is often misunderstood. "Our people like to receive Holy Communion when they are ill." Even when they are not ill, they expect to receive power by taking part in it. He remembered one church member who told him: "The blood of Christ is the power that protects you." Church members mention forgiveness of sins as an important aspect of Holy Communion, but the imparting of healing and power as a life-force are often seen as more significant. It is believed that these forces are somehow transferred by participation in Holy Communion.

This missionary recalled an incident of complaint from women in the congregation, which was brought to his attention by one of the elders: "*Basadi ba re beine ke e nyane*" (The women say the wine is 'small'). They wanted more wine. Why? According to the interpretation of this missionary: because they expected life-force from it.

In the evaluation of these answers and views, one should take into consideration the Lutheran doctrine on Holy Communion, as well as the way it is celebrated.

From a doctrinal point of view the Lutheran church has always maintained that there is a strong link between the symbols of bread and wine and Jesus Christ himself. Lutherans believe Christ's body and blood is present in the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper. This is also called a sacramental presence, meaning: "His body and blood are here in the elements of bread and wine. We take Him at His word even though we cannot explain the presence." (Kolb 1993:232)

This doctrine has been taught by Lutheran missionaries since mission work commenced. Luther's Small Catechism, as translated in Northern Sotho, and used extensively by Lutheran missionaries, has: "*Selalelo se sekgethwa ke eng? Ke mmele wa makgonthe wa Jesu Kriste, le madi a makgonthe a Jesu Kriste; di mo senkgweng le mo beineng; di beetšwe rena bakriste ke Kriste ka noši, gore re di je, re di nwe.*" (Translation: "What is the Holy Communion? It is the true body of Jesus Christ, and the true blood of Jesus Christ, these are in the bread and the wine; they are given to us as Christians by Christ himself, so that we eat them and drink them.")

When comparing this translation to the official text of the Small Catechism (Tappert 1959:351), it is interesting to note that the typical Lutheran formula "under the bread and wine" has been changed to "in the bread and the wine". This makes direct association of the sign (bread/wine) with the body and blood of Jesus Christ even stronger than it was in the original catechism.

Rev. Hoffman, in his handbook for the confirmation class, explains the Lutheran doctrine as follows (1938:83): "*Kereke ya Luthere e ruta e re: "Motho ge a e-ja senkgwa, o ja mmele wa Morena; gomme ge a e-nwa beine, o nwa madi a Morena. Mokgwa so senkgwa se kopanago le mmele wa Morena, le beine, mokgwa wo e kopanago le madi a Morena, ga re di hlaologanye, ke phihlo. Gomme re holofela Lentšu la Jesu ge a re: ...*

*Ke mmele wa-ka... ke madi a-ka.*” (Translation: “The Lutheran Church teaches: When a person eats the bread, he eats the body of the Lord; and when he drinks the wine, he drinks the blood of the Lord. The way in which the bread becomes one with the body of the Lord, and the way in which the wine becomes one with the blood of the Lord, we do not understand: it is a mystery. We trust the Word of Jesus when He said: ... this is my body... this is my blood.”)

Luther himself rejected the misrepresentation that the sacraments work ‘*ex opere operato*’. Although he stressed that “God’s Word works on its own power, without depending on human contribution or participation” (Kolb 1993:237), he emphasized the importance of faith in order to receive the benefits of the Lord’s Supper. “The Word of the Lord, with the bread-body and wine-blood, does not work ‘magically’ to place some charm or amulet upon the recipient” (:237). Luther believed that God himself “does create faith so that we may receive the benefits of the meal” (:237).

It may well be, however, that Africa, where belief in the power of rituals is traditionally strong, formed a good breeding ground for the very misrepresentation Luther feared. In other words: the possibility exists that the strong identification of bread & wine with the body & blood of Christ have produced ‘*ex opere operato*’ beliefs in the Lutheran church in Africa.

Interestingly the same ‘*ex opere operato*’ tendency is found with regard to baptism. Luther did not consider the water in baptism to be common water, but water which through the Word with its inherent power had become gracious water of life, a washing of regeneration. Although Luther himself made the effect of baptism dependent on faith in the recipient (in the case of adults at least), among some of his followers this led to the idea that the sacrament works ‘*ex opere operato*’ (Berkhof 1958:627).

The ‘*ex opere operato*’ tendency finds corroboration in articles written by Lutheran pastors. In a recent article discussing the connection between baptism with water and baptism with the Holy Spirit, Rev. Modisane stresses that these two baptisms are “inseparable” (Modisane 1996:15). Baptism with the Spirit is “God’s activity” (:18). The Spirit is “an external power which enters the believers from outside” (:19). Believers are “totally passive” when receiving the Spirit (:19,20). Modisane speaks of “the Holy Spirit which the believers receive in their baptism” (:18-20) without any qualification. The

same applies to Christ: “In baptism the believers become organically and absolutely united to... Jesus Christ’s life” (:21). Faith is not mentioned as a means of receiving the blessings of the Spirit. All those who are baptized receive the Holy Spirit, Who goes to work in their lives.

There is another aspect of the Lutheran doctrine with regard to the Lord’s Supper that should be taken into consideration. When speaking of the benefits of the Lord’s Supper, Luther’s Small Catechism is translated to this: “*Mo selalelong re newa tebalelo ya melato le bophelo le mahlatse ka lentšu leo. Gobane mo tebalelo ya melato e lego gona, le bophelo le mahlatse di gona le tšona.*” On conversion this means: “In Holy Communion we are given forgiveness of sins and life and good fortune by this word. Because where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and good fortune.”

When compared with the official text (Tappert 1959:352) there is one important change. Whereas the official text speaks about “forgiveness of sins, life and salvation”, the Northern Sotho translation speaks about “forgiveness of sins, life and *mahlatse*.” The word ‘mahlatse’ means ‘luck, good fortune’ (Ziervogel & Mokgokong 1985:421) and is a much shallower notion than salvation. When a person says ‘*ke na le mahlatse*’, it means that things are going well, that he has experienced no major set-backs recently, and that he is generally having a good life. This is something different from the concept of ‘salvation’ which Luther had in mind. When Luther in his Large Catechism explains the benefits of the Lord’s Supper more fully, it is clear that, primarily, he is thinking of strengthening of faith. The Lord’s Supper “nourishes and strengthens the new man,” he writes (Tappert 1959:449), and he continues to say: “The Lord’s Supper is given as a daily food and sustenance so that our faith may refresh and strengthen itself and not weaken in the struggle but grow continually stronger” (449).

Through the Northern Sotho translation of Luther’s Small Catechism the word ‘*mahlatse*’ is commonly used with regard to the benefits of Holy Communion. Hoffman (1938:84) also uses the word in his confirmation handbook: “*Go ja mmele wa Morena le madi a gagwe go dira’ng mo go rena? Go dira gore re newe bophelo le mahlatse.*” In translation: “What does the eating of the body of the Lord and his blood do in us? It causes that we are given life and good fortune.” It gives us life and good fortune.”

It may well be that the use of this one word ‘mahlatse’ has contributed to biased expectations of Holy Communion. Garnered responses certainly reflect an inclination towards expecting the earthly blessings of prosperity, health and good fortune. This in turn may have influenced the perceptions people have of Jesus Christ! After all, in Lutheran teaching Jesus is connected closely to the bread and wine and they in turn give ‘mahlatse’...

Besides this we also have to take into consideration the way Holy Communion is administered. In the present day ELCSA Holy Communion is administered not only in the church but also to the sick, terminally ill and the aged. This ministry to the sick and dying is highly valued by church members. Mkhize maintains: “My experience during a period of 30 years in the ministry has taught me this lesson: I have often heard congregation-members complain that during their times of illness and suffering their pastors have done much to help them, but have failed in giving them their spiritual food, Holy Communion.” (1965:20.)

Mkhize views this ministry as spiritual care of the sick, aged and dying. But in practice this ministry, which has the good intention of proclaiming God’s grace and mercy to needy persons, is in the African context prone to be misunderstood. Traditionally in Africa there is no clear line between natural and supernatural causes of illness. The source of all disease is at least partially supernatural (for example through sorcery, or sent by ancestral spirits), and this idea may still persist to some extent among Christians, making sickness a major spiritual problem (Dayhoff 1980:364).

If church members see their pastors administering the bread and wine to the sick in a specially organised ceremony, they may easily get the impression that this has replaced the old African rituals which involved traditional doctors calling on the gods, performing rituals and supplying medicines. Isn’t it the same in many ways? There is a religious specialist (pastor), who calls on the gods (God), performs a ritual (holy communion) and supplies some medicine (bread and wine) in order to drive away the dark forces of sickness and misfortune. When seen from this angle, it needs a lot of explanation from the pastor’s side to preclude pagan misunderstandings of holy communion!

This, once again, may have an effect on how people perceive Jesus Christ. Especially if pastors use the expression “we are going to take Jesus Christ to so and so” (according to one of the missionaries I interviewed this was common practice among the early missionaries), it creates the impression that Jesus Christ is primarily there for providing life-force and combatting sickness and misfortune.

### Evaluation

To summarize the findings on salvation as reflected in beliefs about Holy Communion, we conclude that

- 1) there is a tendency towards an ‘ex opere operato’ belief which trusts that the sacrament of Holy Communion works regardless of the faith of the recipient; Lutheran doctrine pertaining to the sacraments may have played a role in this process.
- 2) there is a propensity toward expecting creational type blessings (life-force, healing, *mahlatsé*) from Holy Communion, rather than the forgiveness of sins and strengthening of faith.

Findings on views of salvation in ELCSA, as described in this paragraph, concur with those in the previous paragraph. There is a tendency to view salvation in creational terms. The Lordship of Jesus Christ is primarily seen in his benevolent power to help, to give life force and to protect against misfortune. Theologically there is no need to differentiate between the work of the Father and the Son.

### **4.5 Authority of Jesus Christ versus Legalism**

An important part of the research focused on the question whether Lutheran church members view Jesus Christ as an authoritative figure in their lives. Do they feel that He rules or guides them? Do they seek His will? Do they feel responsible towards Him for the things they say and do? Do they ‘live under’ Jesus Christ or are their lives governed by somebody or something else?

Both Luther’s Small and Large Catechism when explaining the second part of the Apostles Creed, emphasize the Lordship of Christ.

The Small Catechism says: “I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the virgin Mary, is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, delivered me and freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with silver and gold, but with his holy and precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death, in order that I may be his, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, even as he is risen from the dead and lives and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true.” (Tappert 1959:345)

The relevant words here are “my Lord” and “that I may be his, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him...”

In the Northern Sotho-translation ‘my Lord’ is translated as ‘*Mong wa ka*’ which means: my owner, master, boss (Ziervogel & Mokgokong 1985:828). It is noteworthy that the word ‘*Mong*’ replaces the word ‘*Morena*’ (Lord) which is used in the text of the creed itself. The word ‘*morena*’ is derived from the verb ‘*go rena*’ which means: to govern, reign (Ziervogel & Mokgokong 1985:1109). When compared, the word ‘*mong*’ places more emphasis on the relationship between the ‘*mong*’ and his inferior (he is the owner, the boss) whereas the word ‘*morena*’ emphasizes his action (he governs, rules). There is, however, no major difference between these two words.

In the Northern Sotho-translation the words “that I may be his, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him...” are excellently translated by: “*ke tle ke be wa gagwe, ke phele mmušong wa gagwe ka tlase ga gagwe, gomme ke mo direle...*”

In the Large Catechism Luther takes the Lordship of Christ as his point of departure. He writes, “We shall concentrate on these words, “in Jesus Christ, our Lord.” (Tappert 1959:414). According to Luther’s explanation the Lordship of Christ means “that he has redeemed me from sin, from the devil, from death, and from all evil.” (414) “He has taken us as his own, under his protection, in order that he may rule us by his righteousness, wisdom, power, life, and blessedness.” (414)

The governance of Christ comes back in the third article, where Luther says: “Just as the Son obtains dominion by purchasing us through his birth, death, and resurrection, etc., so the Holy Spirit effects our sanctification...” (415)

In Hoffmann's handbook for the confirmation class the Lordship of Christ is taught according to classical Lutheran doctrine. He literally quotes the Small Catechism while explaining that the kingship of Christ is threefold: it is a kingdom of power (*mmušo wa matla*), a kingdom of grace (*mmušo wa kgaugelo*) and a kingdom of glory (*mmušo wa letago*). That the kingship of Christ is, or should be, a reality in believers lives, is explained in the following question and answer:

*“O tlo bontšha ka eng gobane o dumela mophološi wa gago ka go rereša?*

*Ke tla phela mmušong wa gagwe (ke bušwa ke Yena), ka tlase ga gagwe (ke dira ka melao ya gagwe).”* (Hoffmann 1938:50) In translation this reads: “How will you show that you really believe in your Saviour? I will live in His kingdom (I am ruled by Him), under Him (I act according to his law).”

It is clear that the kingship of Christ is taught in the Lutheran catechisms. It has been part of Lutheran faith to view Jesus Christ as the Lord, the One who has authority over the lives of believers.

The question now is, to what extent has the authority of Jesus Christ become a reality in the faith of Lutheran believers in ELCSA. In this regard it is important to take note of earlier opinions by researchers and church leaders on the problem of legalism in the church.

The use of the word legalism here does not refer to the theological type of legalism (sometimes called synergism) which states that the keeping of the law should somehow cooperate with the grace of God to produce the salvation of man. We refer rather to the more practical (theologically unintentional) type of legalism in which outward aspects of moral conduct are emphasized at the expense of inner motivation provided by love and dedication to God. We also refer to legalism in the sense of people placing their trust in the adherence of (church) laws rather than the guidance of the Lord through his Word and Spirit. Dayhoff, speaking from a Pentecostal Holiness perspective, maintains: “Legalism becomes a serious danger to the church when people try in their own strength to be Christians without the inner renewal by the Holy Spirit and when church discipline is

administered in the absence of a spirit of revival in the congregation” (Dayhoff 1980:352).

Dayhoff conducted research in the Church of the Nazarene and the Evangelical Lutheran Church among the Northern Sotho people in the 1970's. He found that legalism is a serious problem in both churches. With regard to the teaching of the Lutheran church (sermons, etc.) he found that “the problem of legalism is evident with a weakness in the teaching on love for God and a somewhat weak emphasis on benevolence” (312-313). He found that members usually stress obedience to the laws of God as something very important, but that the idea of loving God was not mentioned as something important. That God should be loved was mentioned by only 32 % of his Lutheran respondents, but that God should be obeyed was mentioned by a massive 92 % (325-327).

An area in which legalism is particularly problematic, is that of church discipline. A proclivity towards legalistic judgments exists. Another area in which legalism was noted, was the teaching on church offerings (351).

Dayhoff believes that the traditional African background is partly to blame for the problem of legalism. In two ways: Firstly he quotes Philip Turner who wrote: “One of the deepest assumptions of people from small-scale societies is... that there is a body of wisdom which, if learned and followed, will lead to a successful life.” (352-353) The preoccupation with law is thus something which is part of the traditional heritage. Secondly “a basic problem seems to be that the concept of NT ‘agape’ is lacking the traditional relationship with deity. Deity is used and manipulated to serve human interests rather than being appreciated for His own sake.” (353) Another cause for the problem of legalism may be the insecurity and uncertainty of people who are in a process of great cultural change. Laws and rules may then offer a sense of security.

Lutheran missionaries have also described the problem of legalism. Becken complained that the Christian minister is looked upon as “the legal observer in the community. He is the authority of the ‘umthetho’, the ‘umthetho’ in the Church being the ten commandments, the one who is the watchkeeper of the Roman legalism which has been planted into the community.” (1965:20)

Löytty, who studied the preaching of the Evangelical Lutheran Ovambo-Kavango Church in South West Africa (present day Namibia), found that legalism appears in the action of church discipline, in the teaching of Christianity, and in the sermons. The layman's sermon especially contained a legalistic emphasis. (1971:136)

Dierks describes how the traditional concept of sin (as being primarily a sin against the community) leads to people solving the problem of sin between themselves, without involving God or Jesus Christ in any meaningful way. To illustrate this he describes his congregation where there was a rule that people who entered into traditional marriage (lobola), without being married officially, were excommunicated from the church. Should an official marriage take place later they were automatically readmitted to the church, without any form of repentance or plea for forgiveness of sins. There was a specific term used for this. It would be said that "*ba itshwaretswe ka lenyalo*", which means: they have obtained forgiveness for themselves by marrying. (1986:183) Dierks comments that the Christian congregation in this way 'solved' the problem of sin while completely circumventing salvation found in Christ. The 'sin' was detected and punished according to the law, without Jesus Christ being involved at any stage.

Theo Sundermeier observed that the problem of legalism exists in Europe as well as Africa, but "that legalism of the African Churches has a different background and distinguishes itself from the legalism of European Churches" (1970:5). According to Sundermeier "the basic distinction made by the reformers between law and gospel has almost no meaning within the African context" (6).

An important part of the African background, according to Sundermeier, is the fact that in the African religions God is remote (9). He is a good God, He helps people when they call on Him, but is not concerned about the law or obedience to it. The law is the concern of man, the concern of society (9). This causes people to view obedience to the law, and the punishment for not obeying it, as something that is sorted out by the community itself, without God being involved.

Consequently people find it difficult to feel guilty towards God. If He is a remote God, uninterested in compliance with His laws, why should one feel guilty towards Him?

At the same time, however, laws are seen as very important for the well-being of the community to which one belongs. Sundermeier quotes Brandel-Syrier who has described

“how fundamentally important law is for Christian groups of women. The laws and regulations are the core and basis of their gatherings.... Drawing up new laws gives strength, creates unity, and lends meaning to gatherings.” (11) A comparable situation is found in the church. The Christian congregation feels a need for laws. “By obeying this law the congregation protects itself against misfortunes and punishment.” (13) “Simply by its presence the law gives strength and salvation to the congregation.” (13) In many cases the pastor and the elders take over the role of the king and his advisors as law-keepers. This may even have an Old Testament flavour: “As Moses saved his people and gave them the law, in the same way the church leader (or ‘Messiah’) becomes the mediator of the law and he himself takes the place of the righteous king. Then there is no longer room for Jesus Christ and his work of salvation, or at least his accomplishment is made to be relative.” (13) Sundermeier believes that these thoughts are present not only in sectarian movements but in a diluted form also in ‘the established churches’. “Does not each one of us notice how one’s sermons and lectures are handed on, ‘changed’ legalistically?” (14)

The only solution to this problem, according to Sundermeier, is an encounter with the person of Jesus Christ. Only then will the legalistic, ritual system of thought be broken. “Being personally bound to Christ touches the conscience, making it speak. This connection must be brought about through our sermons and our preaching.” (17)

Interviews I had with members of ELCSA confirmed the observations of the missionaries mentioned above. Especially in the area of church discipline and the manner in which sins are dealt with, it is clear that there is a strong tendency to work ‘according to the rules’, and a poor awareness that a believer is responsible towards the living Lord, Jesus Christ.

In addition it seems that church discipline is not administered as consistently as before. Quite a few Lutheran members told me that they had never heard of someone being disciplined by suspension from Holy Communion or excommunication. One man said, “There is no punishment any more”: “*dibe ba di šala morago ka dithero; discipline ga ke šo e bone*” (they preach against the sins during the sermons; discipline I haven’t seen

yet). He explained that apparently pastors believe the Word is strong enough to make sinners repent.

Older members recall how strictly church discipline was applied during the olden days. One woman remembers how she and other youths were suspended for three months because they had been fighting during a youth meeting. For those three months they were not allowed to take part in Holy Communion or to visit any meetings. They were only allowed to come to church. After the three months were up they were readmitted, (legalistically:) without any repentance or confession of sins taking place. It was believed that the punishment would make them 'think twice' (which it did indeed).

Although ELCSA may exhibit leniency toward certain sins, an area in which church discipline is still being administered, is the the 7th (in Lutheran tradition the 6th) commandment. Pregnancy before marriage incurs a fixed period of suspension, normally between six months and a year. The girl then has to attend the *klase ya tebalelo* (class of forgiveness) after which she undergoes a sort of examination and is readmitted to the sacraments. In theory this class is meant to help the sinner to wholehearted repentance and to prevent them making similar mistakes in future, but in practice it is often seen as a form of punishment. On completion of the class there is a latent expectation of readmission to the sacraments, irrespective of whether real repentance has occurred. Should the pastor feel there is no real repentance, it remains difficult for him to refuse the person admission to the sacraments. He could be accused of discrimination and favouritism: "*Ba tla re: moruti o a kgetholla*" (They will say: the pastor is discriminating). "The majority of us pastors do not have the courage to say 'no' to a person who has not really repented", one pastor told me. He added that some pastors even make things worse by simply giving the girls some general lessons on Christian living (or even a revision of the catechism), and neglect to address the sin for which they were suspended in the first place.

Thus church discipline easily becomes a matter between the pastor, the church council and the sinner, without consideration of the original aim (reconciliation between the sinner and God). It becomes something to be negotiated (e.g. the length of the punishment). In most cases everybody feels satisfied once it is shown that the matter has

followed the church rules or common practices in the church. As one missionary said: “Legalism is very strong in our church. People want you to always follow the same line. They don’t understand the aim of pastoral care and discipline.”

As a result of this tendency in ELCSA, the rules have become quite elaborate in some cases. For example: An elder explained that there is a difference between the first illegitimate child and the second. A girl bearing a first child outside wedlock will attend the class of forgiveness (*klase ya tebalelo*), and thereafter the child will be baptized and she will be readmitted to Holy Communion. But should she give birth to a second child before marriage, the case will be different. The child will be baptized because it was not responsible for the sin, but the mother will not be readmitted to Holy Communion. The elder explained: “God is not like us. We should forgive 70 times 7 times, but “*Modimo ga a lebalele motho gantši*” (God does not forgive a person often). To prove his point, he even referred to Luther’s battle with the Roman Catholics who made people pay for forgiveness of sins. “*Ne ba ruta batho go briba tebalelo, fela, kua Modimo go be go se na tebalelo*” (they were teaching the people that bribery gains forgiveness, but with God there was no forgiveness).

Originally these rules had good intentions (not to play games with the wrath of God because He is a holy God), but the outcome is legalistic. Their main aim has not been to initiate genuine repentance and reconciliation with God. Instead, the avoidance of indictments such as favouritism and discrimination by the correct application of laws and implementation of wise and impartial punishments, has become the objective. This will ensure harmony and peace in the congregation, and that seems to be - typically African - the ultimate goal.

Another area commanding our attention is the widespread problem of church members who do not feel responsible to the Lord Jesus Christ for the things they do and say. Many members show no real understanding of living ‘*coram Deo*’, although they do express the belief that God looks after their needs from day to day.

Although this was a complaint of Lutheran church leaders, I must add that I have met some Lutheran church members who gave testimony of a genuine sense of guilt about their sins and a real joy about reconciliation with God.

I remember a lady who worked at a supermarket, who told me that she had been stealing goods from the store every Friday on her way out. She had made an agreement with the security-people who checked the employees bags at the gates. She told me that she felt really guilty about this for a long time, but that she could not stop. Then she became ill and her pastor visited her. He asked her whether she had any sins to confess to. She confessed her stealing practices, the pastor prayed, she was healed and she felt relieved and very happy.

There were few people like her. Other respondents showed no real understanding of what Luther called being ruled by Christ and living 'coram Deo'. One lady, when asked whether she would buy stolen goods if they were cheap, told me: "*Ge o sa tsebe, ga go na bothata; ge o tseba, o se ke wa reka*" (if you don't know (that they are stolen) there is no problem; if you do, you should not buy them). When asked to explain, she said: "*di ka se dule gabotse mo go wena*" (they will not stay well with you). In explanation of this she said, the police could come after you and you could be arrested. She displayed no sense of guilt towards God for buying stolen goods, merely hesitation about possible negative effects brought about by the possession of them, for instance, misfortune.

Another young lady, who was engaged in a sexual relationship with her boyfriend, was adamant that she did no wrong. Her reasoning was that, because he was not openly living with her nor she with him, and their sexual activities took place on the weekend, no-one had cause for complaint or reason to be offended. Besides, they were using condoms in order to prevent pregnancy, thus ensuring that no slight should befall them or their families. She was aware that this lifestyle was not in accordance with the Bible, but she did not feel guilty towards God or Jesus Christ. She felt that God would forgive this transgression, seeing they were not trying to cause umbrage. She would only feel guilty, she said, if the pastor caught her with her boy-friend.

When I explained this case to an elder he commented that the pastor would probably avoid catching her red-handed. "It is not good to trap people when they are right in the middle of the sin", he said. People could ask difficult questions like: Why are you coming after me while you do not worry about others doing the same thing?

In addition it is worth remembering that ELCSA is a relatively 'old' church compared to other churches in South Africa. Through the years a large body of rules and regulations

has developed. Though in itself not necessarily legalistic, a church order and an established church hierarchy may contribute to members focusing more on the church laws and the leadership than on Jesus Christ as the Head of the church. Möllers judgment of churches in Soweto comes to mind: People's expectations are focused on the church itself rather than on God (1976:10).

#### Church laws and regulations

ELCSA has an elaborate system of ceremonies for all sorts of occasions. There is an order for funerals as well as an order for the 'funeral of nominal members and backsliders'. There is an order for Holy Communion as well an order for Holy Communion for the Sick. There is an order for infant baptism, an order for emergency baptism, and even an order for the ratification of emergency baptism. The Altar Book of ELCSA (1995 edition) contains no less than 43 separate forms for all events, including ceremonies such as the laying of a cornerstone, the unveiling of a tombstone and the installation of Sunday School teachers, Men's, Women's and Youth League members. Then there are specific rules for church practice and discipline. With regard to funerals there are nearly two pages of regulations about the conducting of the program, the participation of guest speakers, the difference between burying a full member and a backslider, the clothes the pastor should wear at the funeral of a backslider, the reading of messages on wreaths (which is prohibited), etcetera.

Church members as well as church leaders like these complicated rules and regulations. It gives safety and security.

#### Church government

In my interviews with Lutheran missionaries it was explained to me that "Africa likes the high view of a bishop." When the different Lutheran missions merged to become ELCSA, they had to take decisions on a lot of issues in order to establish unity in church practice and church government. One of these was whether the bishop should be 'installed' (the low view, as held by Berlin and Hermannsburg missions) or 'consecrated' (the high view, as held by the Swedish mission). Missionaries warned of the dangers connected to the bishop becoming a 'chief' in the church and they pleaded for the nuanced view that all believers, but especially the pastors and elders, have an office.. It

was all in vain: ELCSA adopted the Swedish view. In the Altar Book one finds an order for the 'Consecration of a Bishop' (:170) whereas for a pastor it is still called 'induction'. One of the missionaries remembered how at a diocesan rally he once watched the people of Natal (Swedish mission) carry some big wooden object into the hall. "That would not be a coffin, would it?" he jokingly asked his neighbour. It wasn't. It turned out to be a bishop's throne!

Subconsciously there may be a relationship between the old system of the chief and his closest advisors, and the system preferred by the African brothers in the church: a strong presiding bishop with his inner circle of advisors, forming the church council.

This does not necessarily mean that the bishop takes the place of Jesus Christ as Head of the church, but it has introduced hierarchical thinking in peoples minds. This gives them security.

An abundance of seemingly important rules and regulations may easily lead to members thinking in terms of 'the law of the church' rather than 'the law of God'. And when strong visible leadership carries such consequence focus is diverted from the leadership and guidance of the Lord Jesus Christ, through His Word and Spirit, to that granted by the church.

### Evaluation

In its confessions the Lutheran Church teaches the Lordship of Jesus Christ over the life and faith of the church and its members. Indeed some members have a sense of personal responsibility towards Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour. But, generally speaking, there is a legalistic tendency in the Lutheran Church. Church law, church discipline and church leadership have become pivotal points in ELCSA, tending to be harmful to the authority of Jesus Christ as the living Lord and Saviour.

## **4.6 Traditional Beliefs and Practices**

The survey conducted in Soshanguve, as described in a previous chapter, revealed confusion among Lutheran church members regarding attitudes towards traditional beliefs and practices. Some members totally rejected these beliefs and practices, others accepted them, and many seemed to be unsure.

Follow-up interviews among ELCSA-members confirmed this conclusion. Confusion among church leaders was also apparent, resulting in statements that are contradictory. One elder told me that it is accepted practice for a Christian to go to the traditional healer, and to call on the ancestor spirits. “*Dilo tšeo, ba di amogetše.*” (They have accepted these things). “*Mo kerekeng ya Luther ga ba bolele ka ditaba tša Sotho, kereke e di amogetše.*” (In the Lutheran church they don’t talk about the typically Sotho traditions, the church is reconciled to them.) According to him a person could even go to be trained as a traditional healer with the consent of the church: “*Motho ge a lwala, o tlo botša moruti, moruti o tlo bea thapelo, ba mo lokolla, a ye ngakeng, a thwase, ba mo fodisa, a boela kerekeng.*” (When a person is sick, he will tell the pastor, the pastor will come and pray for him, they will give him the green light to go to the traditional healer, so he goes there and gets his training, they heal him, and then he comes back to the church).

The situation has not always been as it is now in the Lutheran church: “*Kgale mo kerekeng ne ba di ila. Ne ba le strict. Ne ba go suspenda. Gona bjanong, ba di amogetše.*” (Long ago they prohibited these things in the church. They were strict. They would suspend you. Nowadays they have accepted it).

Another elder, however, denied this vehemently. “That man knows nothing!” “*Kereke ga e bolele bjalo, ke bona self*” (The church does not speak like that, it is they themselves...) He referred to the first commandment and said that to call on the ‘*badimo*’ (ancestor spirits) is breaking the law of God. He said that no decision of any Lutheran church’ council allows members to call on the ancestor spirits.

One of the pastors I interviewed, confirmed that there has been a change in ELCSA. “*Pele mo kerekeng ya rena di-missionary ne ba nagana gore everything of Africa ke seheitene.*” (Earlier in our church the missionaries thought that all things African, were pagan.) But later it was understood “that Jesus Christ must be incarnated in every culture”. Practically this means that “*go ya ngakeng, ga e sa le boleo*” (to go to the

traditional healer is no longer a sin.). It also means that “*go ya komeng, ga e sa le sebe*” (to go to the initiation school is no longer a sin.). The ancestor spirits is a different matter and on this the church stands firm: “*Badimo ga ba na thušo. Re ka ba gopola, for example ka All Saints’ Day. Fela, go ba bitša ke sebe.*” (The ancestor spirits do not help us. We may commemorate them, for example on All Saints’ Day, but to call on them is a sin.) Christianity is an uncompromising religion, he added.

This ministers colleague, however, had a different opinion. Not only was he opposed to the calling on of ancestor spirits: “*ge o rapela badimo, o gana mmereko wohle wa Morena Jesu*” (when you pray to the ancestor spirits, you deny the whole work of the Lord Jesus), but he also opposed visiting a traditional healer. “*Ke gana go dumela mo ditaolong, ka gobane ditaola di bolela le badimo.*” (I am against the belief in divination-bones, because the bones speak to the ancestor spirits). He felt that “we should teach our people that Christianity is not the culture of the white man. Christianity is not a culture, all people have to part with their own culture, even the missionaries who came to tell us the gospel.” Although he felt that he represented the official Lutheran position, he knew that other pastors defended divergent views, which made him afraid. “*Go hlakahlakane mo kerekeng ya rena*”. (There is confusion in our church).

This perplexity was also displayed by ordinary Lutheran members. Some considered it sinful to invoke the ancestor spirits or to consult a traditional healer. Others felt that the church should accept it. Among those who accepted it, there remained an awareness that the two beliefs were incompatible. As one woman put it: “*Ge ke rapela, ga ke ba hlakantshe*” (when I pray, I don’t mix them), in other words: she would pray either to God or to the ancestor spirits, but she would never mention them both in the same prayer.

I could not find anything to indicate the future direction of the Lutheran church. What is significant is that some influential church leaders have taken a firm stand against ancestor veneration. Bishop Manas Buthelezi, for example, complained that “people trust the blood of goats more than the blood of Jesus Christ. Many goats are on sale in Soweto, very often to Christians who face a wide range of crises... They do not seek help from a pastor or ask him to pray for them. Instead they buy and slaughter a white goat which,

they believe, will save them. The blood of Jesus Christ has been replaced by the blood of the goat. People who get thin and weak without knowing what the cause is, are told that the ancestors are angry with them and that as soon as they become diviners, all will be well. They do not ask Jesus to heal them, because they are advised that the angry ancestors will solve everything as soon as the atoning blood of a goat is shed” (Buthelezi 1996:86).

Rev. Mahamba, who was a lecturer at the Lutheran Theological College at Marang in the 1980’s, wrote an article for the Hermannsburg Mission magazine, which was translated into German under the significant title: “*Ahnenkult und Christentum sind unvereinbar*”, which means: The ancestor cult and Christianity are incompatible (Mahamba 1998:5).

On the other hand there are some Lutheran church leaders who promote the partial acceptance of a belief in the ‘living dead’. Moila, for example, has stated that “certain implications of commitment to the living dead by African Christians are not necessarily a hindrance to Christian faith. Belief in the living dead, is, in fact, one of those elements of African culture which can enrich the lives of African Christians, if it is redirected and transformed by the Gospel.” (Moila 1989:149)

On the whole it is clear that the official position of ELCSA is still the same: ancestor veneration and the consulting of traditional healers are unacceptable (or: this stand has not been officially withdrawn). But the practice is tolerance and a lenient attitude toward those members who visit a traditional healer or those who go and *thwasa* (attend diviner’s training) in order to be healed.

The question we intended to answer in the first place, is what this means with regard to the position of Jesus Christ in the faith of Lutheran members. In order to answer this question I went back to the interviews and analyzed the responses.

It appeared that those acquiescent of the traditional beliefs and practices, had generally weaker perceptions of the Lordship of Jesus Christ than those who rejected them. Those accepting traditional beliefs and practices did not speak negatively about Jesus, but were vague in their perceptions of Him, and they expected the same benefits from Him as from the ancestor spirits: protection, good fortune, etcetera.

Some examples of this tendency are: A long time member of ELCSA (58 year old female) who claimed that a woman may become a *ngaka* (diviner) if she cannot resist the calling, said that Jesus Christ was 'our helper' and with regard to the work of the Holy Spirit she said she "really did not know" ("*Ngwana batho, ga ke tsebe!*").

Another long time member (37 year male) who defended the right of black people to venerate ancestors "because our people believed in God before the white people came here and they prayed to God through their ancestors", was not able to say what Jesus Christ meant to him. "He is the Saviour", he said. He believed, though, that he was born again "through baptism".

A 41-year old teacher who had been a member of ELCSA since birth, believed that a person should become a diviner "if there is a call". He also believed that the church should allow its members to venerate ancestors "because Jesus is an ancestor too". To the question of what Jesus Christ meant to him, he answered: "He is a symbol of morality, a great teacher, sent by God."

Another teacher, 42 years old, who also believed that the church should allow its members to go and *thwasa* as well as to venerate ancestors ("it's our culture"), did not have anything other to say about Jesus than "He is three in one and He is omnipresent".

Those rejecting traditional beliefs and practices, would generally add to the list of functions performed by Jesus: He prays for us, He is making room for us in heaven, He is our Saviour, etcetera. Some of the respondents specifically stated that a concomitant worship and service of Jesus Christ and adherence to traditional practices, is an impossibility. As one of them said: "If you choose the *badimo* (ancestor spirits), you loose Jesus."

Examples of this tendency: A 32-year old female teacher who said that a Christian should not go and *thwasa*, said that Jesus was her Saviour and Comforter, and that He was giving her life and protecting her against enemies.

A 29-year old man who said that the church should not allow its members to venerate ancestors ("the Bible does not allow us"), said that he believed Jesus Christ was his Saviour and that He died for his sins. He trusted that Jesus was protecting him against "enemies like Satan and witchcraft".

A 19-years old student who said that the church should not allow its members to revere ancestors “because they are evil spirits”, said that she believed Jesus Christ was her “King and Saviour” and that He was giving her many things: “food and everything that I ask for”. On the other hand, though she believed that she was born again, she could not explain the work of the Holy Spirit.

### Evaluation

Regarding the attitudes of ELCSA-members towards traditional beliefs and practices, the findings confirmed those of the initial survey research. Some members reject it, others accept it, and many are unsure.

It appears that the degree in which traditional belief is upheld is inversely proportional to one’s strength of belief in Christ as Saviour and Lord. Those who accept traditional beliefs and practices generally have a weaker conviction about the Lordship of Christ than those who reject these beliefs and practices.

#### **4.7 Liberal Lutheran Theology**

In chapter 2.3.2 we noted that the Lutheran church in South Africa has been exposed to liberal theological influences. Young black theologians were sent to Europe or the USA for postgraduate studies. There they acquainted themselves with modern trends in Lutheran theology. The question now is to what extent liberal theological trends have had an influence on ELCSA, subsequent to this exposure.

To our surprise, during the course of this research no direct or clear references to liberal Lutheran theology were encountered at a local congregation level. Even Black Theology, though it gained strong support from some ELCSA-leaders in the 1970’s and 1980’s, did not figure in sermons or conversations.

Liberal Lutheran theology flourishes, however, at the academic level of theology. As an example of this trend in ELCSA we will look at the writings of Maimela, professor at the University of South Africa.

In 1988 Maimela published an article in which he dealt with the question of how relevant the Lutheran doctrine of justification by faith is to the South African situation. Maimela's interpretation of this doctrine is as follows: "How can I, a sinner, be justified before the righteous God so as to live now and in the next life? How do I lay my hands, as it were, on those things which make for life?" (1988:36) In the ensuing exposition 'the next life' does not appear. Maimela focuses solely on temporal life: "It is clear that at the heart of Luther's response lies the concern and quest for a life that has meaning and is fulfilling for individuals" (:36). Luther's quest for a gracious God, then, is redefined as a quest for a meaningful life. In Maimela's own words: Justification is "a life of meaning and quality" (:38). It is clear that Luther's understanding of justification has been changed drastically here. The typical Lutheran notions of sin and the forgiveness of sins are ignored.

Maimela then proceeds to apply his view on justification to the South African situation. The argument is developed along the following lines:

- 1: Justification is to have a life of meaning and quality.
- 2: South African blacks do not have a life of meaning and quality.
- 3: Biblically speaking, justification is based on grace.
- 4: In the S.A. situation justification is based on race.

*Conclusion:* The gospel of justification should be preached to the South African people so that all, black and white, may have a life full of meaning and quality (:40).

Once again it should be pointed out that the concept of the sinner's position before God is ignored. Primarily sin has been identified as a presence in the political structures. Justification does not imply being righteous before God by grace through faith, but having a life of meaning and quality.

A similar approach is found in Maimela's book 'Proclaim Freedom to my People' (1987). Here he offers an exposition on atonement<sup>17</sup> in the context of liberation theology (:87-98). He recalls an experience of shock when discovering that the concept of atonement

---

<sup>17</sup> Maimela offers an interesting definition of 'atonement'. According to him "the word atonement literally means 'at-one-moment' by which is signified the process of making God and man one after they had been separated or estranged by sin" (1987:87).

“is simply not a part of the vocabulary of liberation theology” (:87). Maimela feels that the concept of atonement is useful in the context of liberation theology, provided that it is understood correctly. Maimela prefers “the so-called *ransom theory* which presents Christ’s death in dramatic terms as signifying a victory over the powers of the devil” (:88). The only problem he has with this view is “that it fails to focus attention on the concrete political structures that make for human suffering, and fails to say anything about God’s empowerment of the oppressed people who must continue God’s fight against injustice” (:93).

Maimela then explains the liberation theology’s view on sin: “sin is an objective social, historical fact, a state of absence of brotherhood and love in interpersonal relations” (:95). Against this background atonement is chiefly understood as “a transformation of the entire human situation in all its aspects, a situation in which both sin (as a state of fundamental alienation or absence of brotherhood) and its consequences (such as injustice, oppression, poverty and misery) are overcome” (:95).

What is the role of Jesus Christ in all this? Christ is “the life of the world” (:101). This statement is to be understood as a command and invitation to a historical struggle for justice (:107). Christ is also “the source of hope” (:116) because “the story of the victorious Christ gives humankind hope when there is nothing to hope for” (:117). The importance of Jesus appears to be located in what He *has done*, not in what He does today.

### Evaluation

In evaluating the above it is important to take note of the optimistic view of mankind reflected here. Maimela’s view on sin is a far cry from the view on original sin as put forward in the 2<sup>nd</sup> article of the Augsburg Confession:

“It is also taught among us that since the fall of Adam all men who are born according to the course of nature are conceived and born in sin. That is, all men are full of evil lust and inclinations from their mothers’ wombs and are unable by nature to have true fear of God and true faith in God.. Moreover, this inborn sickness and hereditary sin is truly sin and condemns to the eternal wrath of God all those who are not born again through Baptism and the Holy Spirit” (Tappert 1959:29).

Another Lutheran tenet which is not found in Maimela's theology is the view on repentance as put forward in the 12<sup>th</sup> article of the Augsburg Confession:

“Properly speaking, true repentance is nothing else than to have contrition and sorrow, or terror, on account of sin, and yet at the same time to believe the Gospel and absolution (namely, that sin has been forgiven and grace has been obtained through Christ), and this faith will comfort the heart and again set it at rest” (Tappert 1959:34).

In Maimela's view sin occurs in a situation where people are oppressed and deprived of a meaningful life. The worst sinners are the oppressors. Repentance means that people should take part in fighting injustice. Phrases such as “terror before God on account of sin” and “joy because of absolution and new found peace with God”, are absent.

A salient feature of Maimela's view on sin and evil is that it not only deviates from the classical Lutheran position, but also from the traditional African view on evil. In the traditional African understanding, evil refers to anything limiting or endangering life, including infertility, sickness and death, jealousy, envy and witchcraft. Under the influence of Western liberal theology Maimela's understanding of evil is a ‘secularized’ one. The concept of evil has undergone a radical reduction. It is located in racism, underdevelopment, exploitation and other comparable phenomena.

The resultant demarcation of evil and salvation not only digresses from classical Lutheran theology but is also to a large extent irrelevant to Africa. Africa's fears are not answered in this theology. I think this is a plausible explanation for our finding that the modern, liberal type of Lutheran theology, as practised in academic circles, is not reflected in the faith of Lutheran believers at grassroots level. It is simply irrelevant to them.

The same applies to Maimela's Christology. It deviates from classical Lutheran theology. The significance of Christ is His victory over evil forces. He is important because of what He *has done*, not because of what He does today. Jesus Christ is an inspiration because of what He has accomplished on the cross and in the resurrection, but He is not at present

Lord and Saviour. Of course Maimela knows that a past victory is not enough to really give hope (:118). What he adds to this, however, is not a Jesus Christ actively involved in preserving and guiding those who belong to Him and interceding for them in heaven. There is no reference at all to the current role of Christ. Only God is mentioned. God is “actively involved at present to transform human lives and their social conditions” (:118). Jesus Christ has become a *Christus otiosus*. There is no separate task for Him anymore.

A final observation: Contextual theology depends on the context. Should the context change, so must the theology. The political changes in South Africa in the 1990's have dramatically altered the context. This means that Black Theology will have to change too. It is not yet clear with what it will be replaced. Some theologians have proposed a ‘theology of reconstruction’. Others oppose this and feel that Black Theology still has a role to play in the new South Africa (Maluleke 1994a, 1995). Some exponents of Black Theology, including Maimela (1998:115), have redefined their theology by replacing the race issue (black/white) with the class issue (poor/rich). At the same time these theologians will probably move closer to African Theology and take up themes such as ‘fullness of life’ and ‘life in community’ and – in doing so – move closer to the original African religion. Maimela’s exposition on justification (justification understood as fullness of life) evinces this.

#### **4.8 Conclusions**

1. Among Lutheran Christians in Soshanguve the work of Christ is understood primarily in terms of providence and protection (His benevolent power to provide good fortune and protect against misfortune). The notion of His authority to rule believers lives through his Word and Spirit, is weak.
2. The expectations with regard to the work of Christ are in line with those regarding the effects of participation in Holy Communion. There is a tendency to expect creational type blessings (life-force, healing, *mahlatsé*) from taking part in Holy Communion, rather than

forgiveness of sins and strengthening of faith. Further, there is a propensity towards 'ex opere operato' beliefs.

3. Though in its confessions the Lutheran Church teaches the Lordship of Jesus Christ, there is, generally speaking, a legalistic proclivity in the Lutheran Church. The importance of church laws and regulations and the way in which church discipline is practiced, tend to be harmful to the authority of Jesus Christ as the living Lord and Saviour.

4. With regard to attitudes on traditional beliefs and practices, there is confusion. Some members reject these beliefs and practices, others accept them, and many are unsure. Those who accept traditional beliefs and practices generally have a weaker conviction about the Lordship of Christ than those who reject these beliefs and practices.

5. Liberal Lutheran theology, imported from Europe and the USA, has gained influence in ELCSA, especially in academic circles. The result is a shallow view of sin, forgiveness of sin and repentance and a rather irrelevant Christ. Because of His victory over evil and death, accomplished long ago, Christ is seen as a source of hope and inspiration for the fight against injustice and poverty in this world. His present Lordship does not attract attention.