



Vol 24, No 1

2008

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# MELANESIAN JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY

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a Case for People-Centred and Participatory Ministry**  
Abel Haon

**A Case Study: the Impact of the Middle Sepik River  
People's Cultural Practices and Spirit-Worship  
on their Christian Worship**  
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**The Gospel in a World of Cultures**  
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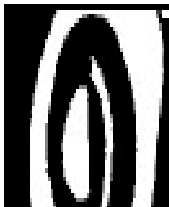
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Journal of the Melanesian Association of Theological Schools

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Developed countries	\$14.00	\$26.00	\$50.00	\$72.00
Developing countries	\$11.00	\$20.00	\$38.00	\$56.00
Papua New Guinea (Kina)	K12.00	K20.00	K38.00	K56.00

Subscription prices include airmail. We do not offer surface-mail prices.  
Some back issues are available.

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ISSN 0256-856X Volume 24, Number 1 2008

This Journal is indexed in the *ATLA Religion Database*, published by the American Theological Library Association, 250 S. Wacker Drive, 16th Flr, Chicago IL 60606 USA, Email: [atla@atla.com](mailto:atla@atla.com), Internet: [www.atla.com](http://www.atla.com).

This journal is abstracted in *Religious and Theological Abstracts*, 121 South College Street (PO Box 215), Myerstown PA 17067 USA.

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# **MELANESIAN JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY**

*Journal of the Melanesian Association of Theological Schools*

The *Melanesian Journal of Theology* aims to stimulate the writing of theology in Melanesia. It is an organ for the regular discussion of theological topics at scholarly level by staff and students of the member schools of the Melanesian Association of Theological Schools (MATS), though contributions from non-members and non-Melanesians are welcome.

The *Melanesian Journal of Theology* is committed to the dialogue of Christian faith within Melanesian cultures. The Editorial Team will consider for publication all manuscripts of scholarly standard on matters of concern to Melanesian Christians, and of general theological interest.

The opinions expressed in the articles are those of the authors, and do not necessarily represent the views of the Editor, Editorial Team, or the member colleges of MATS. All articles have been edited to meet the requirements of the Journal.

The *Melanesian Journal of Theology* normally appears twice yearly, in April and October.

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## EDITORIAL

This volume deals with the declining influence of the Melanesian church on society, the impact of animistic beliefs on Melanesian Christians, and the influence of cultures on the gospel message.

Abel Haon explores why the church's influence in Melanesia is diminishing. He notes that nominalism, syncretism, and pragmatism make the church ineffective, while the philosophy that ministry should be institutionalised, and confined to specialists – who also have a narrow view of ministry – keep the church ineffective. He believes the answer lies in a “whole people” concept of the church, which means that the people of the church must have a passion for God, and desire to proclaim God's glory, while carrying out a holistic ministry to the people of Melanesia.

Timothy Misha evaluates Christian worship in the context of his tribe, the Iatmuls of Papua New Guinea. Although the Iatmuls put great emphasis on worship, they are influenced by traditional cultural practices, including spirit worship. The result is nominalistic and syncretistic beliefs, leading to inadequate worship. Timothy concludes with several insightful recommendations, worthy of consideration by Melanesian churches.

Krista Hanson investigates the influence of culture on the gospel message, noting that Paul used many methods of presenting the gospel – depending on the recipient culture. Krista concludes that the gospel transcends culture, but the presentation of the gospel will vary according to the contextualisation needs of the listeners. For those of us that have relied on a specific memorised gospel presentation, her article will challenge our thinking.

Not everyone will agree with the conclusions reached by the authors. However, we hope that, as you grapple with the issues, the thoughts of the authors will help you grow in your understanding of what God's Word says to your life and culture.

Doug Hanson.

# THE CHURCH IMPACTING MELANESIA: A CASE FOR PEOPLE-CENTRED AND PARTICIPATORY MINISTRY

**Abel Haon**

*Abel, who hails from Bougainville, earned a Bachelor of Theology degree from the Christian Leaders' Training College, Papua New Guinea, in 2006.*

## INTRODUCTION

The Melanesian region in the South Pacific has a rich Christian heritage. It is one of the most-Christianised regions in the world.<sup>1</sup> Most, if not all Melanesians subscribe to Christianity in some form or another. From the beginning, Christian missions have been key players in facilitating the process that led to many Melanesian nations attaining their statehood. In recognition of their indebtedness to Christianity, a number of Melanesian nation-states explicitly subscribe to Christian principles in their constitutions.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, over the last few decades, the momentum of Christian influence, and the impact of the church in Melanesia have declined considerably.<sup>3</sup> The church can no longer speak persuasively, and act decisively, concerning many injustices occurring in the region. On

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<sup>1</sup> This statement is found on page 13 in the book titled *World Christianity: Oceania*, edited by Leonora Mosende Douglas. See the bibliography for details of the book. The latest and expanded data on the extent and scope of Christianity in Melanesia is available from the *World Christian Encyclopaedia*, 2nd edn, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> For instance Papua New Guinea (PNG) and the Solomon Islands.

<sup>3</sup> The word “church” in uppercase is used with consistency to describe true believers who make up the true community of God’s people. Although they observe different institutionalised forms of expressing the Christian faith, their simple faith in God through Christ, and the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, knits them together as the “one body of Christ” (1Cor 12:12-13; Eph 4:2-6).

occasions, when she does, the message is often incoherent to the society-at-large. In the meantime, crime, civil strife, violence, and environmental degradation continue to escalate, unabated. The irony is that this is happening in Christianised Melanesia. Why has the church, formerly a transforming force in the region, now become virtually ineffective?

The supposition presented in this article is that unless the *whole* church is brought to the true realisation of who she is, and what her role is in society, she will not be in a position to impact Melanesia in a significant way ever again. The answer to the problem of the ineffective work of the church in Melanesia rests directly with the *believing peoples* themselves: those mandated and equipped to bring glory to God and reconciliation to the world (Eph 1:6, 12, 14; John 17:20-24; 2 Cor 5:18-19). It is obvious, at least for Melanesia, that the current concept of “church” militates against the explicit biblical teaching of church as the *laos* (λαός) of God (1 Cor 11:18-25; Eph 4:3-6).<sup>4</sup> Most believers are precluded from the “communion of God’s people”,<sup>5</sup> and do not live responsibly for God as a result.<sup>6</sup> Christians of Melanesia must recover the *whole-people* concept of the church, fully and urgently, if they are to emerge vibrant, impacting society, and ultimately bringing glory to God in the region.

The first part of this article discusses the *filial* love that God’s people have for Him, resulting in their obedience to Christ in the world. The second part traces the establishment and development of Christianity in Melanesia, discussing the problems confronting contemporary Melanesian societies and churches. The final part emphasises that Christ, in His life and ministry, was focused on the whole person. When He departed this earth, He provided the equipping power of the Holy Spirit to all those that would follow Him, so they, in turn, can have a *whole-people-oriented* ministry. After suggesting a number of forward steps, the article is brought to a close with concluding remarks.

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<sup>4</sup> The Greek word *laos* (λαός) is translated “people” in English versions of the Bible.

<sup>5</sup> A phrase used in ecclesiastical discussions for the church.

<sup>6</sup> See Acts 2:42-47 and Heb 10:25.

## MOTIVATIONS FOR WHOLE-CHURCH AND PARTICIPATORY MINISTRY

At Caesarea Philippi, Jesus declared to His disciples: “I will build My church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.”<sup>7</sup> These prophetic words were fulfilled with the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. Since then, the church has continued to grow – now into the 21st century. The formative event on the day of Pentecost, moreover, catapulted the church from her ancient Jewish roots to envelop the entire globe.<sup>8</sup> From that point onwards, the church became inclusive and universalised,<sup>9</sup> encapsulating both Jews and Gentiles.<sup>10</sup> The typology of the Old Testament had become a realised entity: the new *laos tou theou* (λαῶ τῷ θεοῦ)<sup>11</sup> – universal, holy, catholic, and apostolic.<sup>12</sup>

Also hinted in Christ’s prophetic words is the fact of the church’s ministry calling in the world – to assail the gates of Hades.<sup>13</sup> The *laos tou theou* (λαῶ τῷ θεοῦ) remain in the world to carry on with the unfinished task of exposing the vanquished powers (Col 3:15-16), and to

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<sup>7</sup> Matt 16:18.

<sup>8</sup> Although there is continuity between the believers of the Old and New Testaments, the change brought about at the Pentecost was so startling that the New Testament could look at the Old Testament only as preparation. Edmund P. Clowney argues this thoroughly in his book titled, *The Church*, Gerald Bray, ed. (Leicester UK: IVP, 1995), pp. 49-60.

<sup>9</sup> *Katholikos* (καθολικός) is the Greek word translated “universal” or “whole”. The word is used in this context to mean that the church embraces every believing individual in every place, and for all time.

<sup>10</sup> David Watson, *I Believe in the Church* (London UK: Hodder & Stoughton, 1978), pp. 75-95.

<sup>11</sup> The phrase *laos tou theou* (λαῶ τῷ θεοῦ), is rendered “people of God” in English translations of the Bible. The word *laos* (λαῶς) means “people”, and the possessive compound, *tou theou* (τῷ θεοῦ) means “of God”. See the following Bible references; Rom 9:25-26; Heb 4:9; 11:25; 1 Peter 2:9, 10.

<sup>12</sup> For a detailed discussion of the four characteristic aspects, other writings should be consulted. For instance, Professor Hans Kung’s book, *The Church* (London UK: Burns & Oates), is recommended for its very thorough commentary on such characteristics. See bibliography for detail.

<sup>13</sup> Matt 16:18-19.



preach reconciliation in the world (2 Cor 5:18, 19). As she advances in God's purposes on earth, Christ's rallying call rings out more audibly: "Go . . . surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matt 28:19, 20).<sup>14</sup> As Christ's emissary on earth, the church cannot but follow her Saviour and Lord, who calls her to advance, and to excel in the task for which she exists. Moreover, ministry is not optional for the church, an added duty for her to do when she chooses to do so. Her ministry response is intrinsically bound to her identity as Christ's emissary on earth.

Overall, the nature and ministry response of the church is rooted in two premises. Firstly, her passionate love for God, and secondly, her loyal obedience to the summons of her Saviour and Lord, who calls her to serve as His emissary on earth.

## LOVE FOR GOD

The church is portrayed as God's family (Eph 2:19; Gal 6:10; Heb 2:11; 2 Pet 4: 17). Her conception was divine. She took form in the bosom of God the Father before the dawn of time (Eph 1:4). God has adopted her as His very own prized possession (Eph 1:14b). Understood in this context, ministry proceeds from a *filial* relationship, transpiring between the *laos* (λαὸς) and God, their Father.<sup>15</sup> The "Spirit of adoption"<sup>16</sup> energises this relationship so that the church is propelled to respond, as members of God's family in the world. Ultimately, the church was birthed, and lives, to radiate God's glory on earth (Eph 1:6, 12, 14), the very thing she was designated to do before creation existed (Eph 1:4).

### *Passionate for God's Glory*

The very nature of the church, as God's holy people, makes her produce one supreme and ongoing response, through her being, ministry, and varying organisational forms in the world *to bring glory to God*. The

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<sup>14</sup> All scriptural references are quoted from the New International Version (NIV), unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>15</sup> David Watson, *I Believe in the Church*, pp. 75-95.

<sup>16</sup> Gal 4:6-7.

church is conceived, redeemed, and invested with the power of the Holy Spirit, to bring glory to God (Eph 1:6, 12, 14). This fact cannot be emphasised enough.

Comparable only to their Saviour and Lord, God's people must be driven by great passion for God's glory. Since this was central to Christ's life and ministry, it must also be equally true for them (John 17:1-5). The church exists to shine, so that people may see her good works and "give glory to our Father in heaven".<sup>17</sup>

God's glory summarises all His features – His holy love, His grace, His mercy and justice. . . . The doxological motive implies that people who know the true and living God discover that *He is such a delight that they want others to get acquainted with and live in fellowship with Him as well* (emphasis added).<sup>18</sup>

*Glory by Life.* The people of God, characterised by godliness, are distinguished from non-believers. What they do with their lives revolves around God's glory (1 Cor 10:31). Their bodies are offered up to God as living sacrifices (Rom 12:1-2), and they are no longer controlled by their sinful desires (cf. Eph 2:1-3). They hunger and thirst after God's righteousness (Matt 5:6). This longing is unquenchable. The more their lives are brought under the control of the Holy Spirit; the more Spirit-borne features (Gal 5:18-19) become manifested in their lives.

The Bible explicitly states that the *laos* are the members of God's household (Eph 2:19). They *are* the temple, in whom God *dwells* by his Holy Spirit (1 Cor 3:16; 6:19-20; Eph 2:22). Since this is the case, Godly living is possible. God's people can live exemplary lives, as God's glory shines out from among them into the world.<sup>19</sup> The result is that God is exalted and glorified.

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<sup>17</sup> Matt 5:16.

<sup>18</sup> Eddie Gibbs and Ian Coffey, *Church Next* (Leicester UK: IVP, 2001), p. 63.

<sup>19</sup> Anderson, Leith, *A Church for the 21st Century* (Minneapolis MIN: Bethany House, 1992), p. 129.

*Glory Through Proclaimed Gospel.* Though lifestyle is the indispensable part of radiating God's glory in the world, it is incomplete without the proclamation of the gospel. The Lord launches the people of God to every part in the world to proclaim the good news of Christ's salvation. Christ said: "Go, into all the world and *preach* the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned" (Mark 16:15-16, emphasis added). The faith response of the lost can only eventuate in the context of the proclaimed gospel.<sup>20</sup> The church is sent to articulate the gospel, as clearly and persuasively as possible, so that estranged humankind is able to respond intelligently to its claims.<sup>21</sup> When God's people, who are His herald, proclaim the gospel, in the power of the Holy Spirit, God's kingdom rule is declared over creation, and His name is glorified, both in heaven and on earth.

### ***Passionate About God's Kingdom Rule***

"Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth, as it is heaven", Jesus taught His disciples to pray. They were encouraged to pray, and to persist in prayer, asking God the Father to realise His *will* on earth. This task must be carried out until Christ returns to fully consummate God's kingdom.<sup>22</sup> Even though the church is not the kingdom, she is the agency through which God's rule is partially realised in the world. At Christ's request, the church functions both as a *sign* and *signpost* of the kingdom of heaven in the world. As a sign, the church models the kingdom lifestyle before the watching world, and, as a signpost, she points the way to God's kingdom of righteousness.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Rom 10:14.

<sup>21</sup> Rom 10:17.

<sup>22</sup> R. P. Stevens coins the word "orthopathy", which he defines as: "Caring for what concerns God, caring for God's concerns in daily life, and caring for God above all." See his article "Living theologically: towards a theology of practice", in *Themelios* 20:3 (1995), pp. 4-8.

<sup>23</sup> "Editorial", in *Evangelical Review of Theology* 22-2 (1998), pp. 99-100.

*The Worshipping Church: A “Sign” of the Kingdom Presence.* The church’s primary calling is to worship the triune Godhead. This response distinguishes her from the people of this world. Through worship, the church perpetuates God’s rule of, and presence, in the world. God is the creator and the owner of this world, even though the world cannot acknowledge this fact in the present (John 1:10). Nonetheless, the world can be brought into such a conviction when the church offers up rousing testimonies of God’s working in the world. The worshipfulness of the church causes unbelievers to pause, be it momentarily, from their preoccupation with the world’s passing desires (1 John 2:17) to reflect on the more significant issues of life.

Worship is expressed as an event as well as a habit. It is eventful when God’s people assemble together in their locality to magnify God’s worthiness. The church also expresses worship to God when she is dispersed throughout society, and is occupied with the daily activities of life, doing everything out of reverence for God. Thus, worship involves all of life. The bottom line in worship is that believers are responding in gratitude to God the Father, for all He has done for them in Christ. James B. Torrance remarks:

It is *our self-offering in body, mind, and spirit* to the One True Offering made for us in Christ, our response of gratitude (*eucharistia*) to God’s grace (*charis*), our sharing in grace in the heavenly intercession of Christ. Therefore, anything we say about worship – the forms of worship, its practice, and procedure – must be said in light of that to which it is a response. It must be said, in light of the gospel (emphasis added).<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> J. B. Torrance, “The Place of Jesus in Worship”, in *Theological Foundation for Ministry*, Ray S. Anderson, ed. (Edinburgh UK: T. & T. Clark, 1979), p. 349.

The lost world is able to comprehend more clearly who God is, when the community of believers worship God gladly and exuberantly from their hearts, and with all their minds, and as they demonstrate, by life, God's glory in their local assemblies and societies-at-large.

*The Fellowshiping Church: A "Sign-Post" of the Kingdom's Presence.* Fellowship is another feature that characterises the church's love for God. It designates the important aspect of reaching out to others so that they, too, can share the benefits. The Greek word *koinonia* (κοινωνία) translated "fellowship" draws out this idea. The word carries a threefold idea of "having a share, giving a share, and sharing".<sup>25</sup>

Worship and fellowship, together, show the essence of the Christian faith. Through worship, believers affirm the fact that the triune Godhead makes them fit to be sharers together with Christ, and of His possession (Eph 1:14). In fellowship, they affirm their reliance on God, and on each other, and, as they disperse, they take the radiance of God's glory wherever they go, sharing with others God's good benefits.<sup>26</sup> As God's people, they have experienced for themselves, in the most tangible way, the *shared* abundance of God's good benefits of salvation, and thus, the treasure of infinite value, which lay within them (2 Cor 4:7). Since this is the case, they are necessarily compelled by the love of Christ (2 Cor 5:14) to share it with those in need. Since God's good gifts are for sharing, ministry is a natural expression of God's *agape* (ἀγάπη = love) lavished on His people, overflowing in generosity to others.

## **PASSIONATE ABOUT CHRIST'S COMMAND**

The ministry response of the church is also essential for one other reason. It is evidence of their obedience to Christ's summons. Christ, who is her Saviour and Lord, has mandated her to this task. The church can only respond, in obedience to her Lord.

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<sup>25</sup> Ralph P. Martin, "Communion", in *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (London UK: IVP, 1980), pp. 307-308.

<sup>26</sup> John Stott, *One People* (London UK: Falcon Books, 1968), pp. 75-81.

Christ's summons to the church was preceded by His own example of obedience to God's will. The church's ministry is not entirely innovative. She follows in the footsteps of her Lord and Master.<sup>27</sup> On earth, Christ stooped to minister to needy people, as a Servant. Ultimately, the Cross is the epitome of Christ's resolute obedience to the will of God on earth. What could be a more compelling example of obedience? Christ commands His people to go and to do likewise!

The compulsion to reach out to the lost world comes not from charitable motives, honourable though these are; nor are God's people responding to the dictates of world events. No! They are compelled to do so out of *absolute devotion* to their Lord and Saviour. Ultimately, it is Christ's explicit and resounding challenge that leads her to respond accordingly:

All authority has been given to *Me!* Therefore *go* and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to obey everything *I* have commanded *you*. And surely *I am* with *you* always, to the very end of the age" (Matt 28:18-20, emphasis mine).

Christ bids His people go. They must do so without delay!

### ***The Ministry of Service***

The call of Christ logically implies *service*, since those in the community of God are His servants. In the New Testament, most particularly in the Pauline epistles, the noun form of the word translated "minister" is *diakonos* (διδάκωνος).<sup>28</sup> It is used, in a very broad sense, to describe someone who waits at tables, in order to serve. Even though the New Testament recognises that some members of the church are "specifically" gifted to serve in full-time church ministry (Acts 6:4; cf. Eph 4:11), the word "minister" must still be understood in its broadest sense of the

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<sup>27</sup> Luke 9:23.

<sup>28</sup> The word can be translated either "minister" or "deacon".

term.<sup>29</sup> Every believer is engaged in an *ergon diakonias* (ἔργον διακονίας = work of service).<sup>30</sup> Leon Morris states; “Christianity knows nothing of a spiritual elite, occupying positions of special privilege. Paradoxically, for Christians, the highest privilege is that of being lowly.”<sup>31</sup>

This then, is how the call of the church to ministry is to be understood. A. T. Hanson expresses this point succinctly, when he remarks; “The pattern is Christ – the ministry of the church, and the task of the ministry is not to undertake some specialist activity, from which the rest of the faithful are excluded, but to pioneer in doing that which the whole church must do.”<sup>32</sup> The mandate of service is the enterprise assigned *inclusively* to everyone who confesses Jesus Christ as his or her Saviour and Lord. It is necessary to say, however, that obedience to Christ is anything but casuistry. Christian service is innately *voluntary*! It is a spontaneous activity, arising from transformed lives undergirded by the qualities of gratitude and humility.

*Service of Gratitude.* The inevitable response by the *laos* (λαὸς = people) of God to serve Him in the world originates from a heart-felt gratitude at the wonderment of the great salvation that has been offered freely to them by God in Christ. Gratitude ignites their resolve to obey Christ. God’s people cannot remain complacent when Christ’s *agapao* (ἀγαπάω)<sup>33</sup> compels them to act. The apostle Paul remarks: “For Christ’s love *compels* us”.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, God’s people cannot remain apathetic, when God’s compelling love has been shed abroad in their

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<sup>29</sup> C. K. Barrett, *The Church, Ministry, and Sacraments in the New Testament* (Exeter UK: Paternoster Press, 1993 reprint), pp. 31, 32.

<sup>30</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, “Christ Ministry through His Whole church”, in *Theological Foundation For Ministry*, Ray S. Anderson, ed. (Edinburgh UK: T. & T. Clark, 1979), pp. 430-457.

<sup>31</sup> Leon Morris, *The Great Doctrines of the Bible: Ministers of God* (Downers Grove UK: IVP, 1964), pp. 35, 36.

<sup>32</sup> A. T. Hanson, *Church Order in the New Testament* (London UK: SCM Press, 1961), p. 72.

<sup>33</sup> The most common form of the verb translated “to love” in the New Testament.

<sup>34</sup> 2 Cor 5:14.

hearts. They can only expand their lives in loving service for their Saviour and Lord.

*Service in Humility.* The call is to *table-wait*: to consider the needs of others before one's own interests and needs. God's people must be eager to dispense with pride; to put on an apron of humility, and to wait on the needs of fellow believers, and the needy world around us. Christ demonstrated *humble service* to His disciples, in the Upper Room on the eve of His passion, when He peeled back His outer garments, wrapped a towel around His waist, and stooped to wash their feet (John 13:4-5). Even though He was God Himself, His profound concern for the needs of estranged mankind, and the created order, ultimately resulted in His death on the cruel Cross.<sup>35</sup>

In responding to the ministry call of Christ, then, His people are demonstrating the qualities depicted by him as God's lowly *diakonos* (διδάκονος = servant) in the world.<sup>36</sup> They can only finally respond to this call and say: "We are only your *unworthy servants*" (Luke 10:7).

### ***Emulating Christ***

The ministry calling of the church offers believers the opportunity to emulate Christ in the world. As they respond, in daily life, to Christ's summons, they grow more toward Christlikeness in their lives. This is a reassuring thought, and yet one that is most challenging for God's people to understand.

The connection between service and Christlikeness is often lost to ordinary believers, because of the way Christianity is portrayed or taught. Most often, Christianity is presented as merely *assenting* to correct propositions. In truth, the Christian faith is more about *obedience* than it is about accumulating propositions – even correct

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<sup>35</sup> Phil 2:5-8.

<sup>36</sup> Ray S. Anderson, "Living in the World", in *Theological Foundation For Ministry*, Ray S. Anderson, ed. (Edinburgh UK: T. & T. Clark, 1979), pp. 567-594.



propositions.<sup>37</sup> The shared participation of every believer in the ministry task is obligatory, since it is fundamental to change occurring in his or her life. Service is an important means, through which God does this in the believer. Even if Christians do not fully understand the connection between the two, they can at least obey Christ in the opportunity afforded them, and, by so doing, grow more into the likeness of Christ.<sup>38</sup>

The prospects afforded to the church to emulate Christ are numerous, since ministry deals with the whole of life. Nevertheless, two possibilities stand out distinctively that serve this purpose: suffering and fruit-bearing.

*Through Suffering.* Suffering is inevitable in an environment that is estranged and hostile toward God and His rule. Christ Himself remarked that, following Him, will entail suffering: “If any man would come after Me, let him take up his cross daily and follow Me” (Luke 9:23). Most certainly, the people of God will be assailed with trials of many kinds.<sup>39</sup> In most cases, this will occur daily, as heavenly values clash with those of the fallen world, the ruler of the kingdom of the air, and man’s fallen nature.<sup>40</sup> God’s people are not exempted from suffering, as they seek to bring glory to Christ in a hostile environment. The fact is, they will most likely suffer more, for the simple reason that they are followers of Christ. Paul warns, “those who want to live godly lives in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim 4:12). Nevertheless, God’s community will not shrink from suffering. It is through suffering that a valuable opportunity is afforded to them to draw strength from the power of God (2 Cor 12:10), and excel in their attempt to bring glory to His name.

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<sup>37</sup> The 2nd-century church father, Ignatius of Antioch, expresses the similar idea in his letter to the Roman Christian in the latter half of the 1st century AD. He writes: “Christianity is not a matter persuading people of particular ideas, but of inviting them to share in the greatness of Christ.” Cited in *Roots of Faith*, Robert Van De Weyer, ed. (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1997), p. 27.

<sup>38</sup> Rom 8:29.

<sup>39</sup> Jam 1:2.

<sup>40</sup> Eph 2:2.

*Through Fruit-Bearing.* In the Upper Room discourse (John 13-17), Christ discussed *fruitfulness* with His disciples. They were to abide in Him, to be able to bear fruit: “You did not choose Me, but I chose you, and appointed you to go and bear *fruit* – fruit that will last” (John 15:16, emphasis added). The words spoken by Christ have as much relevance and potency for the church now as when they were first spoken to the 12 back then. Perhaps a question worth answering is: What evidence can God’s people submit as proof that they are growing and bearing fruit for Christ in Melanesia today?

Fruitfulness is evident when the following things occur: firstly, believers are progressing in *holiness* and godly living; secondly, believers are *replicating* themselves in the lives of others; and, finally, they are *excelling* in good works. Is this the case for the church in Melanesia?

### **AN APPRAISAL OF THE IMPACT OF CHURCH LIFE AND MINISTRY IN MELANESIA**

Although Christianity made its initial appearance in the region as early as the mid-1500s,<sup>41</sup> Melanesians<sup>42</sup> waited another three centuries before any deliberate attempt was made to Christianise them. In the early 1800s, the attempt to Christianise the islands of Melanesia commenced with great earnestness. With a westward push from the Polynesian islands, coupled

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<sup>41</sup> The Portuguese brand of Roman Catholicism was introduced to Timor in the 16th century. The other parts of Melanesia were evangelised three centuries later. Although the Roman Catholic mission entered the Bismarck Archipelago in 1847, it was mostly a fruitless attempt until 24 years later, when the LMS mission was established in the southern Papuan region in 1871. The Sacred Heart Order re-entered German Nuigini in 1881, and only four years later in 1885 held their first religious service. For detailed information about missions and the church, in individual states and colonies of Melanesia, see the 2nd edition of the *World Christian Encyclopaedia*, vol 1 (2001).

<sup>42</sup> Melanesia, in the western Pacific, includes the following: Timor, West Papua Province of Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, New Caledonia, and Fiji.

with the opposite thrust from the north, the Melanesian region was opened up for Christian missionary work. This pioneering effort is credited to the London Missionary Society (LMS), and a number of Roman Catholic Orders. Other mission agencies and denominations, such as the Methodists and Lutherans, were to follow suit.

From the initial efforts of the 1800s, to the dawn of the 1900s, the number of Christian converts in Melanesia had multiplied enormously. Incidentally, from that point on, the work also became more competitive, with the influx of other Christian missions and denominations vying for the souls of Melanesians. By the latter half of the 20th century, the people of Melanesia had almost been fully Christianised.<sup>43</sup> It is hardly disputed that the efforts of foreign denominations and mission agencies to Christianise the Melanesian region were markedly successful. Generally speaking, the overall goal of establishing the church in the Melanesian region appears to have been accomplished.

With the advent of the church, the social and cultural situations of Melanesia have been changed for the better, making life for the people of the region a lot more agreeable. Missions-related projects, essential to the welfare of the people, form part of the everyday reality for most, if not all, societies of Melanesia. Importantly, people have eagerly embraced the Christian gospel; parting with features of their traditional religions contrary to the Christian gospel.<sup>44</sup> Even as believers gratefully acknowledge the significant changes Christianity brought to Melanesia, it is also timely for them to pause and take stock, to seek out the reasons for the ineffectiveness of the church's influence in the region.

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<sup>43</sup> These remarks do not represent the most accurate historical details. They are simply a generalised description setting the stage for our discussion. For a more expanded historical account of the establishment of the Christian church in Melanesia see other writings. A helpful sketch of early missionary work in Melanesia can be found in Rufus Pech's article titled: "A Historical Sketch of Christian Missions and Ministry in Central Melanesia", published in the *Point* 7 (1985): 17-71.

<sup>44</sup> Gernot Fugmann, "The Role of the Church in Society", in *Point* 5 (1985), p. 1.

Why, one may ask, if there is such a huge Christian presence in Melanesia,<sup>45</sup> is the region sliding more and more into moral decay each day? Why is there little passion for God, and for His glory, in the region? Why is the church still immature, after many years of Christianity impacting the region? These serious questions, and more, beg for answers, considering the current plight of the church and the region generally.

### **THE ANOMALY OF “CHRISTIAN” MELANESIA**

The ills of Melanesian societies, as well as that of the church in Melanesia, continue to generate discussion. Observers have commented that the region is replete with escalating social, religious, and political problems.<sup>46</sup> The writings of socio-political scientists also abound with descriptive, as well as prescriptive, commentaries about such problems.<sup>47</sup> There is also an expanding volume of material written by Christian scholars about these issues.<sup>48</sup> The international media, and expatriate observers, also harangue Melanesian peoples about these problems, on a regular basis.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Christian adherents in Melanesia make up to 85-95 percent of the total population. Fiji and West Papua are exceptions, for obvious reasons – Fiji has an equal number of Indo-Fijian, who are mostly Hindus, and West Papua is a province of Indonesia – the most populous Islamic nation in the world. Nevertheless, the Melanesian populations of these two societies are still disproportionately Christians.

<sup>46</sup> A regular commentary in the print media by Mike Manning of Transparency International (TI) is a case in point.

<sup>47</sup> Allan Patience, a political science professor at the University of PNG, has written and spoken quite a lot about the problems of Papua New Guinea, but also of the Melanesian region as a whole.

<sup>48</sup> For example, the writings of Joshua Daimoi and Mosende L. Douglas cover some of these issues quite extensively.

<sup>49</sup> An email dispatch of August, 31, 2006, is a case in point. The dispatch is titled: “PNG Careens towards Chaos”, and describes the impending collapse of one of Melanesia’s largest states, due to issues such as poverty, law-and-order breakdown, corruption, and the increase in HIV/AIDS infections, to name but a few.

### ***Trouble in Society***

There is no doubt at all that Melanesia is a *troubled* region. It is among the most violent in the world. Crimes of all forms ravage the region. It seems that Melanesian societies gravitate more toward brutality than to neighbourliness. Aggravated assault, thuggery, and wilful murder, occur unchecked, on a daily basis, both in the towns and rural villages.<sup>50</sup> This is a direct indictment of the “Melanesian way”.<sup>51</sup> The most vulnerable – the poor, women, and children – suffer immensely in Melanesia. Violence of all forms is directed, almost daily, particularly against women and children.<sup>52</sup> Rape cases are also reported daily in the papers, and have reached peak proportions.<sup>53</sup> Anti-social behaviour and petty crimes are prevalent. Poverty is on the increase, causing it own sets of problems. The HIV/AIDS epidemic is escalating in the region. One of

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<sup>50</sup> The situation in Melanesia can be compared to some of the nations in sub-Saharan Africa, which are the most violent in the world. All the member states and entities in Melanesia have, without exception, undergone civil disorder. The assumption that Melanesians value harmony more than confrontation is probably an idealistic notion, which should be accepted with a “grain of salt”. But, see Joshua Daimoi’s article “Understanding Melanesians”, in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 17-2 (2001), pp. 6-21. A report of a series of studies to ascertain the magnitude and the various forms of violence occurring in the whole of Oceania are recorded in the “Special Issue” of the *Pacific Studies* 13-3 (1990).

<sup>51</sup> Bernard Narokobi, a lawyer and PNG government minister, was an ardent advocate of “the Melanesian Way”. His thoughts are recorded in the book of the same title: *The Melanesian Way*. In essence, it was held that, given the opportunity, Melanesians could very well deal with their problems, using skills and wisdom, transmitted from their forebears for many thousands of years. Incidentally, this thinking seemed to have overlooked the fact that mankind is inherently sinful, and is unable to deal with its problems amicably. In the current environment, this concoction does not appear to be potent enough, and so, Melanesians must look elsewhere for others to help us with our predicament.

<sup>52</sup> For a thorough catalogue of domestic violence in Oceania region, see “Domestic Violence in Oceania” (Special Issue), *Pacific Studies* 10: 3 (1990), especially pp. 225-254.

<sup>53</sup> A 152-page report titled “Black and White”, published in 2005 by the *Consultative Implementation and Monitoring Council of Papua New Guinea* (CIMC-PNG), gives us a snapshot of the pervasiveness of brutality in PNG. Although this report chronicles the PNG situation, it is assumed that it reflects the situation throughout Melanesia generally.

its member states now has one of the highest HIV virus infection rates in the world.<sup>54</sup> Pillaging of national coffers is rampant in these societies. Only recently, a retired head of state in the region is reported to have freely admitted to have stripped Government House bare of its furnishings at the end of his six-year tenure.<sup>55</sup> The irony being that this individual was often candid about his commitment to the Christian faith in many of his public speeches.<sup>56</sup> Church leaders and lay Christians themselves are colluding with criminals and con men<sup>57</sup> to satiate their lust for wealth, in the most blatant ways possible, knowing fully that they are consigning themselves, their people, environment, and their societies “to the dogs”. Each day, the print, audio, and visual media churns out a concoction of the wickedness that is so pervasive in Melanesian societies. In the midst of this, the church *sleeps!*

### ***The Trouble with the Church***

Other writers have discussed the ills of the church in greater detail than offered here.<sup>58</sup> Nevertheless, it is important to revisit three of the more-insidious “isms”, which contribute considerably to the ineffectiveness of the church in the region: nominalism, syncretism, and pragmatism.

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<sup>54</sup> Some reports indicate that three out of every 10 people in PNG are infected by the HIV virus. Nationwide, the number of infected people is estimated to be 60,000 to a 100,000. The rate of infection is reported to be comparable to some Asian and sub-Saharan countries, and it is still rising.

<sup>55</sup> Source: *Deutsche Press-Agentur*, 2006.

<sup>56</sup> Many Melanesian politicians and government bureaucrats profess to be born-again Christians.

<sup>57</sup> In the mid-1990s, a number of quick money schemes, sprang up, primarily in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, with a large following in other Melanesian island nations. These QMS alleged that they were Christian organisations, and so had the strong backing of certain denominations and their leaders. After siphoning people’s money, they vanished – together with the “investment” – a large proportion of which belonged to ordinary believers and Christian denominations.

<sup>58</sup> See especially, books and articles by Boseto, Daimoi, Douglas, Kendi, Kero, and Manu, listed in the bibliography.

*Nominalism.* The Melanesian church is besieged by nominalism. Some people have projected that 96 percent of Melanesians, who profess to be Christian, are only nominally committed to the faith.<sup>59</sup> Nominalism can be referred to colloquially as a “six-inch deep by 60 miles wide”<sup>60</sup> commitment people make to the Christian faith. It is also a profession of faith, much talked about, but very rarely, if ever, lived at all.

The problem of nominalism becomes very obvious to any observer, when she or he tries to correlate the packed church buildings every Sunday or Saturday with what goes on during every working day. The spillover effect of packed worship activities in the homes and workplaces of Melanesian societies leaves so much to be desired. Schwarz remarks:

Sunday services may be crowded, and the sacraments dispensed in record numbers, but, despite the appearance of success, one must ask how the church is experienced here. How effective is this approach, in helping people to respond to their baptismal calling in daily life, and, in this movement toward the church building, who and how many are left behind?<sup>61</sup>

It is probably safe to venture to say that the hazard called “nominalism” dates back to the early days of the mission endeavour in Melanesia, and is the result of misguided strategies, whether people want to admit it or not.

*Syncretism.* Syncretism is another malady that permeates the church in Melanesia. Perhaps it is an even more-serious problem than nominalism. It has been pointed out by others that, since Melanesian societies are caught in the whirlpool of rapid change, it is not uncommon for people in such situations to concoct a hybrid belief-system, consisting of both the

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<sup>59</sup> Kewai Kero, “Nominalism in Papua New Guinea”, in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 14-1 (1987), pp. 57-87.

<sup>60</sup> Source unknown.

<sup>61</sup> Brian Schwarz, “Ministry in Urban Context”, in *Point 7* (1985), p. 174.

old and new belief-systems.<sup>62</sup> This brew is *syncretism*. Syncretism is also designated “folk Christianity”. Syncretism is a severe problem, because it pervades the church more than it is often acknowledged. Even born-again Christians exhibit syncretistic tendencies in Melanesia. Quite often, they resort to their traditional religious practices, when they find that Christianity does not completely answer some of their life problems. For instance, Christians are known to regularly seek the help of traditional healers, when medical treatment and prayer fails to exhibit anticipated results. It is probably realistic to say that syncretism is the cause, while nominalism is the effect.

*Pragmatism.* The other problem is similar to syncretism; it is designated *pragmatism*. It is common for people to say that Melanesians are functional pragmatists.<sup>63</sup> An untold number of Melanesians have embraced Christianity, out of a sense of expediency. This is a very typical response in Melanesia. Melanesians look for results. Beliefs or ideas are accepted or rejected on the basis of their *utility*, and not on the basis of their *credibility*. What works is accepted; what doesn't is either put on the backburner, for future use, or is rejected outright. It is fair to say that many Melanesians seem to have embraced Christianity, more because of its social reasons than for its credibility as a world and life view.

Sadly, many Melanesians ignore the fact that, in essence, Christianity provides the only credible life “story” to human existence. Christianity must evoke commitment, not because it anticipates results, even though it does, but, more importantly, it provides humans with a window to understanding themselves, their predicaments, as well as their achievements in the world. This, then, is the conspicuous situation of the church in Melanesia, despite the fact that the Christian gospel has

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<sup>62</sup> See especially, Lacey's article “Religious Change in Precolonial Era”, in *Point* (2/1978), p. 178.

<sup>63</sup> Kewai, “Nominalism”, pp. 57-87.



become well and truly established in the Black Islands<sup>64</sup> for over two centuries.

### IDENTIFY THE ROOT CAUSE

The ineffectiveness of the church in Melanesia, and her ills, will continue to generate discussion, and spill much ink, as time goes on. No doubt, the momentum will increase, as more and more indigenous church leaders and home-grown thinkers become more conscious of the issue. Unfortunately, it is noticeable that current discussion and writing are inclined to discuss the surface illness of the church rather than root causes, which are far more urgent. This article is an attempt to contribute to the latter cause; to probe beyond the surface problems of church in Melanesia, and try to identify a basic root cause to these problems.

The assertion of this article is that the most insidious root cause of the ineffectiveness of the church in Melanesia is that the *laos tou theou* (λαῶ τῶ θεοῦ = people of God) are excluded from participating fully in church life and ministry in Melanesia.<sup>65</sup> Unless the entire company of believers is “mainstreamed” fully into the church life and ministry in Melanesia she will continue to decline in her influence, and will never be a proactive presence for Christ in the region.

Put differently, the church’s deplorable state has eventuated, because the laity have been put at arms’ length from the centre of the life and ministry of the church in Melanesia. Moreover, the antidote to this root cause does not lie with the savvy clergy, structures, and techniques, but simply with the entire *laos* (λαῶς = people) of God themselves (cf. Acts 8:1, 4).

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<sup>64</sup> The Melanesian region is referred colloquially to as the “Black Islands”, because some people, who have the darkest skin complexion in the world, inhabit it.

<sup>65</sup> A growing number of Christian writers from the West, concerned about postmodernism, are proposing very much the same concern that is delineated in this article. For instance, see Gelder’s book *The Essence of the Church* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Books, 2006), see especially chapters 4 -6.

The current state of affairs of the church in Melanesia is comparable to Europe in the Middle Ages, where the Reformers boldly contended for “priesthood of all believers”. The church in Melanesia is the monopoly of a few “specialists”. Nevertheless, to pontificate about the “priesthood of believers” in Melanesia is not sufficient. The situation demands more than paying lip service to God’s people. God’s chosen race, His royal priesthood, His special people (1 Pet 2:9) must be affirmed as coparticipants, released fully to live as His people, and to serve Him with their whole lives.

Junkin’s comment, although directed particularly at the church in North America, makes great sense in Melanesia:

The church members all too often are primarily the objects of the ministries of others: others pray for them; others tell them what scripture says; others tell them to what obedience they are called; and others engage in ministry on their behalf. . . . They remain children in faith, dependent upon others; and such dependency breeds voicelessness, powerlessness, apathy, and even anger.<sup>66</sup>

It is extremely important for the *whole-people* concept of the church to be recovered urgently. Until this happens, any real prospect of resolving the ills of the Melanesian church, and thus of the wider society, will continue to be remote and elusive.

Individual believers must be made to understand that they are *indispensable* to body life, as well as to the maximum effectiveness of the church, in the region of Melanesia. Christians are accountable to each other, and to God, for the use of their gifts and abilities as members of Christ’s body in Melanesia. Moreover, as they are provided opportunities to explore for themselves, they will be able to enhance the effectiveness of their gifts, and discover their niches in church life and ministry.

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<sup>66</sup> Edward Dixon Junkin, “Up from the Grassroots: The Church in Transition”, in *Interpretation* xlvii-3 (1992), pp. 279-280.

The point hardly needs emphasising that the scope of impact and effectiveness in the church in Melanesia can only be in direct proportion to the extent to which the gifts and abilities of God's people are utilised throughout Melanesia. In sum, the insignificance of the church in Melanesia can be correlated to the small percentage of believers currently involved in the life and ministry of the church in Melanesia.<sup>67</sup>

The solutions to nominalism, syncretism, and pragmatism, and to a host of other problems, for that matter, lie neither in human ingenuity nor in organisational structures, but with the *laos* (λαὸς = people) themselves.<sup>68</sup>

### **IMPEDIMENTS TO THE WHOLE-CHURCH PARTICIPATION**

A number of interrelated barriers inhibit God's people from fully expressing love for Him, and obedience to Christ, through the life and ministry of the church in Melanesia. The impediments are *conceptual* rather than organisational or functional. They are rooted in faulty ideas people have about the nature of the church, and her role in the world. The sooner these faulty conceptions are eliminated, and replaced with more biblical ones, the better placed the church will be to give maximum attention to her role in Melanesia. Until then, the maximum participation of God's people, envisaged in scripture cannot really and truly begin to happen.

#### ***Overt Clericalism***

One of the chief obstacles to *lay-participation* in the church in Melanesia stems from her unabashed clericalism. Church life and ministry are perceived by many as the domains of the "specialised" clergy. Though this may not be advocated explicitly, this perception is rooted in the mostly hierarchical styles of church governments, which were

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<sup>67</sup> Gaius Helix's short article titled "The Pastor and Resources", in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 11-1&2 (1995), pp. 94-103, also makes the similar observations that this article makes.

<sup>68</sup> See also Bill Hybels, *Courageous Leadership* (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2002), especially chapter 1.

transplanted to Melanesia by overseas missions and denominations. Most often, the mentality is reinforced, when the clergy, both expatriate, as well as national clergy, is located in mission stations some distance away from the masses. Thus, the masses automatically equate the mission station with the church.

Moreover, since it is the specialist *klēros* (κλήρος),<sup>69</sup> who have acquired the correct knowledge of the Bible – for an extensive period of time – people generally assume that they have the exclusive right to the church and her ministry. Designations, such as, “priest”, “reverend”, or “minister” add fuel to this faulty thinking by ordinary believers.

The *laos* (λαὸς = people), on the other hand, cannot accept that they are the church, because they sense so much distance between themselves and the clergy. They are content, together with the pagans of this world, to be passive *receptors* and *spectators* of the ministry of the “specialist” clergy.

### ***Reductionist View of Ministry***

This hurdle follows from the one above. Given the fact that church life and ministry is confined to the “specialist” clergy, the church’s ministry is also construed in a very restricted way. For the most, ministry is restricted to the number of things done by the ordained clergy.<sup>70</sup> Most often, ministry is understood in the following two ways only:

*Dispensing the Desirable.* Ministry is equated with service rendered to those who have a particular need or needs. In this case, it is treated as a *commodity*. It is something that can be accepted, or even refused, like other products in the marketplace. Church ministry must vie for its own

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<sup>69</sup> *Klēros* (κλήρος) is the Greek word, from which we get our English synonym “clergy”. In the New Testament, the word *klēros* (κλήρος) meant; “a part” or “a share”. In about the 3rd century AD, the use of the word was used to refer to those who ministered in the church fulltime, as against those who did not. See R. P. Stevens, *The Other Six Days*, for a fuller treatment of this subject.

<sup>70</sup> This fact appears to be equally true for both the “high churches” as well as for those that subscribe to a congregational form of government.

customers. The religious fraternity has total monopoly over this product. With so few specialists to go around, they must dispense ministry like “service station attendants”.<sup>71</sup> People, who desire some form of ministry, can respond in two ways: “shop” for it in the mission stations or the pastor’s study, or wait for it when the clergyman or clergywoman turns up to “deliver” at an appointed time and place.

*Wholly Inwardly Focused.* Ministry, moreover, is restricted entirely to the interior life. When the term “ministry” is mentioned, it automatically invokes the notion of something “spiritual”. Since the specialist clergy is schooled in the interior life, it reserves the right to deal exclusively with issues related to it. This “spiritual” ministry is stressed to such an extent that the other equally-important aspects of life become completely redundant. The result is that an unbridgeable chasm is created between the spiritual and physical and/or the spiritual and mental, etc. The Christian faith can no longer lay claim to other parts of life. It is now restricted entirely to the spiritual maladies of the “souls” of men and women. Beyond this, the church is silent; this is the secular life – “the God forsaken” – that must be left to its own devices.

### ***Institutionalism***

The third impediment to whole-church life and ministry is institutionalism. Even though the church is institutional in its visible forms, Christians must be able “to recognise the limits of particular organisational forms, which become institutionalised”.<sup>72</sup> While the forms serve unchanging purposes, “they are not absolute, neither are they static and unchanging”.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Schwarz, “Ministry”, p. 174.

<sup>72</sup> Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church*, p. 159. This is one of the most valuable resources for understanding the nature, ministry, and institutional expressions of the church. Gelder expresses sentiments similar to this article.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159.

In Melanesia, people show a zeal for transitory expressions or “forms” of the church, rather than the underlying timely truths they point to. For instance, Melanesian believers continue to divide over organisational structures, modes of worship, and even such trivial issues, such as hand clapping or raising hands. Most often, these transitory forms date back to the early missionaries and missions. They are so embedded in people’s minds, and are even regarded as Bible truths, themselves. The result is that the church in Melanesia is distanced from authenticity, because she cannot move beyond these forms. The church in Melanesia should seriously consider the admonition of her Saviour and Lord if she is to elicit a hearing in the Melanesian region.

No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch will pull away from the garment, making the tear worse. Neither do men pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst, the wine will run out, and the skins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins and both are preserved (Matt 9:16-17).

Clergymen or clergywomen must, again, bear some responsibility for inculcating this mentality in the minds of believers.

### **CHRIST’S LIFE AND MINISTRY ANTICIPATED IN WHOLE-PEOPLE MINISTRY**

Christ *anticipated* whole-people coparticipation in church life and ministry. The following features in His ministry characterise this:

- He made Himself accessible to everyone, in His life and ministry on earth.
- He called individuals to Himself, so that they could observe His life and teaching, and share in His ministry.
- Christ had a ministry focus that was *universal* – the whole world.

Christ understood His purpose for coming to earth, that is, to redeem Adam's progeny from the curse of the law, sin and death. Since all of mankind have equal share in the fall of Adam (Rom 5:12), He was concerned for the entire human race.<sup>74</sup> This is borne out by the fact that during Christ's life on earth, He ministered to everyone, regardless of his or her status or occupation in life.

People, in all their different situations and walks of life, had enormous value in the eyes of Christ. They had value, because they were created for God's glory, and created in His image, though fallen in sin. Christ was prepared to love them, even to the point of suffering and death on the cruel Cross to do so.

On His own initiative, Christ took the form of a servant so that He could deal a death blow to sin, death, and the Devil, once and for all (Gal 2:20; Phil 2:6-11; Col 2:15). The result of this is that every believer now has equal access to God the Father in heaven (Heb 10:19-23), and is endowed equally with His blessings in the heavenly places (Eph 1:3).

The fact of a *whole-people* ministry becomes more convincing when we consider Christ's call to individuals to follow Him and to share in His ministry. The 12 disciples are a case in point. They were called: separated from the throng, so that they could observe Christ, His life and teachings, carefully at close quarters. They were ordinary men, prone to failure, as is the rest of mankind. What differentiated them from the rest was their obedience to the call of the Master, and a commitment to follow closely in His steps. It was to these 12 disciples that Christ "entrusted the secrets of the kingdom" (Mark 4:11; see also 1 Cor 2:7; 1 Cor 4:1). It was also to them that Christ personally committed the task of proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, to the ends of the earth.

Inevitably, this rag-tag company of 12 formed the nucleus of what emerged on the day of Pentecost as the new community of God's people – the church – birthed and empowered by the Holy Spirit. This is the very

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<sup>74</sup> See John 3:16 and Rom 5:15b.

same community, into which Melanesian believers are instantaneously baptised by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:13; Eph 4:5), the moment they trust in Christ's redemptive work and its merits.

## THE WHOLE-PEOPLE ARE CHRIST'S COPARTICIPANTS IN THE WORLD

Privilege and responsibility run parallel to each other in scripture. Those who are redeemed by Christ are also called to serve Him as His representatives on earth. The church, as the sum total of God's people, exists to expand on the work Christ began when He was on earth. As members "of the body of Christ", they are obedient to Christ, who is their "Head", and are committed fully to His cause on earth. The church, as Christ's body, is his coparticipant, entrusted with a sacred trust. This sacred trust is mandated to the entire *laos tou theou* (λαῶ τοῦ θεοῦ = people of God), by Christ, without exception. R. Paul Stevens remarks:

"Laity" in its proper New Testament sense of *laos* (λαὸς) – the people of God – is a term of great honour, denoting the enormous *privilege* and *mission of the people of God*. Once we were not a people at all, but now, in Christ, we are "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people (*laos/λαὸς*) belonging to God" (1 Pet 2:9; Ex 19:6, emphasis mine).<sup>75</sup>

Since Christian ministry is essentially about kingdom lifestyle, everyone, without exception, can participate in kingdom work. Unfortunately, over the centuries, "specialised" practitioners, and human ingenuity have often disparaged the Bible-sanctioned *whole-people* concept of church and ministry. For Melanesia, at least, the most urgent need is for the *laos* (λαὸς = people) to be returned to the centre stage of church life and ministry. Until that happens, the concept of *whole-people* church life and ministry, anticipated by Christ, and envisaged in the Bible, continues to be ignored, or simply disobeyed, but at the risk of perilous consequences. The fact that Christ anticipated whole-people participation in church life

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<sup>75</sup> R. Paul Stevens, *The Abolition of the Laity* (Exeter UK: Paternoster Press, 1999), p. 5.



and ministry is established indubitably when two additional truths are brought into the equation.

### ***They are Empowered Evenly***

Before His departure to heaven, Christ instructed His 11 disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, He said, would empower them to be His witnesses in the world. On the day the Holy Spirit descended, the number of those waiting was 120 in all (Acts 1:15). This entire company was imbued with Christ's gift of His Spirit on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:4). It is important to note a number of characteristic aspects of the company assembled in the Jerusalem. Notable are the following features:

- The group consisted of both men and women (Acts 1:12-14).
- They were men and women, who responded humbly to the claims of Christ in their lives (Acts 4:13).
- With a few exceptions, they were mostly very ordinary men and women (Acts 4:13 cf. 1 Cor 1:26-31).
- The group consisted of individuals from all walks of life and occupations (see the Gospels).
- The entire group, both men and women, were filled and empowered by the Spirit, without exception (Acts 2:4).
- The entire group ministered the glories of God to the Jerusalem audience, without exception (cf. Acts 2:17-18).

The impact of the Holy Spirit on this timid band was stupendous. In an instant, the believers' lives were transformed. The once-timid band became filled with divine boldness and power. They, *all together*, fearlessly proclaimed the glorious gospel to the Jews of Jerusalem, and also to those of other regions. The result speaks for itself: by the end of the day, the number of believers swelled to over 3,000 (Acts 2:41).

God's Holy Spirit is poured out in the same measure and power to God's entire people today. In very much the same way, He was poured out on the waiting followers of Christ on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:17-22). What happened in Jerusalem, 2,000 years ago, is occurring repeatedly in the rural communities and cities of Melanesia. This is true for the church in Melanesia, as well as for every other part in the world.

### ***They are Equipped Impartially***

The giftedness of God's people is taught explicitly in New Testament, and hardly needs justification. The nature of the church, as Christ emissary alone, demands this to be the case. Indeed, God's people cannot hope to accomplish the task, unless the necessary apparatus is placed at their disposal. The same Holy Spirit, who provides power to the church, also equips her to carry out Christ's summons in the world. This equipment comes in the form of charismatic gifts (1 Cor 12:1-31; 14:1-40; Rom 12:6-14), as well as charismatic individuals (Eph 4:1-16).

Moreover, since *all* believers are baptised by the Holy Spirit into one body, and made to drink of the one Spirit,<sup>76</sup> no believer is excluded from the liberality of the Holy Spirit, as He dispenses His grace gifts. The entire church of Christ is showered with a variety of gifts and special abilities, so that she is equipped, fit, and ready for various forms of ministry (1 Cor 12:7; Eph 4:12). Even though God's people are endowed with different gifts and abilities, they have a common task to accomplish. In Eph 4:12-16, Paul points out, explicitly, the reason for which Christ dispenses His gifts to His church. The different gifts are distributed to the "body of Christ", to equip her to carry out the works of service, so that she attains unanimity in the faith, maturing, until she reaches out to the measure of the fullness of Christ, who is her Head (Eph 4:15; see also 1:22; Col 1:18). This is the reason why *whole-people* coparticipation in church life and ministry is both inevitable and indispensable in Melanesia.

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<sup>76</sup> 1 Cor 12:13.

## WHOLE PEOPLE ARE SENT TO THE WHOLE WORLD

The universality of the church is strategic. Christ commissioned: “Go into *all the world*” (Mark 16:15, emphasis added). God’s people are dispersed far and wide in the world as ministers of God. The very nature of the church consists in her *being sent* to the world. Jesus compares the community of believers to wheat scattered among the tares of this world (Matt 13). For as long as Christ’s Second Advent is delayed, God’s people must coexist among the people of this world. The church’s existence in the world has been predetermined by the triune Godhead. Christ’s prayer in John 17 clearly alludes to this very fact. “My prayer is not that You take them out of the world, but that You will protect them from the evil one. . . . *As you have sent Me into the world, I have sent them into the world*” (John 17:15, 18, emphasis mine).

The ministry mandate, recorded in all the Gospels and the book of Acts (Matt 28:18-19; Mark 16:15-18; Luke 24:46-49; Acts 1:7-8), indubitably establishes the reason for God’s people sojourning in the world. They are in the world with a *mission* to serve the triune God, and ultimately to bring Him glory! As long as Christ tarries, each believer must judiciously respond to the opportunity to contribute to God’s kingdom rule on earth (Eph 5:15-17). Immersed, as they are in the world, with its nagging questions of life (about existence, suffering, pain, and death), God’s people are called to respond as *table-waiters*. This response demands a practical theology – an active-reflective theology – that exegetes both scripture and life.<sup>77</sup>

This ministry task, begun by Christ, comports itself most comfortably with God’s people – earthen vessels – who know the world so innately, and yet are possessed of God so intimately, so that they become His *gift* to the world.

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<sup>77</sup> R. Paul Stevens, *The Other Six Days*, pp. 16-17.

## FORWARD STEPS: SOME SUGGESTIONS

This article's burden has been to point out the urgent need for the *whole* church to recover her identity and calling, at the *bequest* of Christ in the region of Melanesia. The author is optimistic about the church's potential to be an advantageous influence in the Melanesian region. This article, moreover, points out that one of the chief root causes of the ineffectiveness of the church in Melanesia is the exclusion of the entire *laos tou theou* (λαὸν τοῦ θεοῦ = people of God) from church life and ministry.

Identifying the root cause is perhaps the easiest thing to do. The task of reintegrating it fully into the life and ministry of the church remains the hardest part of the equation, requiring much prayer and reflection.

Nevertheless, the church, in her multi-faceted forms, and in a variety of contexts in Melanesia, must begin to work through such important issues. The situation demands courageous and bold steps to be taken. It is most urgent! A remark from a Melanesian Christian leader is worth stating:

It is my strong hope that when all Christians in Melanesia are caught up by the activity of God's Spirit, then we will rise above our denominational boxes, to see each other as brothers and sisters. . . . The world, today, desperately needs to see Jesus walking about again with His body WHOLE, serving the needy, liberating those who are under the power of the devil, and raising the dead.<sup>78</sup>

The following suggestions are offered to assist concerned Christians, but, more particularly, to those entrusted with the responsibility of *envisioning* a new and proactive pathway for the church into the future.

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<sup>78</sup> Leslie Boseto, former Moderator of the United church of Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands.

## MISSIONAL TEACHING

One of the immediate needs of believers in Melanesia is to understand clearly their identity as God's *missional servants* in the world. This requires that academicians in theological institutions, as well Bible teachers and preachers, available to the local congregations, be harnessed fully, to convey this truth, as clearly as possible, to Melanesian believers, in culturally-appropriate ways. Teaching should place greater emphasis on retelling the Bible as a "divine story", as well as instilling correct knowledge. The Christian community must be made to understand, and identify clearly, who she is "in Christ", and what her role is in God's great purpose in the world. Greater emphasis must be placed on teaching the following:

- The church, as both divine and human, is God's missional agency, whose primary task is to proclaim God's kingdom rule in the world.
- The nature of gifts, and their place in Christian ministry.<sup>79</sup>
- The nature of the Christian leadership, and its role in the church, and in society.

## FLEXIBLE MODELLING-FACILITATIVE STYLE OF LEADERSHIP

Church leadership, at all levels, must exercise greater flexibility, as it seeks to respond to the changing environments of both the church and the society at large. Institutional expressions of the church, which promotes autocratic leadership styles, and breeds ongoing dependency of the *laos* (λαὸς = people), is dated, and probably needs to be discarded. Today's leadership must assume a more *modelling-facilitative* style that strives to enhance the entire community's competency to carry out ministry.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> An excellent resource tool for dealing with spiritual gifts has been written by Eric Wright, titled *Church: No Spectator Sport*. See Bibliography for full details.

<sup>80</sup> Mary McDonald, writing about ministry in Melanesia, proposes that the leadership style needed is *facilitative*, where the main task of leaders consists primarily of enhancing and assisting God's people to fulfil the ministry responsibility, to which they

## PLURALITY OF LEADERSHIP

Christians must rethink the traditional concept of solo-leadership style, currently in vogue in Melanesia. There is a great need to recognise, promote, and incorporate fully, the concept of *plurality* of leadership.<sup>81</sup> It is envisaged that, when this happens, a greater number of people will sense a heightened responsibility as members of the church, and use their gifts, with greater urgency. As the Bible quite explicitly teaches *plurality* in leadership, it is envisaged as the norm for all time (see Acts 20:17; Titus 1:5; and 1 Peter 5:1).

## BASIC WORSHIP/FELLOWSHIP-CENTRED GROUPS

Leaders of congregations must promote and encourage small-group fellowships, where all members are able to participate more fully in worship and fellowship together around God's Word. This probably means discontinuing some church-related activities, or rescheduling others, to allow group members to concentrate more of their effort in their own groups. Such "basic communities" should focus on providing their members with the opportunity to care more for each other by "bearing one another's burdens", in very practical ways. The base-group arena also provides the opportunity for mature believers to *model* Christian conduct before new believers.

## LIFESTYLE MODELLING FOCUS

Discipleship is probably the critical link to whole-church coparticipation in Melanesia. Pragmatic Melanesians cannot be easily convinced with words alone. Christian life and conduct must be *seen to be believed*. This means that mature Christians must seriously consider identifying people they can get alongside, and commit themselves to, in order to model Christian faith and conduct to them in their immediate life setting.

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were called. See her article "Community and Ministry", in *Point* 7 (1985), pp. 141-152.

<sup>81</sup> For an expanded treatment of the issue, see Gilbert Bilezikian, *Community 101* (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1997), pp. 161-168.

## CREATIVE AND AFFIRMATIVE MINISTRY OPTIONS

Believers, who cannot put their gifts and abilities to use in the worship-fellowship setting, must be provided with opportunities to do so elsewhere. The task of leaders, in this case, is to affirm these individuals, and assist them in *envisioning creative options*, to develop their gifts and abilities, and to channel them (gifts and abilities) in meaningful and practical ways, to enhance the believing community's image and capability to impact society at large. On the other hand, individuals, who are serving in the secular professions, must be affirmed publicly, so that they sense an acceptance for what they do: their work has value, and contributes to God's kingdom rule on earth.

## HOLISTIC MOBILISATION APPROACH TO MINISTRY

As the Melanesian region becomes more and more inundated with multifaceted needs and problems, there is a growing demand for the formation of multiskilled teams that can be *mobilised* quickly to meet the problems. The initiative could be particularly targeted at young adult (youth) members of congregations, who are in the prime of their life, and seeking some adventure.<sup>82</sup> Team mobilisation is something the church in Melanesia can explore, since she is well placed for such a response among the grass-roots communities, as well as the towns and cities of Melanesia. Interestingly, some mainline denominations are beginning to explore these options.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> The author has been involved in similar initiatives for about 11 years. He has been involved in mobilising his village young people, a significant number of them Christians, to deal with some of their community's needs. He has assisted them in establishing gravity-fed water-supply systems, a clinic, a power-supply, and a couple of school buildings. Through their participation in these projects, a number of young men have acquired trade skills. They are now responsible for the ongoing repair and maintenance of the projects. He has also assisted youth groups, women's groups, and communities in other parts of the Bougainville province with some of their own initiatives.

<sup>83</sup> The response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic is a case in point. See L. Pirpir, "Report: Heads of Churches' HIV/AIDS Leadership Workshop", in *Catalyst* 35-2 (2005), pp. 174-182.

## CONCLUSION

The region of Melanesia is undergoing a tumultuous period in its history. It is being assailed by a multitude of forces that can undermine its viability in the world. This is causing much stress and anxiety to the people of the region.

Famous for its pervasive Christianity, Melanesia now struggles to find lasting answers to its perplexing problems. Who or what is the solution? The answer, no doubt, is etched in many of the Melanesian states' constitutional preambles: the Christian gospel! It is the news about God reconciling all things to Himself, in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ.

The church embodies this gospel. She is sent to this region to live, act, and proclaim this gospel. However, this gospel must be *fleshed out* in society to be effectual. This is the reason why this article contends for the full participation of whole *laos tou theou* (λαὸν τοῦ Θεοῦ = people of God). The gospel can only sufficiently suffuse the region if God's people together live out their convictions to the full. Above all, this response can only occur if it is grounded supremely in the passionate love believers exude toward their God and Father, and in their undying obedience to the Saviour and Lord of the church, who summons:

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matt 28:18-20).



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# CASE STUDY: THE IMPACT OF THE MIDDLE SEPIK RIVER PEOPLE'S CULTURAL PRACTICES AND SPIRIT- WORSHIP ON THEIR CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

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## INTRODUCTION

Melanesian churches today lack genuine Christian worship, conducive for the presence and power of God to be manifested among His people, to transform lives, and to grant physical and spiritual blessings to the church.<sup>1</sup> The absence of the power of God brings adverse effects, which are evident in the behavioural problems in the attitudes and character traits of church members. This absence of the power of God results in nominalism, which, in turn, produces conflicts that churches face, resulting in disunity, disloyalty, and unfaithfulness to God and the church.

The author specifically dwells on his people group called the Iatmul language-speaking people, as a case study on their culture and worship of spirits.<sup>2</sup> Their cultural practices, in the worship of spirits, bear a

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<sup>1</sup> "The Melanesians are dark skinned, frizzy-haired people, who live on Pacific Islands to the north and northeast of Australia. Together with the Papuans, they form the Oceanic Negroid division of humankind. The Melanesians live in part of coastal New Guinea, especially in the Southeast, and in most of the Solomon Islands, the New Herbrides, New Caledonia, and Fiji", *The World Book Encyclopedia* (Chicago IL: Field Enterprise Educational Corporation, 1976), p. 656.

<sup>2</sup> Iatmul is the largest tribal group, and it has the greatest cultural influence among the people of the middle Sepik River area in Papua New Guinea. The Iatmuls are made up of 36 villages, divided into three groups by dialect and location: Iatmul Nyaula, Iatmul

negative effect on their Christian worship; and they may be representative of many related cultural practices throughout Papua New Guinea and the rest of Melanesia.

There are four sections in this article. The first section is about cultural practices. The second section is on spirit worship. While the third section deals with the negative effects on Christian worship. The fourth section dwells on biblical and Christian worship. The article concludes with a critique and recommendation. Before discussing the first point of this article, it is appropriate to define culture.

### **DEFINITION OF CULTURE**

“Culture is a total human pattern of lifestyle that man adopts within a given society, whether rural, urban, rich or poor, educated or illiterate. It includes man’s outlook on life’s spiritual values, social institutions, customs, languages, and lifestyles.”<sup>3</sup> What people believe, and hold onto as absolutes, come from powerful influences within the cultures and societies in which they live, from the crises they experience, and from heredity.<sup>4</sup> These factors shape a person’s behaviour and responses to certain situations and circumstances in life, as dictated by his worldview.<sup>5</sup>

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Palimbeis, and Iatmul Sawos. They are strategically located, according to their geographical, migrational links, and dialect groups. The Iatmul tribe is under the Wosera Gawi District. The Iatmul language-speaking people are dwellers in the Middle Sepik River. As referred to by ethnographer Gewertz Deborah, “the Iatmul dominate other societies of the region, much as the river does topography. They are the headhunters described by explorers and missionaries as fierce, proud, and treacherous, and regard themselves as the first people of the Sepik”, Dedorah B. Gewertz, *Sepik River Societies* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1983), pp. 8-9.

<sup>3</sup> Robin Keeley, et al, ed., *Lion Handbook of Christian Belief* (Tring UK: Lion Publishing, 1988), p. 30.

<sup>4</sup> Heredity means inheritance of chieftain status, through matrilineal and materiel land rights, and names from the father or uncles varying from societies. It may also mean passing on of physical or mental characteristics from biological parent to child. Keeley, et al, eds, *Lion Handbook of Christian Belief*, p. 31.

<sup>5</sup> Noebel defines “worldview” as any ideology, philosophy, theology, movement, or religion that provides an overarching approach to understanding God and the world. Thus, it is a way of viewing or interpreting all of reality. It is an interpretive framework, through which, or by which, one makes sense of the data of life and the

The first section discusses the cultural philosophies and practices of the Iatmul.

## CULTURAL PRACTICES

Three major areas characterise the mental, physical, and emotional approaches in the attitude of an Iatmul toward circumstances and situations in life. The first is the concept of big-man mentality, the second is the *wantok* system, and the third is the payback system.

### BIG-MAN LEADERSHIP OF IATMUL

#### *Definition*

Casper To Vaninara describes a Melanesian big man as one who has personal power, becoming a man of renown, a generous man, and a central figure, and not a chief, who inherits his position by right of birth.<sup>6</sup> In Iatmul culture, however, one can achieve big-man status through hard work, or from heredity.

#### *Practice*

Firstly, big-man status in Iatmul is acquired through heredity. The system is not hierarchical, like the Polynesians; nevertheless, a son of the clan leader is identified as the next big man. The son of the big man in the clan gains recognition and automatic inheritance of wealth, power, and status. He does not have to work hard, or possess any special qualities, to gain recognition; he gains the title through inheritance. He assumes clan and tribal leadership responsibilities in physical and spiritual matters. These involve settling social, moral, and spiritual conflicts within the community, and between tribes.

John Paul Chao describes heredity in Papua New Guinea as minority tribal practices that have developed social and political ranking in a number of tribal groups in the coastal areas. These include Mekeo,

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world. David Noebel, *Understanding the Times: The Religions Worldviews of our Day and the Search for Truth*. (Eugene OR: Harvest House, 1994), p. 8.

<sup>6</sup> Casper To Vaninara, "Living Theology in Melanesia: The Big Man Aspect", in *Point* 8 (1985), p. 143.

Orokolo, Purari, Koita, and Motuans, the Manam of Madang, and the Wageo and Murik of Sepik Province. Moreover, the Trobriand Islanders and the Kalauna of Goodenough Island in Milne Bay Province, the Arawe of East New Britain Province, a few coastal groups of New Ireland Province and North Solomons Province.<sup>7</sup>

However, Iatmuls do not practise hierarchical leadership, led by a chief, like the others in coastal areas. The Iatmul believe that, in practice, heredity attributes much to a person's behaviour. The use of the pidgin language phrase *em stap long blut* (it is all in the blood) best describes things they believe are passed from father to son. For instance, if the father was a cheater, a thief, or a womaniser, then the son becomes the same. In this culture, blame for much of the bad things a person does is attributed to factors relating to heredity.

Secondly, an Iatmul acquires big-man status through hard work, and the ability to lead others in organising village activities and settling disputes. They also compete in tribal warfare, and the use of sorcery and magical powers, in demonstration of superiority over neighbouring tribes. Thus, the tussle for identity as a big man has a price to pay, in constant warfare, and killing by magic. You must kill to be a big man, or be killed instead.

On the other hand, in the Taute and Bun cultures of Sepik Province in Papua New Guinea, the aspect of a big man is quite different altogether. Their emphasis is on social equality, and not allowing a particular individual or clan to be elevated over others in wealth and power.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the Banaro and the Ilahita Arapesh cultures of Sepik Province practise leadership led by a council of elders instead of a big-man leadership.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> John Paul Chao, "Leadership: Hereditary Leadership in Melanesia", in *Point 5* (1984), p. 128.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133.

<sup>9</sup> Chao, "Leadership", p. 133.

In the Highlands of Papua New Guinea, one achieves big-man status through hard work and personal skills, which attract followers among his kinsmen and neighbouring groups. An aspiring big man successfully organises activities in tribal warfare and village ceremonies. He is gifted in public speaking, and in other important skills that enable him to become a big man.<sup>10</sup> The position and status held is only temporary, because there is the possibility of another rising to the position, when one fails to maintain wealth, power, and recognition of status, or if one falls from favour with the community. On the other hand, heredity leadership is transferable to the next of kin, to the son of the deceased, or brother.

The most common form of political leadership in Melanesia is the big man. There is no fixed political office. However, few men maintain heredity status for a big-man leadership. Most big men are recognised through their personal success in acquired wealth and mastered skills. The practice of being a big man impacts the Iatmul culture, as does the *wantok* system.

### **WANTOK SYSTEM**

This section discusses the definition, shortcomings, and reciprocity within the *wantok* system.

#### ***Definition***

*Wantok*, in the Papua New Guinea Pidgin language, means “one talk”. Mary MacDonald defines the *wantok* system as, “the bond of people, speaking the same language, belonging to one tribe, and sharing common values”.<sup>11</sup> Bartle defines the *wantok* system as the “Melanesian insurance and social security system that one invests in and profits, in a time of need”.<sup>12</sup> In other words, the system becomes an insurance policy, and a security system, creating open dialogue, obligating the other for

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<sup>10</sup> Neville Bartle, *Death, Witchcraft, and the Spirit World in the Highlands of PNG*, Point 29 (2005), p. 30.

<sup>11</sup> Mary MacDonald, “Melanesian Communities: Past and Present”, in *Point* 5 (1984), p. 220.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*



return favours when the need arises. Therefore, *wantoks* stick together, sharing mutual respect, trust, and desires for meaningful relationships, and a sense of belonging.

### ***Practice***

*Wantoks* depend on one another for protection from enemy attacks, and in the needs of daily life. The *wantok* system, in a practical sense, is a reliable and trustworthy concept. Nevertheless, the *wantok* system has two sides to it. On one hand, it is beneficial to the Iatmul people. Negatively, it encourages corruption and nepotism among Iatmuls. The *wantok* system has its practical negative effects when someone takes advantage of the system, in favour of their *wantoks*, and neglects his responsibilities to church, government, and country, as a whole.

The obligation to assist a *wantok* becomes a priority before obligations and loyalty of service to any organisation. For instance, if a *wantok* asks to use a government-owned vehicle for personal reasons, one is culturally expected to allow him to do so. This causes corruption, a major problem in Papua New Guinea.<sup>13</sup> Some people use the *wantok* system to gain support from others to increase their personal power and big-man status. The *wantok* system also incorporates the mentality of giving and receiving.

## **GIVE-AND-RECEIVE MENTALITY**

### ***Definition***

Giving and receiving is a two-way system, whereby one is culturally obligated to return a favour. These favours include giving of material things, assistance in work, defending another, supporting and sponsoring one another's interest. Thus, it is an important concept and aspect of life for an Iatmul as a Melanesian.

Bartle described Melanesian life as governed by the theme of "reciprocity". Giving and receiving provides equality and harmony in

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<sup>13</sup> Kevin Hovey, *Before All Else Fails . . . Read the Instructions* (Brisbane Qld: Harvest Publications, 1986), p. 107.

life: a demonstration of an exchange partnership between two peoples or groups. The relationship between the two parties is strengthened through the exchange of goods given and received. The system of reciprocity is further seen as “economics” in Melanesian society, where the giving and receiving becomes a form of trade. The sharing of surplus items becomes an investment to cash-in in time of need in the future.<sup>14</sup>

### ***Practice***

Iatmul give and receive, as a way of preserving surplus food. Giving to a *wantok* leads, in turn, to receiving from that *wantok*. The system serves as security and investment for future benefit.<sup>15</sup> For example, a Melanesian, given a plate of food, is obligated to return the plate with food at some point. It is embarrassing to return an empty plate; thus, it has become an ethical principle in practice. Not only is the *wantok* system influential in Iatmul life, but also is the practice of payback.

## **PAYBACK SYSTEM**

### ***Definition***

Payback is based on the attitude of revenge in Iatmul culture – the philosophy of an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth – a part of human nature practised to its extremes. Bartle explains payback in Papua New Guinea traditionally as a law, or a system, which functions as a control. It operates as an equalising factor to prevent one tribe from dominating others. In other words, it creates fear of retaliation in the event of inflicting pain and suffering to others. The system balances the tendency of tribal groups to dominate others.<sup>16</sup>

### ***Practices***

Payback, in practice, is defending one another, and, if needed, dying for the cause. Culturally-bound obligations are to defend the pride of the tribe, fight for superiority, and prove dominance. It is standing up for

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<sup>14</sup> Bartle, *Death, Witchcraft, and the Spirit World*, p. 31.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

one another in good times and bad times – a commitment, trust, and dependence, expected from an ideal Iatmul.

The aspect of payback killings involving tribal fights in Papua New Guinea varies from coastal areas to the highlands. Iatmul, living in the coastal areas, involve payback killing, through magical powers, sorcery, and witchcraft, and, to a lesser degree, confrontation in a physical battle. However, in the highland's culture, it involves brutal killing and cold-blooded murder in tribal warfare. The payback system hampers physical, spiritual, and social development of the lives of people. The payback mentality, and the *wantok* system, dictate actions toward physical, emotional, and spiritual encounters experienced in life, as does spirit-worship.

### **SPIRIT-WORSHIP**

Iatmuls worship spirits to pay homage for favours shown, and for reconciliation and redemption. They faithfully worship spirits, and are bound by traditional rules, beliefs, and practices that govern community and relational activities of life. Iatmuls – surrounded by spirits, witchcraft, curses, magic, and other supernatural forces – are obligated to respond positively to the hostility of spirits. Therefore, Iatmuls offer sacrifices, in the form of rituals and celebrations of worship, to propitiate and honour spirits.<sup>17</sup> Marilyn Rowsome states that anyone trying to understand the Melanesian mind must think of spirits.<sup>18</sup> This is true, because all aspects of Iatmul life involve spirits.

Iatmul, as animists, worship spirits, believe in dreams and visions, and have complete faith in what the spirits can do. The practice of spirit worship is a lifestyle, and a part of everyday activity. Magical words are uttered for guidance, assistance for a good catch, and on a hunting and fishing trip, for a good yield of crops, and for protection during travels

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<sup>17</sup> “Propitiation is the act of atoning for sin or wrongdoing (especially appeasing a deity)”, *Oxford Advance Learner's Dictionary*, 4th edn, s.v. “circular”.

<sup>18</sup> Marilyn Rowsome, “Spiritual Powers in Paul's Writings: an Adequate View for Mission in Melanesia”, *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 9-2 (1993), pp.37.63.

through enemy territories. Mary MacDonald describes magic, involving sorcery and healing, as symbols relating beliefs and rituals as a quest for a rich and abundant life for Melanesians. It is the forging of symbolic links between different experiences of human beings that bring significance in life.<sup>19</sup> As a result, Iatmul's every daily activity of life is spirit-driven and magic-orientated.

The spirits they worship have spiritual hierarchies and well-organised structures. Each clan has its own head spirit (*Sugundimi Wagen*). The head spirit is supreme over all, and governs the spiritual affairs of the clan. The chief magician represents the physical involvement. There are two aspects of the worship of spirits, which are discussed next. The first is the category of spirit personalities, and the second is the practice of spirit worship.

### **CATEGORIES OF SPIRIT PERSONALITIES**

There are three categories of spirits: the head spirit (*Sugundimi Wagen*), the ancestor spirits (*Niaik Gwaark*), and a high god (*Nyagonduma*). Lesser spirits also exist (refer to diagrams in Appendix One and Appendix Two). David Burnett describes the lesser spirits as having greater and lesser powers, bound up with human experiences. These spirits are either powerful spirits, or relatively insignificant spirits of the forest, river, or field, who may cause nuisance to humans.<sup>20</sup>

#### ***Head Spirit (Sugundimi Wagen)***

The head spirit, *Sugundimi Wagen*, governs the spiritual affairs of each clan, with assistance from the chief magician. This spirit assumes two roles, centralised among the clans. Firstly, he employs elemental spirits, situated in different geographical locations. Secondly, he controls the clan, and demands sacrifices, for the breaking of ethical laws in the clan.

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<sup>19</sup> Mary MacDonald, *Symbols of Life: An Interpretation of Magic* (Goroka PNG: Melanesian Institute, 1985), p. 8.

<sup>20</sup> David Burnett, *The World of Spirits* (London UK: Monarch Publications, 2000), p. 37.

*Sugundimi Wagen* employs and oversees elemental spirits operating with various titles, yet under his control. Three elemental spirits are the river spirit, *Wanjimauk*, the jungle spirit, *Wunjumbu*, and sky spirit, *Sigundimi Niawi*.<sup>21</sup> Bartle describes elemental spirits as, “spirits of nature that inhabit trees, streams, rivers, mountains, caves, and swamps. These spirits are generally referred to as evil, and easily offended”.<sup>22</sup> Iatmuls obey taboos to avoid angering these spirits.<sup>23</sup> Thus, in the village, bush, or river, Iatmuls are careful not to break taboos in relation to these spirits.

The river spirit, called *Masalai* in Papua New Guinea Pidgin, dwells mainly in the rivers, lakes, and sea, but has influence over rocks, and some areas of the land. This spirit rules the inhabitants of the river, and manifests itself in the form of an alligator and snake – varying by geographical locations.

The jungle spirit, *Wunjumbu*, is thought to live in tree houses, invisible to human eyes. Shrubs and bush ropes – thick and crowded on trees in nearby bushes – are believed to house the spirit.<sup>24</sup>

The sky spirit, *Sugundimi Niawi*, governs the air – as far up as the black clouds – and controls the weather. When heavy rain and high flooding is experienced, this spirit is called upon to bring calm and normalcy.

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<sup>21</sup> Sherman described these spirits as principalities within the demonic kingdom referred to as territorial spirits. The word “principality” has two parts: “prince”, a leader with a title, and the suffix “pality”, which has to do with both geography and demography. Geography is the study of land areas, and demography is the study of how people are grouped in societies. The term “principalities” reveals a most significant aspect of Satan’s approach to planet earth, deploying his troops (demons) according to a world map. Dean Sherman, *Spiritual Warfare: How to Live in Victory and Retake the Land* (Seattle WA: YWAM Publishing, 1995), p. 101.

<sup>22</sup> Bartle, *Death, Witchcraft, and the Spirit World*, pp. 42-43.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> The Iatmul hold myths about this spirit marrying and having human children. It is normal practice for the magicians from clans of Iatmul to call upon these spirits to mobilise and assist in tribal warfare. If adequate help is not received, it is because of some unsettled matters, seen as barriers in the relationship between the spirits and the clan concerned.

Therefore, Iatmul worship different spirit personalities, according to functional roles played, and titles held, in the spiritual hierarchy. Each spirit is responsible to relate to man, as seen fit, according to traditional laws practised.

The head spirit, *Sugundimi Wagen*, demands sacrifices of pigs and chickens to propitiate for broken taboos. The spirit causes people to fall ill, even killing people, if adequate sacrifices are not offered. Therefore, adherence to his demands is very important, thus maintaining a relationship and open communication channels. The worship and relationship with *Sugundimi Wagen* is as equally important as the worship of ancestor spirits (*Niaik Gwaark*).

### ***Ancestor Spirits (Niaik Gwaark)***

Bartle describes the ancestor spirits, “as the remembered dead, sometimes referred to as the living dead, ever present among the living, and a part of the clan”.<sup>25</sup> Iatmul believe that ancestor spirits are with them, and that they whisper in communication, as they go about everyday activities. Most of the successes and failures of life are believed to be results of the anger or goodness of ancestor spirits. When an Iatmul kills a pig, spears a crocodile, catches many fish, or gathers a good harvest, he attributes it to the goodness of ancestor spirits.

In protection against invading hostile spirits, Iatmuls keep substances of magical leaves and bones of ancestors in the house roofs, and buried in front, and under the stairs, of the houses, for protection, to safeguard lives. They have great faith in these substances as reliable sources for warning and protection from enemy attacks and curses.<sup>26</sup> The *Sugundimi Wagen* and *Niaik Gwaark* spirits relate and interact with humans, while the higher god spirit does not.

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<sup>25</sup> Bartle, *Death, Witchcraft, and the Spirit World*, p. 42.

<sup>26</sup> Sikin Kundambuk, Iatmul tribe, Kandinge village, Headman Ghama clan, Wosera Gawi District, Wewak, East Sepik Province. Interview by author, January 13, 2006.

### **Higher God (Nyagonduma)**

The belief in a higher god is an area that is untouched, and held sacred, by Iatmuls.<sup>27</sup> The name *Nyagonduma* means “sun god”. *Nya* refers to the sun, and *gonduma* is a person or god responsible for controlling the objects in outer space. Unlike the *Ande Yagl* of the Kuman, and *Neno kande* of the Simbu, who relate to man, this spirit isolates itself from human activities.<sup>28</sup>

*Nyagonduma* is different from others, in nature and characteristics. This spirit is responsible to bring light upon the earth, and is described as a clean and righteous spirit, without fault against man. Not much is known about direct sacrifices offered to this spirit, because of the sacredness of things forbidden to public knowledge.<sup>29</sup>

Different tribal groups within Iatmul hold creation myths, regarding the birth of this high god. Iatmuls believe that, in the beginning, before the creation of the world, there was a primal sea with no living creatures. The first creature that appeared was the primal crocodile. This crocodile sprang up from the bottom of the sea, causing the sea surface to foam. A little piece of earth formed as the water turned, going around in a circle.<sup>30</sup> A dog spirit, *Koruimbangh*, made the earth bigger by running around until an opening appeared, from which all living creatures, including the first human beings, came tumbling out. The crocodile then opened its mouth wide, causing the jaw to split into two pieces. The lower jaw fell, and became the earth, and the upper jaw became the sky.<sup>31</sup>

When the earth had originated, there also came a female snake called *Ndumagwanimbhk*. From her urine arose her first son *Nyagonduma*,

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<sup>27</sup> It is sacred, because life is at stake, should others know about secret and sacred things, as discussed later in the Covenant-Orientated section.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126.

<sup>29</sup> Iatmul tribe, Simark clan headman James Gawi of Kandinge village, interview by author, January 11, 2006.

<sup>30</sup> Jurg Wassmann, *The Song of the Flying Fox* (Boroko PNG: National research Institute, 1991), pp. 83-85.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

also referred to as the sun. The mother spirit, *Ndumagwanimbhk*, represents a particular snake in the swamps of the Iatmul, often adored, and worshipped for her part in the birth of her son, responsible for the rulership of outer space.<sup>32</sup> Not only is the character of Iatmul patterned and shaped by the worship of spirits, but there are also practices of, and reasons for, spirit worship.

## PRACTICES AND REASONS

Iatmuls have lived to witness the devastations caused by natural disasters, accidents, sickness, and death – thought to be the result of their failure to please the gods. Therefore, they feel obligated to appease the spirits for peace and resolution of misfortune. The Iatmuls, consequently, have developed practices of worship and sacrifices.<sup>33</sup> The worship of spirits is discussed in the following two sections. In the first, worship is event-orientated, while in the second, worship is covenant-orientated.

### *Event-Oriented*

In event-orientated worship, primal events are recited and sung in songs. There are two general reasons in event-orientated worship. Firstly, men relate to spirits, through events, according to the myths held. In one aspect, spirits are honoured and worshipped for their part in creation myths. For instance, in death ceremonies, the Iatmuls praise and worship the spirit *Kabaak*, the primal crocodile, and *Koruimbangh*, the dog involved in the formation of the earth. The death ceremonies include *Minjango*, a major ceremony, and *Kitagamak*, a minor one. These events orchestrate reconciliation with spirits, and propitiation of some unsettled matters. Sacrifices of animals and betel-nuts are offered during these ceremonies, and songs of praise and worship are offered.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Paul G. Hierbet, R. Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tienou, *Understanding Folk Religion* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Books, 1999), p. 143.

<sup>34</sup> Two kinds of songs are presented: *Sagi kundi* and *Grasak kundi*. The song *Sagi kundi* involves praise and worship. *Grasak kundi* is a lament, sung of the dead, and events of the past, sung with emotion and shedding of tears.



Moreover, there are several versions of songs that depict the role of these spirits in clearing the way for the clan founders on their journeys in primal times. In addition, the involvement of these two personalities in the existence of life and migration, and formation of tribal groups, are recited in other versions of songs.<sup>35</sup> These spirits' names and activities are memorised by heart, and sung in celebrations and commemorations, paying tribute and honour to spirits. Knotted cords are also used as timelines to recall and stimulate memories, to explain myths and events that took place many generations passed.<sup>36</sup> This is eternity written in the hearts of men, where people continue to recall and recite myths in songs, knotted cords, and totems.<sup>37</sup>

Secondly, spirits are called upon in initiation and other ceremonial rituals. The skin-cutting ceremony of an Iatmul takes a period of three to four months. This involves the ritual of skin-cutting on men's backs and breasts. The scar resembles, or is totemic, to the skin of the primal crocodile, depicting creation myths. In this event, young men are taught myths and manhood, in preparation for marriage and adulthood.<sup>38</sup> Event-orientated worship leads to covenant-orientated worship, where spirits are honoured in worship.

### ***Covenant-Oriented***

All clans in this culture are responsible to different head spirits, each known by name. Myths of the spirits are maintained by succeeding

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<sup>35</sup> Wassmann, *The Song of the Flying Fox*, p. 68.

<sup>36</sup> Knotted cord is made out of young shoots of trees known as *Hibiscus tileacus* (*mansi*). It is about six to eight metres long and three centimetres thick. Knots, small and large, are tied at regular intervals. Six to 22 knots always follow, into which a dry piece of betel-nut shell (*bangrah*) is woven. The first portion of the cord contains fewer small knots. Knotted cord is always owned by the important man of a group, who has inherited it directly from his father, or indirectly from his father, through his mother's brother.

<sup>37</sup> A totem is an emblem, symbol, or picture, consisting of an object, such as an animal or plant.

<sup>38</sup> Iatmul tribe headman, Godfried Saun, Kandinge village. Interview by writer, January 9, 2006.

generations.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, clans and families hold secret myths of past relationships, and obligations covenanted with spirits. Each clan has secret names about its origin, and it is forbidden these be told to others. The threat of annihilation by death of the extended families of one ancestor is imminent, in the event of the secret name made known to others. The death predicted is like cutting off the umbilical cord of existence of the complete family connection to life, thus causing the death of all.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, it is the responsibility of every clan leader to maintain secrecy, dialogue, and openness in offering sacrifices, to maintain the spirit relationship. The spirit, in return, provides protection from other hostile spirits that are a threat to one's existence. The Iatmul find this a law of ethics, in safeguarding one's salvation and redemption. Thus, covenantal relationship with the head spirits is an integral aspect of life, maintained throughout generations.

Thus far, the beliefs, activities, and practices that contribute to how Iatmuls react and respond in attitude and character toward certain situations and circumstances in life have been presented. Now, the next section focuses on the negative effects on Christian worship, produced through these beliefs and practices.

## **NEGATIVE EFFECTS ON CHRISTIAN WORSHIP**

There are two negative effects of the Iatmul cultural practices and spirit worship on Christian worship: nominalism and syncretism.

### **PROBLEM OF NOMINALISM**

What is nominalism among Melanesian Christians? Bartle describes nominalism as practising religion without receiving nurturing and growth in discipleship. Christian values have not made any significant impact on the daily lives of these people.<sup>41</sup> Nominalism is a big problem in the lives of Iatmul Christians, as observed in the author's village. The author, during his internship ministry in 2004, witnessed three crusade meetings,

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Bartle, *Death, Witchcraft, and the Spirit World*, p. 71.

organised in his village. The guest speaker was the regional superintendent of the village church. Over 100 people were baptised in a single day. During the Christmas break the following year, the writer visited his village, only to find that most of those baptised had gone back to the world, and joined the lists of nominal Christians.

One may ask where the real problem lies for so-called Christians to quickly shift their allegiance from the God they so ceremoniously followed to their old way of life. There are three problem areas: the dynamic, animistic religion; the pragmatic religion; and the lack of nurturing and discipleship training after conversion. Darrell Whiteman writes that, “Melanesian contact with Europeans meant adopting religious rituals, which led to abundance in life with steel tools, luxury goods, and superior technology”.<sup>42</sup> Thus, this change of perception, with high hopes, makes Melanesian and Iatmul religion dynamic, as discussed below.

### ***Dynamic Religion***

The first problem with Iatmuls becoming nominal Christians is that their traditional religion is dynamic, in the sense that it is open to change – although the outsider may view it as closed. Life has always been changing, from the adoption of Christian religion, and other forms of religious practices, to education and religious training. Kewai Kero supports the idea that Melanesians are open to change, trying out different rituals, as an important part, seen as a means to an end. In addition, their openness to change introduces other religions or cultic groups.<sup>43</sup> Iatmuls are just like the rest of the Melanesians, trying out different rituals, by different religious and cultic groups, in search of a better life, wealth, and experiences. The Iatmuls’ dynamic religion also integrates pragmatism that effects such a bearing on their attitude to Christian worship.

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<sup>42</sup> Darrell Whiteman, “Melanesian Religion: An Overview”, in *Point 6* (1984), p. 95.

<sup>43</sup> Kewai Kero, “Nominalism in Papua New Guinea”, in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 14-1 (1998), p. 58.

### ***Pragmatic Religion***

The second problem of nominalism is pragmatism. “Pragmatism is the attribute of accepting the facts of life and favouring practicality and literal truth.”<sup>44</sup> This describes a religion that is practical, bringing results. Iatmuls, coming out from an animistic background, constantly shift from one ritual to another, seeking a better life, called *gutpela sindaun* in the Papua New Guinea Pidgin language. Hence, the key element of Melanesian religion is pragmatism. This is a religion, which is always looking out for results and experiences.<sup>45</sup>

Iatmuls shift allegiance and loyalty to God with the expectancy of results in material gains, or a quick answer to prayers. They want to see power encounters, and miraculous signs and wonders, in order to continue their allegiance and relationship with God. However, when such are not evident, they are posed with questions on what went wrong. This results in their leaving to try out other rituals, or returning to the old, thus becoming nominal in their Christian faith. When dealing with a dynamic and pragmatic religion, the problem here is lack of nurturing and discipleship training.

### ***Lack of Nurturing and Discipleship Training***

The third problem of nominalism is lack of nurturing and discipleship training. Iatmul Christians lack true knowledge in the Word of God. The local churches do not have properly-trained Bible teachers to teach and instruct converts on the principles of Christian living. In other words, there are no discipleship training classes conducted to nurture new converts, concerning their newfound faith. Consequently, this results in the lack of understanding of the principles of Christian living. Converts cannot tell the difference between truth and error, and always move about in confusion, seeking answers to their quest for an abundance of wealth in life. Therefore, Iatmuls become nominal Christians, because of their dynamic and pragmatic religious belief systems, and lack of nurturing and discipleship training for new converts. Nominalism influences lives

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<sup>44</sup> *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, 4th edn, s.v. “circular”.

<sup>45</sup> Kero, “Nominalism”, p. 58.

of Christians in churches, in misdirected Christian worship, as much as syncretism.

### **PROBLEMS OF SYNCRETISM**

Syncretism is the attempt to reconcile diverse or conflicting beliefs, or religious practices, into a unified system. It is a dynamic principle, done either intentionally, or unconscious movement of assimilation.<sup>46</sup> Syncretism in the Milne Bay Province, as Ledimo Edonie states, is Christians praying to God to cause the spirits to provide for them magical charms for hunting, fishing, and a good harvest, while professing the Christian faith.<sup>47</sup> However, in the Iatmul culture, syncretism is consulting the spirits of the dead, through mediums, while professing and practising Christian rituals. Two points are presented next. Firstly, a mixture of beliefs; and, secondly, use of cultural forms and symbols.

#### ***Mixture of Beliefs***

Syncretism, in this sense, can mean two things: firstly, in the event of getting the Christian message across, missionaries, cross-cultural workers, and church planters assimilate Christian faith with culture, or other belief systems. Secondly, so-called Christians compromise their faith, lifestyles, and rituals with other belief systems.

Firstly, churches today face the universalising of the particulars of the Christian faith. This means mixing Christian faith with culture, or other belief systems, for the sake of peace, and the universal concept of many religious practices leading to one God.<sup>48</sup> Nicholls comments that, “universalising the particulars of the Christian faith . . . is the principle of reductionism. It attempts to regress from historical fact to ideal or timeless truths. The Jesus of history becomes the ideal cosmic Christ.”<sup>49</sup> Hence, a mixture of belief systems devalues the power of the gospel, and

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<sup>46</sup> Bruce J. Nicholls, *Contextualisation: A Theology of Gospel and Culture* (Downers Grove IL: IVP, 1978), p. 30.

<sup>47</sup> Ledimo Edonie, “Syncretism in the Milne Bay Province of Papua New Guinea”, in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 16-2 (2000), p. 23.

<sup>48</sup> Nicholls, *Contextualisation*, p. 30.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

makes Christianity just one of the world religions. Thus, it puts God under a microscopic analysis, and confines a big God to something small. Men cannot analyse God and put Him under some scrutiny; God can only be adored and worshipped.

Secondly, Iatmul Christians compromise their faith with other religious belief systems. They consult mediums and other spirit powers to experience healing, when their faith in God fails to produce results.<sup>50</sup> In view of this practice, Hiebert, Shaw, and Tienou term syncretism as “split-level Christianity”. This is professing faith in Christ, but living lives, using traditional practices, because they do not find effective answers in the church to meet their problems of illness, misfortune, and fear of spirits.<sup>51</sup> Others practise Christianity as high religion, but, in private, hide from the missionaries and pastors. They continue practising many of their traditional ways, appropriating beliefs and practices associated with animism.<sup>52</sup>

Nicholls terms “the joining together of concepts and images at the depths of worldview and cosmology, and of moral and ethical values”, as theological syncretism. This involves theological concepts, assimilated into cultural practices, becoming more damaging to the Christian faith.<sup>53</sup> Thus, missionaries and evangelists unconsciously assimilate Christian faith with culture, in their enthusiasm and endeavours to convey the gospel of Jesus Christ, hence, falling into syncretism. The falling into syncretistic belief involves use of substances and forms of culture elaborated below.

### ***Use of Cultural Forms and Symbols***

Iatmuls use cultural forms and symbols as a means to bridge belief systems to complement Christian faith and worship. They use cultural

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<sup>50</sup> One may be a church deacon or a church elder, but when a prayer for healing of cancer, or for deliverance of other demonic oppressions in the family fails, then other sources are consulted.

<sup>51</sup> Hiebert, Shaw, and Tienou, *Understanding Folk Religion*, pp. 90-91.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> Nicholls, *Contextualisation*, p. 31.

elements, like *kundu* drums, *garamuts*, and bamboo flutes as instruments in worship. In addition, lyrics of songs, sung to spirits are used to compose songs to worship God. One may ask if it is right to use the instruments and lyrics consecrated to the worship of spirits for Christian worship? In answer to this, Nicholls suggests that the church, seeking to express its life in local cultural forms, faces the problem of cultural elements that are either evil or have evil associations.<sup>54</sup> Thus, elements that are false or evil cannot be absorbed into the Christian faith and worship without falling back into syncretism, a great danger to churches in all cultures.<sup>55</sup>

Moreover, churches fall into the uncritical use of cultural symbols and practices, often resulting in the confusion of Christian and pagan belief practices.<sup>56</sup> Hence, those lacking the knowledge of the Word of God can easily turn to falsehood and cultism, and follow false religions. Therefore, certain elements of traditional forms and symbols that are evil, cursed, and demon possessed, require redemption and sanctification for use in Christian worship.<sup>57</sup> Next, the meaning of true worship is drawn from the worship practices in both the Old and New Testaments.

### **BIBLICAL AND CHRISTIAN WORSHIP**

“Worship” is a noble word. The term comes from Anglo-Saxon “weorthscipe”, developed into worthship and then to worship. “It means ‘to attribute worth’ to an object”, or refers to an action of a man in expressing homage to God for His worthiness.<sup>58</sup> The *NIV New Bible Dictionary* describes worship as, “ascribing to His supreme worth, praise and worship”.<sup>59</sup> From a theological point of view, worship constitutes the gospel in motion. It is celebrating God’s great acts of salvation. In worship, God communicates to the worshipper His salvation and healing.

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<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> Theodoor Ahrens, “Grace and Reciprocity”, in *Point* 26 (2002), p. 55.

<sup>58</sup> Ralph Martin, *Worship in the Early Church* (London UK: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1974), p. 10.

<sup>59</sup> *NIV New Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2001), p. 1250.

The person then responds with faith, praise, prayer, thanksgiving, and a life of service.<sup>60</sup>

Worship sets the gospel in motion, from Genesis to Revelation, and tells of the promise of salvation that God had made that He fulfilled in Jesus Christ (Gal 4:4-5).<sup>61</sup> The next section outlines biblical truths regarding worship in the Old Testament, and the introduction of true Christian worship in the New Testament.

## **OLD TESTAMENT TEACHINGS**

Five items will be presented on the Old Testament teachings. These include a brief history on worship, tabernacle and temple worship, false and true worship, and the results of God's presence.

### ***Brief History on Worship***

Men began worshipping God from the beginning of history. Adam and Eve had regular fellowship with their God in Eden (Gen 3:8). Cain and Abel gave the first clear act of worship before the time of Moses. They worshipped with the fruits of their labor as thanksgiving, and showing gratitude to their God.<sup>62</sup> Seth's descendants called on the name of the Lord in worship (Gen 4:26). Noah built an altar to the Lord for a burnt offering (Gen 8:20). The Patriarchs erected altars and made sacrifices, wherever they settled, in their worship in thankfulness and appreciation of God's many blessings (Gen 8:20, 12:7-8).<sup>63</sup> God appeared to

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<sup>60</sup> Robert Webber, *Worship in the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1994), p. 14.

<sup>61</sup> All scripture quotations are taken from the NIV unless otherwise noted.

<sup>62</sup> Cain brought his offering of fruits from the ground as a sacrifice and worship to God. Abel brought his offering from his flock, and of the fat thereof. God responded by accepting Abel's worship, and rejecting the offering of Cain (Gen 4:1-6). The important thing to notice is the response of God towards their worship, and God as the focal point and centrality of their worship. James Innell Packer, Merrill Chapin Tenney, and William White, eds, *Illustrated Manners and Customs of the Bible* (Nashville TN: Thomas Nelson, 1997), p. 397.

<sup>63</sup> Jacob erected a stone monument, used as a pillow, setting it as a pillar, and poured oil upon the top of it. He called this place Bethel, or God's house, because there he met with God (Gen 28:18-22). Patriarchs also designated sacred trees and sacred wells



Abraham, when he stopped at the oak in Shechem, and he worshipped Him (Gen 12:6).<sup>64</sup>

### ***Tabernacle and Temple Worship***

Moses inaugurated a new period in worship practices for the Israelites, in the plans he received for a new worship site, with an altar housed in a tent (Ex 27:1-3).<sup>65</sup> Tabernacle worship involved rituals, where animals were sacrificed for the atonement for sin (Lev 17:11; 23:27). Lawrence Boadt describes the tabernacle as a desert sanctuary, where God's presence dwelt among His people (Ex 25-28), and a meeting place of God with Moses and his elders (Num 10:24-30).<sup>66</sup> Hence, the presence of God in the tabernacle was evident, indicative by the pillar of cloud at the door of the tabernacle (Ex 33:7-10).

### ***False Worship***

The Israelites worshipped the false gods of their neighbouring countries, when practising mixed marriages, and in disobedience to their God.<sup>67</sup>

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to remind themselves of what good things God had done for them at particular places and times in their lives (Gen 12:6, 35:4, Deut 11:30). The patriarchs practised the use of earthen and stone altars for sacrifice and worship, until God sanctioned these through Moses (Ex 20:24-26). God sanctioned a new kind of worship site, through Moses, with the plans and structural details of a new tabernacle for sacrifice and worship, where the presence of God dwelt. The key features in this worship were the sacrificial system, and specific patterns to be followed in the conduct of elements involved (Num 28-29). Packer, Tenney, and White, eds, *Illustrated Manners and Customs of the Bible*, p. 397.

<sup>64</sup> "Abraham built a shrine at the oak of Mamre near Hebron (Gen 13:18), and at Ai (Gen 12:8). Still later, he planted a tamarisk tree near an altar in Beer-sheba (Gen 21:33). His son, Isaac, worshipped in the same place." Lawrence Boadt, *Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction* (New York NY: Paulist Press, 1984), p. 266.

<sup>65</sup> Moses returned from Mount Sinai, not only with the ten commandments, but also the plan and structure of the kind of temple, in which God desired to dwell (Ex 27:1-3). God gave specific instructions to be followed, in the structural plans of worship, according to His revealed truths, and not plans and devices acceptably convenient to men.

<sup>66</sup> Boadt, *Reading the Old Testament*, p. 268.

<sup>67</sup> They worshipped Ashtoreth of Phoenicia and Baal, a false god of Phoenicia (Judg 2:13, 1 Sam 7:3; 31:10; 1 Kgs 11:33). In addition, they worshipped Baal of Peor and Chemosh, gods of the Moabites, and Dagon, the god of the Philistines, Packer, Tenney,

Israel worshipped images and other objects, including the golden calf Aaron had made (Ex 32:4; Deut 9:16-18; Ps 106:19). They worshipped heavenly bodies, in the form of teraphim, images, and household gods (Gen 31:19; Judg 17:5).<sup>68</sup>

A. W. Tozer describes Cain's worship as false, because it was worship from an unregenerate heart without repentance; his sin was not atoned for before his sacrifice. He needed to experience cleansing by the blood of the lamb, before worship took place.<sup>69</sup> This speaks of the necessity of cleansing before worship in the lives of God's people. They failed miserably to worship God from the heart (Deut 6:4-5), because of sin, even though He kept reminding them (Is 29:13). Although Israel failed many times, and worshipped false gods, God still wanted to restore true worship among His people, by instituting events.

### ***True Worship***

True worship in the Old Testament meant offering the first fruits from Israel's harvest, presented before God (Deut 26:1-10). They ascribed to the Lord the glory due His name, brought offerings, and came before Him in worship (1 Chr 16:29).<sup>70</sup> Moreover, worship is an act of glorifying God; it fulfils the purpose for which man was created, an activity of eternal significance.<sup>71</sup> Therefore, worship is a direct expression of man's ultimate purpose for living, to glorify God, and fully enjoy Him.<sup>72</sup> God brought the Israelites out of Egypt into the wilderness, not only to

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and White, eds, *Illustrated Manners and Customs of the Bible* (Nashville NY: Thomas Nelson, 1980), p. 680.

<sup>68</sup> *The NIV Thompson Chain-Reference Bible* (Indianapolis IN: B. B. Kirkbride, 1990), p. 1612.

<sup>69</sup> A. W. Tozer, *The Missing Jewel in the Evangelical Church* (Harrisburg PA: Christian Publications, 1961), p. 16.

<sup>70</sup> Packer, Tenney, and White, eds, *Illustrated Manners and Customs of the Bible*, p. 399.

<sup>71</sup> In Isaiah, God calls everyone by name, which He created for His glory (Is 43:6-7). Paul uses the same terminology, when he said those who first hoped in Christ have been appointed to live for the praise of His glory (Eph 1:12). Scripture is clear that God created humanity for the praise of His glory.

<sup>72</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 1003.

worship Him, but also to bless them with the blessings He had promised to their ancestors.<sup>73</sup>

### ***Results of God's Presence***

Finally, the presence of God meant four things to the Israelites: God's redemption, revelation, preservation, and judgment. Firstly, God, through Moses, redeemed Israel from their oppression and slavery in Egypt with awesome power and mighty acts. In addition, He delivered them from numerous threats and attacks from their enemies throughout their journey to Canaan (Ex 5:1-15:21).<sup>74</sup>

Secondly, God revealed Himself through miraculous provisions, and mighty acts of deliverance. The revelation of God was through the symbols of the pillar of cloud, smoke, fire, and lightning. In addition, they heard the thunder, the voice of God, and felt the earthquake. God revealed Himself as a powerful and mighty God that they ought to fear and reverence Him (Ex 13:20-22; 24:9-18; 20:18-21).<sup>75</sup>

Thirdly, God blessed them with manna and quail, in other words, He preserved them from thirst and dehydration (Ex 15:22-27), from hunger (Ex 16:1-36), from annihilation (Ex 1), and defeat by their enemies (Ex 17:8-16).<sup>76</sup>

Fourthly, God's presence, for the Israelites, also meant judgment, when they fell into sins of idolatry and disobedience (Ex 32:7-10).<sup>77</sup> God's

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<sup>73</sup> This was in fulfilment of a promise made to Abraham to give his descendants a land, a people, and a great nation (Gen 12:1-3).

<sup>74</sup> Dan Anderson, "Exodus, Redemption, and Revelation" (course manual, Banz: Christian Leaders' Training College, 2006), p. 14.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>76</sup> Anderson, "Exodus, Redemption, and Revelation", p. 15.

<sup>77</sup> God's presence means blessings, and, at the same time, judgment, when disobedience and sin is evident in the lives of His people. Starting from Eden, when God walked in the cool of the evening, Adam and Eve hid, because they sinned (Gen 3:8-11). The presence of God meant strength to Samson the Nazirite (Judg 13), and sin meant departure of God's presence in his life, resulting in defeat and destruction (Judg

presence means blessings, and, at the same time, judgment, when disobedience and sin is evident in the lives of His people. Adam and Eve hid from the presence of God, when they realised that they were naked (Gen 3:8-11). Moreover, for Samson, the departure of God's presence in his life meant judgment, defeat, and destruction (Judg 16:20-21). David realised the implications of sin, and the departure of God's presence, when he prayed to God not to take cast him away from His presence, and taking away His Holy Spirit from him (Ps 51:10-11). The presence of God means judgment is swift, and punishment and the consequences follow.

God's presence, and the powerful acts in the Old Testament, all pointed to the reality and eternal presence, and mighty resurrection power of Christ Jesus, present today, through the Holy Spirit in the New Testament.

## **NEW TESTAMENT TEACHINGS**

The Old Testament covenant promises of priesthood, sacrifices, and temple worship were temporal, symbolic, and outward acts of rituals, or forms of worship. The new covenant then supersedes and fulfils the old, in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. A new meaning to worship was instituted (John 4:24-25; Heb 9:11-15). Jesus introduced a new and living way to God (Heb 10:19-21; John 4:23-25). Three items of worship are discussed below: false worship, true worship, and the essence of God's presence.

### ***False Worship***

There are two characteristics of false worship. These are the problems of formalism, and a lifestyle of compromise. Firstly, formalism is merely outward form and lip service, seen from the lives of the Pharisees on part of their hypocritical, legalistic expectation of life, and enforcement of God's law on others, while their hearts were far away (Matt 15:7-9). Many today get involved with the businesses of life with displaced

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16:20-21). In addition, Moses radiated God's glory (Gen 34:29-35), whilst for those disobedient, fear and trembling (1 Sam 5, 6).

priorities, as seen from the church in Ephesus that lost its first love (Rev 2:1-5). In addition, Paul warns of judgment for those who partake of the Lord's Supper without breaking free from sinful lives (1 Cor 11:28-30). Thus, God only accepts sacrifices of worship and praise, when hearts are right before Him (James 4:8, Ps 24:3-4).<sup>78</sup>

Secondly, false worship is indicative in the lives of so-called Christians and churchgoers, with their lifestyles of compromise, sin, and immorality. Their indulgence in acts of a sinful nature and immorality (Gal 5:19-20) implies using the name of the Lord in vain (Ex 20:7). Consequently, it leads to disloyalty, unfaithfulness, and nominalism.<sup>79</sup> Rayburn states that all types of non-Christian worship are expressions of Satan's attempt to draw away worshippers from God.<sup>80</sup> This is because Satan desired, from the beginning of time, to be the object of worship, but failed to be like the most high God (Is 14:14). He even sought the worship of Jesus, and tempts Christians in the same area today (Matt 4:9). Therefore, it is necessary to understand true worship, and the object to which worship is directed.

### ***True Christian Worship***

Grudem observes that if genuine worship is lacking in churches, one should explore how to experience much more of the depth and riches of worship. Worship, he stated; "is a natural response of the believing heart to a clear awareness of God's presence".<sup>81</sup> Thus, it should be a natural response of every Christian to worship God, as an expression of thanks for His love and mercy. Nevertheless, how can true worship be offered to God?

Jesus inaugurated a new kind of worship, in His statement to the Samaritan woman, that true worship is in spirit and in truth (John 4:24).

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<sup>78</sup> Packer, Tenney, and White, eds, *Illustrated Manners and Customs of the Bible*, p. 400.

<sup>79</sup> *The NIV Full Life Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), p. 680.

<sup>80</sup> Robert G. Rayburn, *O Come Let Us Worship: Corporate Worship in the Evangelical Church* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Book House, 1984), p. 104.

<sup>81</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 1011.

Two main elements are involved in the expressions of true worship, the worship of God in the “spirit”, and the worship of God in “truth”.

Firstly, the expression to “worship in the spirit”, has more than one thought conveyed by theologians. Some interpret it to mean worship in the realm of the spirit. Others say it is the worship of God by the human spirit communicating with the spirit of God, while others state worship to be through the Holy Spirit. David Peterson states that, “the primary reference in John 4:23-24 [to worship in the spirit] is not to human spirit, but to the Holy Spirit, who regenerates us, brings new life, and confirms us in the truth (cf. John 15:26-27; 16:13-35)”.<sup>82</sup> However, Grudem says that worship of God is not in the spirit, but in the realm of the spirit, the involvement of physical bodies and minds in spiritual activities (Rom 12:1).<sup>83</sup> On the other hand, Rick Warren asserts worship in the spirit refers to the spirit of man, and not the Holy Spirit.<sup>84</sup>

The author of this article agrees in principle with the three views expressed above. However, he understands all three to mean the same, where the worshipper worships God, whether through man’s spirit, God’s Spirit, or in the realm of the spirit. The important aspect of all views is that Christ is the central focus and the object of worship.

Worship in the spirit involves elements of man’s body, including soul and mind. The soul involves the emotions and will, and the mind involves the intellect, where man worships with the clear knowledge and understanding of God, expressing his heart (Ps 84:1-2). The Holy Spirit of God enables man to worship, with the use of the body as a living sacrifice, an act of spiritual worship (Rom 12:1). Man, a spirit being, sinful and self-centred, cannot worship God by his own effort (Eph 2:18;

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<sup>82</sup> David Peterson, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* (Leicester UK: IVP, 1992), p. 99.

<sup>83</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 1011.

<sup>84</sup> Warren further expanded that man is made in the image of God, a spirit being that resides in the body communicates with God’s Spirit. Thus, worship is man’s spirit responding to God’s Spirit, Rick Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Life* (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2003), p. 101.

Rom 8:26). He needs the control and direction of the Holy Spirit to worship God in Spirit.<sup>85</sup> The presence and manifestation of the Holy Spirit is evident, through Christians exercising the spiritual gifts, entrusted by the Holy Spirit to edify the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:7-12; Acts 2:42-43).<sup>86</sup>

Secondly, worship in truth is accurate worship, by the revealed truth from the Bible, and not through men's own imaginations of God, through limited knowledge, which is idolatry. Men cannot worship God with physical effort, or by doing good works, like some religions, but with revealed truth from the Bible (Rom 8:26-27).

Robert Rayburn says that, just as Jesus declared He worshipped the Father in Spirit, through the third person of the Trinity, the same applies to worshipping the Father in Truth, through the second person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ, who is the Truth (John 14:6). This means believing Christ, in the fullness of His being, and His work as the incarnate Son of God, both as the man, Jesus, and God's Anointed One, the Christ (John 1:1, 14).<sup>87</sup> Hence, worship in truth is Christ-centred, exalting His name; a worship based on the true knowledge of God, knowing God personally: His attributes and characteristics, and the acknowledgment of His worth, greatness, holiness, and awesomeness (Phil 3:3).<sup>88</sup> True worship is not something man invented, but, rather, it is the outpouring of his heart, as a

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<sup>85</sup> The spirit and soul of man, as influenced by the Holy Spirit, worships God, and has communion with Him. Spiritual affections in fervent prayers, supplications, and thanksgivings, form the worship of an upright heart, in which God delights, and is glorified (John 4:24).

<sup>86</sup> *The NIV Full Life Study Bible* (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1999), p. 680.

<sup>87</sup> Rayburn, *O Come Let Us Worship*, p. 112.

<sup>88</sup> Moreover, worship includes the elements of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, a new covenant Jesus made with His blood (1 Cor 11:23-26). In addition, psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs are sung in worship, and all seek the face of God in prayer, as worship, confession of sin, reading of scripture, as one vital element, and tithes and offerings as worship (Lev 27:30-31; Mal 3:8-10). The manifestation of the Holy Spirit adds uniqueness to the elements involved in true worship of God (Acts 2:42, 46, 47; 20:7, 11).

response, after a realisation of the attributes and character of God.<sup>89</sup> Tozer describes worship as a “lost jewel” that is missing in the church, requires searching, discovering and restoration. Worship is described as the “chief end of man, the very reason to have been created”.<sup>90</sup> Therefore, true worship is identifying and rediscovering the lost kind of jewel that is missing in the lives of individual Christians and churches today.

### THE ESSENCE OF GOD’S PRESENCE

When true worship of God takes place in a church, two things are evident: the presence of God and the judgment of God. Firstly, when Christians truly worship God in Spirit and in Truth, Jesus promised His presence will be with them (Matt 18:20). True worshippers, with sincere faith, are promised their prayers answered, guidance of the Holy Spirit into all truth, and sanctification by His Word and Spirit (John 17:17-19). Hence, the boldness to proclaim Christ’s message (Acts 4:31).<sup>91</sup> Therefore, in the presence of God, there is fullness of love, joy, and peace, forgiveness of sin, and upright living in serving Him (John 14:27; Rom 5:1; Gal 5:22). Seeing the essence, Christians should desire the presence of God in their lives.

Secondly, the power and presence of God means dealing with sin and judgment over the lives of people. The Holy Spirit convicts His people of sin, and unrighteousness, and judgment (John 16:8). Sinners, present in the worship service, would be convicted of their sin during worship services (1 Cor 14:22-25).<sup>92</sup> Consequently, the experiences in the death of 70 men of Beth Shemesh (1 Sam 6:19-20), the falling into pieces of the idol god Dagon, and Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11), are classic examples of God’s presence and dealings with sin in people’s lives destroying falsehood. Therefore, the presence and glory of God can

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<sup>89</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 1011.

<sup>90</sup> A. W. Tozer, *The Missing Jewel in the Evangelical Church*, p. 5.

<sup>91</sup> *The NIV Full Life Study Bible* (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1999), p. 680.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*



either expose sin, or bring judgment, or spiritual blessings and prosperity to the church and individuals.

## **CRITIQUE AND RECOMMENDATION**

This section analyses three points: including cultural practices, spirit-worship, and reasons for Christian worship, followed by a recommendation.

### **CULTURAL PRACTICES**

The cultural practices of Iatmuls, with their worldview and lifestyle, must be transformed and translated into Christian principles and lifestyle. Cultural mentality and practice must never be allowed in worship and the attitude toward God. The practices of spirit-worship, dependency, and manipulation of spirits must not impact the attitude toward Christian worship. Today, many Iatmul and Melanesian Christians practise Christianity with a concept of worship in order to receive blessings from God, with the give-and-take mentality of culture. In addition, they worship and serve God to become rich and popular among their people, and to be recognised as a big man. Moreover, others worship God with the idea of manipulating God, as they do to the spirits. They pray to God with lists of demands that must be answered immediately, or they shift to try out other rituals to find immediate results. This is the very core of the problems in Iatmul culture, and in Melanesia, today.

What does the Bible say regarding these attitudes and approaches? The attitude of Iatmuls to worship should not be to receive blessings from God, because this is a selfish and self-centred attitude to worship. It is a drift toward formalism, where man keeps the outward form in wanting to worship God, but losing the meaning of true worship, because his heart, mind, and thoughts are far away (Is 29:13; Matt 15:7-9). Christians must forget the idea of worshipping God in order to get rich and popular. This, again, is a false kind of worship, because it involves self and pride, the main intent of the heart. The Bible states that God resists the proud heart, and gives grace to the humble (James 4:6). He detests all those with proud hearts, and promises to punish them (Prov 16:5). Christians

should, instead of being proud, be willing to work in harmony (Rom 12:16), and practise love, giving God an acceptable worship (1 Cor 13:4). Moreover, man cannot manipulate God in whatever he does, with the intention of cheating Him, and then live a different kind of life. The Bible says a man reaps exactly what he sows (Gal 6:7); Malachi expresses a curse applicable to the one who cheats God (Mal 1:14).

Thus, we see that Christianity cannot be a faith, other than what the Bible reveals about it. Christians cannot exercise worship of God in the same manner as the traditional worship of spirits. Neither can one have a mixture of another religious faith with Christianity, which is syncretism. One must be very careful about the danger of syncretism, because it reduces God to the value and worth of a false god.

### **SPIRIT-WORSHIP**

The Bible forbids consulting mediums, and having access to the spirit world, and the worship of spirits. Iatmul's ideas about well-being, misfortune, and evil must be transformed by clear biblical teachings, as much as their understanding of the nature of God. Abraham lived in his father's culture until God called him out and away from his tribe and father's household to a new place. There, God taught and transformed him to adapt to a new culture and lifestyle (Gen 12:1-3). Moreover, God transformed the worldview of the Israelites, in preparing them to enter the Promised Land, and later towards Christ's coming (Ex 20).<sup>93</sup>

Therefore, under no circumstances should men consult the spirit world, whether out of fear, or by cultural practice. God wants all men to worship Him, not out of fear, obligation, or a duty, but out of a free will: showing love, gratitude, and appreciation, with hearts full of praise and thankfulness.

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<sup>93</sup> Another factor is that God condemns the beliefs and practices of magic (Ex 9:11), witchcraft (1 Sam 15:23; Gal 5:20), and divination (Deut 18:10).

## **REASONS FOR CHRISTIAN WORSHIP**

Today, many Iatmul people, or Melanesian people, do not know the value of worship, and the importance of a relationship with God. Some confine worship to Sunday Services, where songs are sung, the scriptures are read, and other Christian rituals are conducted: where worship is attending fellowship, and being involved with spiritual activities. All these may be a part of worship: however, worship is more than this.

Iatmul Christians ought to know now that man was created to worship God (Eph 1:11-12; 1 Pet 2:5). The highest and greatest purpose for man is to be alive is to know God personally, and to worship Him. When men truly worship God they will come to discover the original purpose for being created, and the source of joy, fulfilment, and satisfaction (Rev 1:6; 4:11). One must take note that man's greatest and most important reason for living is to love God with their whole being, and worship Him only (Ex 25:3-5; Matt 4:10; 22:37-38).

Hence, worship is reverencing God's presence, committing oneself to His program, and acknowledging total dependency on Him. It is confessing sins, declaring God's power, and a sure hope and destiny in Him. Moreover, the perspective of worship should not be a matter for Sunday services only, but a lifestyle, whereby, everything one does must be seen as worship, because worship encompasses man's entire life. Man is instructed to offer their entire bodies as a living sacrifice, in an act of spiritual worship (Rom 12:1).

What is wrong with man in not worshipping God in the prescribed manner today? Sin is one factor, that is, man has become self-centred since the fall (Gen 3), and cannot worship God appropriately. Apart from the sin factor, and man being self-centred, he is attracted to idolatry. Man gives his time and devotion to other things of this world, which take the place of Christ in his heart. Moreover, man has the tendency to drift toward formalism, where he keeps the outward form of worship, yet not having any meaning to his actions (Is 29:13; 15:7-9). The first and second commandments instructed Israel not to have any other gods, or make graven images, but love God from their hearts, and worship Him

alone (Ex 20:1-6). Hence, humankind, with its various cultures, has violated these commandments, by worshipping idols with divided hearts and disobedient lifestyles, which are hostile to God's laws.

However, Christ came and restored lost worship, shifting man's attention back to a God-centred life (Eph 1:7-14; Gal 3:13-14). Therefore, man can now freely worship God, expressing in life the worth of God the creator. Hence, we must worship with a deep response of the heart in thanksgiving, praise, and adoration to God, rather than mere outward ceremonies and rituals (Ps 51:16-17; 100:1-5).

### **RECOMMENDATION**

The Iatmul church must firstly differentiate and establish what spirit-worship and cultural practices are. They must then identify the developed behavioural problems in attitude and character traits of their congregation, which are hindrances, because of spirit (animistic) worship. In addition, the problems of a dynamic and pragmatic religious background, and culture-tainted worldviews, which bring negative effects to Christian worship in forms and practices, must be scrutinised.

Finally, there needs to be reflection on the true biblical teaching of Christian worship, and what it means to truly worship God from the heart, in spirit, and in truth, and worship in a way acceptable and pleasing to God. Therefore, it is the intention of the writer for all who read this article to address these problematic issues in their respective church denominations. The identification of these problems would then enable the churches to correct the very problems that exist in churches, which hinder church growth, and the success of Christian ministries. It is God's desire to dwell among His people, and to bless the churches to experience His bountiful blessings.

## **CONCLUSION**

Culture and spirit-worship characterise behavioural problems in attitude and character traits that result in nominalism and syncretism. These lead to the problems, evident in the churches in disunity, disloyalty, and unfaithfulness to God and the church, as presented in this article.

The implications of cultural practices and spirit-worship must be seen as hindrances to true Christian worship. The practices of idol worship, formalism, falsehood, and pretence, which are evident in so-called Christians' lives, result in false worship. Consequently, the true worship of God is missing in the life of churches, and it is apparent in the absence of the presence and power of God.

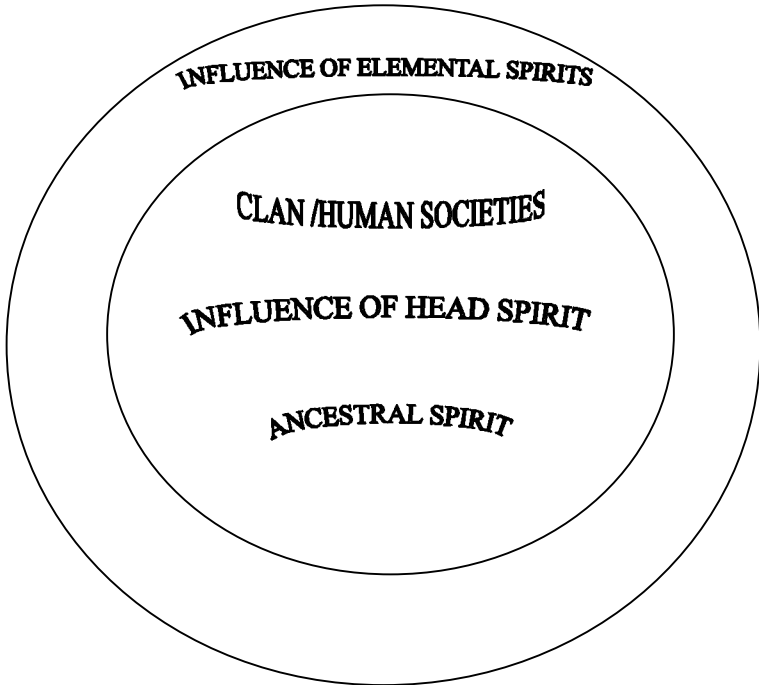
These have been the reasons churches and Christians are ineffective and unproductive in their ministries and church growth. As seen from the understanding of God, initiating His saving events in the Old Testament, fulfilled in Jesus Christ, and His desire to dwell among His people, it is vital and necessary to allow God to take His rightful place in the hearts of believers today.

Hence, the presence of God means the manifestation of the power of God and all spiritual gifts in operation. In addition, all churches, and individual Christians, need to experience the blessings and power of God in their lives, for transformation, sanctification, and boldness, to be effective witnesses for Christ. Thus, the church needs the presence and power of God, to enjoy Him forever, which is the chief end of man, and to be in touch with God in fulfilling His will.

**APPENDIX ONE**

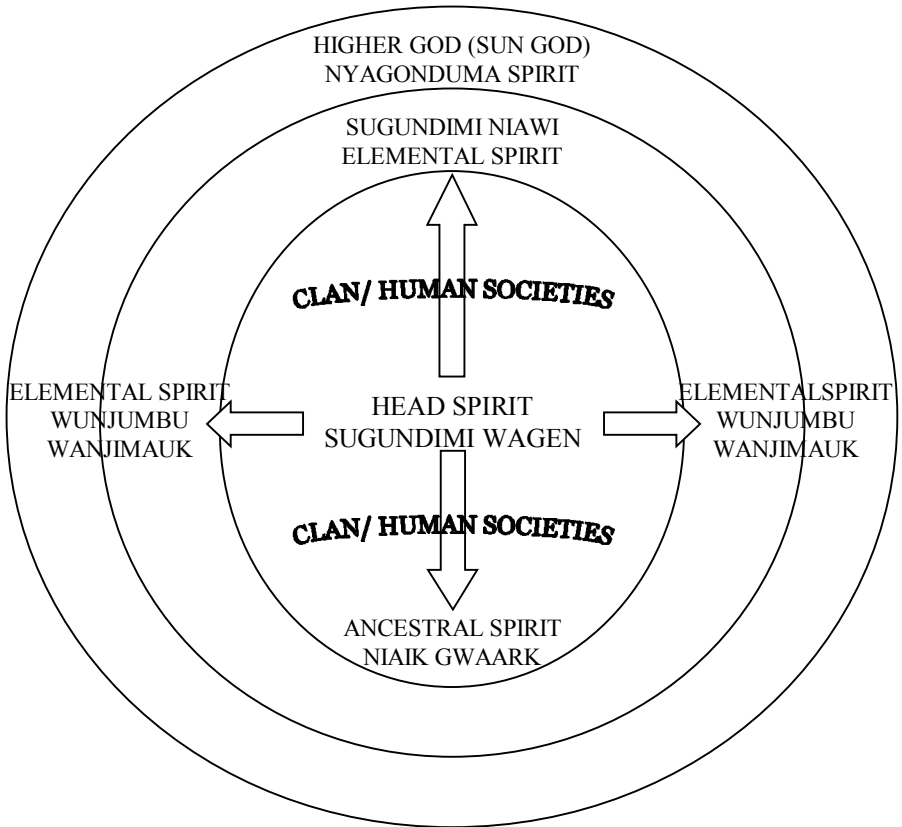
Iatmul Spiritual Structure and Influences over Human Communities

**Sun god Nyagonduma**



## APPENDIX TWO

### Iatmul Spiritual Hierarchical Structure and Control



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# THE GOSPEL IN A WORLD OF CULTURES

**Krista Hanson**

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## INTRODUCTION

Very few Christians would deny that the gospel is at the heart of Christian missions. Yet, when asked to define the gospel, many would struggle to come up with a concrete and non-controversial answer. The answer given would be influenced by one's cultural context, including, among other things, language, family expectations, previous exposure to religion, social morality standards, and norms of behaviour. This has led Lesslie Newbigin to argue that, "The idea that one can or could at any time separate out by some process of distillation a pure gospel unadulterated by any cultural accretions is an illusion."<sup>1</sup> The challenge to present the gospel to every culture in a way that is both biblical and relevant is a great challenge of Christian missions today.

## THE GOOD NEWS

Newbigin draws attention to the fact that the gospel is essentially the Good News of Jesus, the Word made flesh. He went through the ultimate incarnation, taking human form so that He could live among those to whom He was sent. Newbigin further argues that:

to separate a pure gospel, unadulterated by cultural accretions . . . is, in fact, an abandonment of the gospel, for the gospel is about the word made flesh. Every statement of the gospel, in words conditioned by the culture, of which those words are a part, and

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<sup>1</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks* (London UK: SPCK, 1986), p. 4.

every style of life that claims to embody the truth of the gospel is a culturally-conditioned style of life . . . there can never be a culture-free gospel.<sup>2</sup>

Newbigin clearly explains that the gospel, as understood by humans, is understood within the context of one's culture. Paul Hiebert, a leading proponent of anthropological understanding in missions, says this:

The gospel belongs to no culture. It is God's revelation of Himself, and His acts to all people. On the other hand, it must always be understood and expressed within human cultural forms. There is no way to communicate it, apart from human thought patterns and languages. Moreover, God has chosen to use humans as the primary means for making Himself known to other others. Even when He chose to reveal Himself to us, He did so most fully by becoming a man, who lived within the context of human history, and a particular culture.<sup>3</sup>

No student of the Bible will deny the importance of understanding the cultural climate of 1st-century Palestine when attempting to understand the gospel. For 1st-century Jews, God was יהוה (YHWH), a holy sovereign God to be feared. When Jesus referred to God as אבא (Abbā – 'Αββᾶ in Greek) (Mark 14:36, NIV), an Aramaic term roughly meaning "Daddy", this was a completely revolutionary way of thinking<sup>4</sup>. Jesus' incarnation and sacrifice changed forever the way that God's people related to Him. Without a general understanding of Jewish culture in Bible times, the significance of this change in thinking would be lost. Thus, Paul Hiebert comes to this conclusion:

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Book House, 1985), p. 30.

<sup>4</sup> "Αββᾶ", in *TDNT* 1.5-6 (originally published in Germany in *TWNT* 1.5-6 (1933). As referenced in D'Angelo, Mary Rose, "'Αββᾶ and 'Father': Imperial Theology and the *Jesus* Traditions", in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 111 (Winter 1992), p. 611.

Clearly we need to understand the gospel in its historical and cultural setting. Without this, we have no message. We also need a clear understanding of ourselves, and the people we serve, in diverse historical and cultural contexts. Without this, we are in danger of proclaiming a meaningless and irrelevant message.<sup>5</sup>

### **CULTURAL CONTEXTUALISATION**

While Newbigin's theory is very helpful, to a certain extent, one must be careful not to carry this idea of cultural contextualisation too far. Hiebert reminds us that culture, like all other human institutions, is capable of great elements of sin:

Among these are slavery, apartheid, oppression, exploitation, and war. The gospel condemns these, just as it judges the sins of individuals. . . . Kenneth Scott Latourette points out: "It must be noted that Christianity, if it is not hopelessly denatured, never becomes fully at home in any culture. Always, when it is true to its genius, it creates a tension."<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, culture must be subject to critical analysis, when attempting to present the gospel in a way that is culturally appropriate. The nature of the gospel is transformational. It should not be mindlessly adapted to conform to the culture. This invariably will lead to the great problems in Christian mission today: the issues of syncretism and pluralism. Instead, Dean Gilliland gives this definition of biblical contextualisation:

In the process of contextualisation, the church, through the Holy Spirit, continually challenges, incorporates, and transforms elements of the culture in order to bring them under the lordship of Christ. As believers, in a particular place, reflect upon the Word,

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<sup>5</sup> Hiebert, *op cit.*, p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> *Op cit.*, p. 56

through their own thoughts, employing their own cultural gifts, they are better able to understand the gospel as incarnation.<sup>7</sup>

Newbigin's theory has certainly not been the norm in historical Christian thought. From the Nicene Creed to the contemporary "sinner's prayer", there have been countless attempts to figure out a concise gospel message. Formulated in the West, these gospel outlines have focused on a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, emphasising human sinful nature, and subsequent justification through grace by faith, which leads to eternal fellowship with the Saviour<sup>8</sup>. In our individualistic society, this technique has often proved to be successful, leading to the idea that this particular way of presenting the gospel was the only way to present the gospel.

This method of evangelism is helpful to a certain extent. Its rigid nature does not often give way to further syncretism. Although inadequate in equipping Christians with a full understanding of the gospel, the foundational truths presented in these gospel outlines are undeniably biblical. Along these lines, the Bible always affirms that there is a definitive gospel that applies to every person in every culture. Paul is especially clear about this in his epistles:

But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned! . . . I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ (Gal 1:8, 9, 11, 12).

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<sup>7</sup> Dean Gilliland, "Contextualisation", in Moreau, S., ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Reference Library, 2000), p. 226.

<sup>8</sup> "How to Become a Christian", in *Southern Baptist Convention*, <http://www.sbc.net/knowjesus/theplan.asp>. Accessed on January 14, 2008.

Yet, nowhere in the Bible will one find a particular way to present this gospel. Although Paul always preaches the gospel, his presentations of the gospel are never identical. He tells the Philippian jailer to “Believe in the Lord, and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31). To the philosophers on Mars Hill, Paul explains that Jesus is Lord, the supreme “Unknown God” (Acts 17:23). To the eager disciples of John, Paul shows that John’s baptism was simply a precursor to baptism in the name of the Lord Jesus (Acts 19:4). Thus, the gospel, by nature, is so comprehensive that it cannot be explained in the same way in every circumstance.

Samuel Escobar explains the dangers of trying to manufacture a certain way of presenting the gospel. He relates this story of failed contextualisation in African culture:

In African culture, the way in which man can be man is within the family. The African culture knows no isolated individuals. Man is man, because he belongs. He is a part of a larger family, a clan or a tribe. Hence, John Mbiti says, “I am, because we are.” As a member of a family man cannot be left to his own. . . . In some parts of Africa, the Christian gospel has been preached as if it were relevant only to an isolated individual. A person has to make an individual decision to accept Christ. This is an importation of individualistic cultural thinking of the West. The Philippian jailer (Acts 16) was baptised in the middle of the night with his household. Whenever an African person wants to make an important decision, he has to consult the whole family. Our evangelism in Africa must be aimed at families, and groups of people.<sup>9</sup>

Undoubtedly, Newbigin has brought to light a key aspect of biblical mission: that the gospel must be relevant to one’s culture, in order to be truly life changing. The New Testament gives us many examples of this. However, one must be careful, to the extent in which the gospel can be

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<sup>9</sup> David Gitari, as quoted in Samuel Escobar, *The New Global Mission: The Gospel from Everywhere to Everyone* (Downers Grove IL: IVP, 2003), p. 140.

“adulterated” with “cultural accretions”, while still remaining the gospel. Before long, the gospel can become vague, giving way to religious pluralism. On the other hand, one must also be careful to not relegate the gospel to an evangelistic talk that takes five minutes to explain. Both lead to an either inaccurate or incomplete view of the gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ.

## CONCLUSION

Therefore, it is not an issue of whether the gospel must always be marred by cultural accretions. Rather, we must recognise the fact that the gospel transcends all cultures. When Jesus spoke of living water to the Samaritan women, but of a new birth to Nicodemus, He was not speaking of two altered gospels. Alteration implies change. Rather, the nature of the gospel is so powerful that it is able to speak to, and transform, any culture. The gospel that Paul preached is the same good news that we are called to preach, but this does not mean that it will always be presented the same way. Perhaps the best way to sum up a model of biblical, and relevant evangelism, is through the words of this ancient Chinese proverb: “Go to the people, live among them, learn from them, love them. Start with what they know, and build on what they have.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> As quoted in Darrell Whiteman, “Anthropology and Mission: The Incarnational Connection (Part II)”, in *Global Missiology, Research Methodology* (July 2004), [www.globalmissiology.net](http://www.globalmissiology.net). Accessed on January 11, 2008.

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## **BOOK SUMMARY: *WORLD OF THE SPIRITS: A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE ON TRADITIONAL AND FOLK RELIGIONS***

[Burnett, David, *World of the Spirits: A Christian Perspective on Traditional and Folk Religions*, reprint, Oxford UK: Monarch Books, 2005.]

In his book, *World of the Spirits*, David Burnett seeks to describe the beliefs and practices of “traditional religion” (animism), including the nature of the spiritual realm. He also explores the consequences of folk-religion – the merging of traditional religion with major world religions (namely Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, and Hinduism).

**Traditional Religion.** In searching for a definition, Burnett surveys several attempts at identifying traditional religion, or at least identifying its roots: fetishism (De Brossess), magic (Frazer), belief in spiritual beings (Tylor), belief that is basic to all religions (Taylor), belief that existed before world religions (Shaw), a local expression of belief without missionary intent (Turner, Baylis), and beliefs of oral societies. Ultimately, Burnett does not offer a specific definition of traditional religion; rather, he relies on describing its various beliefs and practices: gods/spirits, humans/souls, ghosts/ancestors, taboo/sin, rituals, divination, witchcraft, sorcery/magic, spirit possession, and shamanism. His findings in each of these areas provide the reader with realistic insights into traditional religion.

1. *Gods/Spirits.* Concerning gods/spirits, he notes that although belief in a supreme creator may exist in traditional religions, the lower gods and spirits are viewed as the ones that influence human experience. The supreme being is often viewed as the creator, but now distant from daily life – some even seeing the lesser gods as various manifestations of the supreme god. Consequently, a tension exists between monotheism and polytheism in traditional religions.

2. *Humans/Souls.* Followers of traditional religion perceive an individual's soul as interrelated with the community and with nature. The individual's soul can move in and out of his, or her, body – possibly through dreams. Other people can also manipulate an individual's soul, through acquiring something related to the individual (hair, fingernail, name spoken, or footprint).

3. *Ghosts/Spirits.* There is a distinction in traditional religion between ghosts and spirits. Ghosts are ancestors, whereas spirits have always been supernatural beings. Ancestors continue to play a role in the welfare of the living, at least as long as the people living remember the ancestors. The emphasis on ancestors is not how they exist, but how they affect the living.

4. *Taboos/Sins.* A “taboo” is prohibition that, if violated, results in a penalty. The penalty does not require human- or spiritual-being involvement; rather, it occurs naturally (almost as a force within itself). Taboos play a role in many facets of life: societal taboos, individual taboos, and religious taboos. The breaking of taboo results in pollution/sin. Although Burnett argues that Western missionaries may have imported the concept of sin, he goes on to discuss classes of sin: sins against society, sins against known gods or ancestors, and sins against unknown gods. Protection countermeasures include charms and rituals.

5. *Rituals.* A “ritual” is a prescribed formula, used at specific times, to influence spiritual forces. These times include status transition (birth, puberty, marriage, death), time transition (calendar festivals), and rites of crises (sickness, disease, war, accident, drought, unexpected death). In rites of crises, traditional religion societies ask “Why?” rather than “How?” the crises occurred. In an accidental death, effort is made to determine what (sorcery, witchcraft, spirit) may have caused the death. Once the “why” is determined, a ritual may be part the response. Rituals function to integrate a society, and give cadence and stability to life.

6. *Divination.* The term “divination” covers the ways people search for the cause of a problem, and then ways to counter to the problem.

There are many divination methods, each including ritual: manipulation of material objects (cowry shells, twigs, strips of leather), observation of animals (movement of a beetle, animal entrails), and accessing spiritual powers (meditation, dance).

7. *Witchcraft*. “Sorcery” is a conscious attempt to harm another by spiritual powers. Conversely, “witchcraft” is an unconscious attempt to do the same. An example of witchcraft is when one person (witch) dreams of another person being sick. If that person then becomes sick, the witch is the cause. A witchdoctor is one who seeks to uncover the witch that caused the harm. Interestingly enough, most people, accused of being a witch, are surprised at the accusation. Bad social relations (jealousy, spite) are the motivation for witchcraft, while fear of being accused as a witch often discourages expression of greed and envy in a society.

8. *Sorcery/Magic*. “Magic” is the manipulation of objects, or the reciting of spells, to cause harm, intentionally. The fear of sorcery/magic is very real in a traditional-religion society. One example of sorcery is the “evil eye”, by which one person causes harm to another person, by looking at or praising them. Jealousy is the reason for the harm, while charms ward off the evil eye – the physical effect of the jealous thoughts. Popular charms in Islamic-influenced societies are the hand of Fatima, and the wearing words from the Qur’an in a locket. Another example of sorcery is the curse – words that are spoken deliberately to harm. Charms may ward off curses, but the effectiveness of curses is related to the innocence or guilt of the cursed person. The best way to combat a curse, then, is to live an irreproachable life. Yet another example of sorcery is magic rituals, normally involving three steps: finding something associated with the victim (hair, clothing, excreta), carrying out a ritual to apply the intended results, and the summoning of appropriate powerful spirits to produce the intended results.

9. *Spirit Possession*. There are two types of spirit possession: unwanted and wanted. An unwanted spirit possession results in maladies, such as sickness or convulsions. Appeasement or exorcism

(transferring the spirit to an animal) is often the remedy for unwanted possessions. The title “shaman” is used of a person, who pursues spirit possession, and then seeks to control the spirit for the purposes of healing. Additionally, a person may join a possession cult, often through a dance-induced trance state, and enter into a working relationship with a spirit. As long as the person adequately appeases the spirit, the spirit will serve the person.

10. *Shamanism.* A person may become a shaman, a controller of spirits, due to the spirit’s bidding, the passing of shamanistic powers from parent to child, or by a person seeking out the spirit. Since a shaman can “see” spiritual beings, the shaman has insight into the causes of sickness. In shamanistic societies, sickness is caused by soul travel, spirit intrusion into a person, object intrusion into a person, breaking of a taboo, or sorcery. The shaman’s job is to protect society from unwanted spiritual influence. The shaman invokes friendly spirits, often through entering a state of ecstasy, to gain knowledge of how to respond to unwanted spirits.

**Folk-Religion.** After describing traditional religion, Burnett turns to evaluating what happens when a major world religion invades a traditional-religion society. He makes a couple of insightful points regarding religious conversion.

Firstly, a traditional-religion society more readily accepts a major world religion than a society already influenced by another world religion. This may be due to the firm moral code and creeds of world religions. The growth of Christianity, for example, has occurred mainly through the conversion of traditional-religion societies. If a traditional-religion society converts to a major world religion, it is unlikely in the future to commit to a new major world religion.

Secondly, religious conversion is a long process that normally includes a period of syncretistic beliefs. “Syncretism” is the mixing of belief systems (such as traditional religion with Christianity). Burnett discusses a two-tier belief system in traditional religion: great traditions/high religion and little traditions/low religion. The latter often refers to beliefs

of uneducated, non-literate, villagers. Low religion, also called “folk religion”, addresses questions of daily life (sickness, drought), has no written texts, has informal leadership, few formal institutions, and is pragmatic overall. Syncretism then is nominal acceptance of the high religion, but continuing to practise the low religion in subtle, yet frequent, ways. Followers of folk-religion are more concerned with “does it work?” (low religion), rather than “is it correct?” (high religion).

**Summary.** In summary, Burnett paints an accurate picture of traditional religion, gives the reader an appreciation of the spirit world, and explores the impact of world religions on traditional-religion societies. While doing so, he presents several ideas that warrant mention.

Firstly, scripture leaves room for the possibility of ghosts, as exemplified by the witch of Endor (1 Sam 28), plus Moses and Elijah on the Mount of Transfiguration. God, however, did prohibit the Israelites from trying to contact the dead (Deut 18:11; Is 8:19).

Secondly, the subject of ancestors in a traditional-religion society is of great importance. There is a shift from lineage solidarity to a nuclear family, as Christianity grows in influence in a society, often undermining traditional family ties of the living, in communion with their ancestors.

Thirdly, Burnett does not answer the question whether converts to Christianity should participate in traditional rituals. He notes that some Christian missionaries have advised against participation in the rituals, while others have promoted the Christianisation of the rituals, namely the illustration of Christian teachings. He concludes his discussion of rituals with a tantalising statement – he suggests that ritual serves as more than just a societal function, carrying symbolic meaning; it is also the harnessing of spiritual power.

Fourthly, in traditional religion, divination plays an important role in helping people make decisions. He observes that Christians, in contrast, use the Bible, prayer, and the Holy Spirit’s guidance, in making decisions, which, to the traditional-religion adherent, often seem to be abstract methods. Consequently, God is viewed as unable to

communicate with man, other than through a book, only usable by the literate. Divination, in their eyes, provides a specific method (ritual) for providing a definitive answer for all people. He surmises that this may be why the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements, with their emphasis on spiritual gifts, have become such a part of the global expansion of Christianity.

Fifthly, Christians must be aware of the social context of witchcraft and sorcery. Those accused of being witches are often the ones living on the edge of society (widows and minorities), who are then used as a release valve for relief of social pressure. When something in society is not going well, blame is cast to these outcasts. The Christian message should stress reconciliation and acceptance of all, by all, in a society.

Sixthly, followers of traditional religion live in fear, including the fear of spirits, ancestors, sickness, and death. Hence, following taboos, performing rituals, and reliance on shamans, all play important roles in countering this fear for traditional-religion followers.

**Melanesia.** Burnett refers to Melanesia a number of times in *World of the Spirits*, including the Gahuku-Gama of the Eastern Highlands Province in Papua New Guinea, Kwaio people of the Solomon Islands, the Bahinemo people of Papua New Guinea, the Maisin of northeastern Papua New Guinea, and people of Fiji. This fact is of special interest to me (as the writer of this book summary), since I am sitting in the Eastern Highlands Province of Papua New Guinea as I type this review. The reality of the truths and insights, Burnett relays in his book, are valid and worthy of study by anyone seeking to reach people, living in a traditional-religion society, with the good news of Jesus Christ. Understanding the beliefs and practices of traditional-religion adherents is an important step towards reaching such societies for Christ. After all, the model missionary, the Apostle Paul, walked around Athens studying the objects of the Athenians' worship before declaring to them the truth about their unknown God (Acts 17:22-23).

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# **BOOK REVIEW: CHRISTIANS CARING FOR THE ENVIRONMENT IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA: A HANDBOOK OF PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICE**

[*Christians Caring for the Environment in Papua New Guinea: A Handbook of Principles and Practice*, compiled by the Evangelical Alliance of Papua New Guinea, published by Evangelical Alliance of Papua New Guinea, 2005.]

## **INTRODUCTION**

The book opens with the words of the statement of the World Council of Churches' Conference at Seoul, South Korea, held in March, 1990, to describe the condition of the globe, with its depleted resources: "The destruction of the planet has approached an order of geological magnitude. The soil is eroded, 70 percent of the reefs, where the fish breed, are gone, the rivers are polluted from mine tailings; the forests reduced to bare ground. The world's people are wounded."<sup>1</sup>

## **THE SEVEN DEGRADATIONS<sup>2</sup>**

In pursuing the theme of depletion of physical resources of the planet, the book begins with the presentation of the seven degradations of creation, as outlined by Dr Calvin B. DeWitt, in his article "Creation's Environmental Challenge to Evangelical Christianity". The seven degradations include alteration of earth's energy exchange, land degradation, deforestation, species' extinction, water-quality degradation, waste generation and global toxification, and human and cultural degradation.

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<sup>1</sup> *Christians Caring for the Environment in Papua New Guinea* (Mt Hagen PNG: Evangelical Alliance of Papua New Guinea, 2005), p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.

Some of these issues can be said to be those that Papua New Guineans have to grapple with. For instance, deforestation is the result of logging. Extinction of plant and animal species is taking place, as the result of loss of rainforests. Soil erosion is the result of failure in controlling water run-off. Water pollution is caused by industrial waste, due to mining, uncontrolled disposal of industrial waste, and sewage disposal. Marine degradation is the result of over-fishing, and pollutants carried by land water. Air pollution is caused by widespread burning of wood, and using different types of fuel.

### **THE SEVEN PRINCIPLES OF CREATION-KEEPING DISCIPLESHIP<sup>3</sup>**

Chapters 2 and 3 discuss the theology of environment, based on the biblical teaching of God's creation, and mankind's creation-keeping discipleship. The evangelical perspective of God's creation comes from the analysis of the first three chapters of Genesis, which are held as relevant to the modern understanding of the environment around us. In this process, several principles of creation-keeping discipleship were developed: being disciples of Christ, being the second Adam, giving rest to the land that is due to it, as envisaged in the Sabbath, esteeming the blessings of God's creation, to be enjoyed in true stewardship, so that other generations could have the benefit of the same, seeking the Lordship of God in every area of life, restraining greed by accepting what God has provided with grateful acknowledgment, and exercising principles of true stewardship in practical ways.

### **ENVIRONMENTAL CARE BASED ON BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES**

The focus of the discussion also brings out the point that the churches are variously rooted in different cultures, and, hence, the approaches the church leaders take towards the environment are different. Nevertheless, it does not absolve us from accepting the relevance of biblical principles that help us live our lives as disciples of Jesus Christ in harmonious relationship with God's creation.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., pp. 18-19.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 18.



## **THE SEVEN PROVISIONS OF THE CREATOR<sup>5</sup>**

The picture of harmonious relationship of man with nature is often seen in the Bible, as we find in Ps 8, 24, 33, 90, 104, 115, 121, and 145. This brings into focus another neglected aspect of evangelical Christians: to worship God as Creator, Governor, and Upholder of all things. We see humanity as individual human beings, created in God's image, with a responsibility of caring and exercising our delegated authority over the environment, but not autonomously. Calvin B. De Witt's article "Creation's Environmental Challenge to Evangelical Christianity" exemplifies "Seven Provisions of the Creator" that speak of the wonder and awesomeness of God's creation, as we find in a study of Ps 104. The provisions of God, as De Witt outlines, are the regulation of earth's energy exchange with the sun, biochemical and soil-building processes, our ecosystem's amazing recycling and transfer of energy, fruitfulness, as witnessed in the biodiversity and the responsive and adaptive physiologies of life on earth, water purification systems of the biosphere, distribution of vital materials for life on earth, and the ability endowed to human beings to live in accordance with the laws of nature.

## **THE BIBLICAL GROUND FOR ENVIRONMENTAL CARE<sup>6</sup>**

The theology of the environment also takes into account the story of the nation of Israel. It is observed that the creation aspect of God's relationship with mankind and all His creation is the basis of human behaviour, and what is acceptable and what is not. The laws, He gave to Israel to abide by, reveal God's care and concern for His creation.

The theology of environment also notes the affirmation made by the New Testament teaching on the sacredness of God's creation, and man's responsibility of loving care. In the gospels, we see God's care for individual members of His creation, small and great. This is clearly seen in the teaching of our Lord (Luke 12:7). This is also observed in the Old Testament's teaching on God's knowledge about His creation (Is 40:26). We also read in the gospels that Jesus is the Lord of Creation. The

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

incarnation of our Lord proves the falsity of ideas of the material world around us, which influenced the church to the point of neglecting the physical aspects of life.

We acknowledge the church's responsibility of balancing the spiritual and the physical in its service to God.

### **A STUDY OF THE BACKGROUND OF ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES IN PNG<sup>7</sup>**

Chapters 4 and 5 deal with the key environmental issues for Papua New Guinea. These issues are considered against the background of the country and its culture. When contrasted with the modern approach of agriculture, with its emphasis on increased production and profit, traditional practices in agriculture are found to have had a positive impact on environment. But we are left with much environmental degradation already, by the encroachment of modern methods, and also some unsound practices of traditional agricultural methods. The result is that a considerable amount of resources are wasted in running a normal, traditional way of life. There is also over-exploitation of plants and animals, leading to the extinction of a number of species. PNG, therefore, is not isolated from general environment degradation. In fact, there is enough evidence in the country to show that, in the name of development, a lot of land resources are put at risk of degradation. This calls for sustainable development strategies in the country.

### **AN ANALYSIS OF ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES IN PNG<sup>8</sup>**

Several pages are devoted to the detailed analysis of various factors affecting the environment in PNG. The workshops covered the themes: the land and the people, forests, mines, marine resources, and freshwater resources. These environmental issues of PNG are analysed under the headings of (1) Significance, (2) Degradation, (3) Restoration.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp. 55-66.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., pp. 67-132.

*The Significance of Resources.* Under the significance of rainforests, we learn quite a deal about the dependence of Papua New Guineans on the forests for livelihood and cultural life. We are given a good description of the way of life of the people. The significance of the atmosphere is portrayed in detail, showing its link to the basic requirement of good health. We learn about the “greenhouse gases”, and how important they are in capturing sun’s energy, and in the maintenance of the earth’s surface temperature, and of the atmosphere around it, at a constant level. Change in the levels of these gases is linked to the now-dreaded global warming. The significance of marine resources is highlighted in PNG’s rich coral reefs, and the extensive mangrove ecosystems. The country is also blessed with a wide range of rivers that cover 14 percent of the land.

*The Degradation of Resources.* The cause of the degradation of rainforests is man himself. While deforestation is a global issue, it has now become a major concern for conservationists in PNG. Measures must be taken to control the damage done to the forests. As for the soils, degradation and loss of fertile soils continues. The often-experienced landslides are due to the fact that much of the vegetation on the sloping land has been removed. Degradation has also taken place on various tracts of mangroves. As a result, there is substantial damage to the ecosystems along the coastline, especially along the Hanuabada and Matuka region. There is, in addition to all this, a degradation of freshwater resources. Though it is unlikely to reach the levels of degradation, evident in Europe and Asia, a process has already been set in motion by the dumping of waste from industry, mines, and communities. Measures must be taken to control this.

*Restoration.* A number of measures have been taken by governments and community agencies across the world to restore sustainability in agriculture, conservation of land use, and water resources. Organic fertilisers, such as animal manure, compost, and “green fertilisers”, which are plants that enrich the soil with nitrogen, are used in several countries. The practice of burning of plants is discouraged, because it prevents recycling and compost making, and destroys certain useful plant nutrients. This is one measure of control, of which PNG farmers should

take note, about which necessary steps should be taken to make people aware of the problem. Water-flow management on the sides of the hills is highly recommended as a possible innovation in agriculture, not only to prevent soil erosion, but to reign in the flow of water for increased use in agriculture. Research is recommended as a possible step towards implementing sloping agricultural land technology.

Although PNG is not a major contributor to global problems of pollution, it is recommended that the country should facilitate environment awareness among adults, besides making school curricula accommodate environmental issues, in regards to atmospheric pollution. PNG could be a major user of ethanol as a fuel if it is to exploit the possibilities of growing sources of sugars and starch. A wide range of possibilities exists in recycling of waste in our societies. People should be taught about waste disposal for recycling.

For restoration and sustainability of marine resources, four areas are suggested for consideration: relevant research, laying down regulations and implementing them, coordinated efforts for moral leadership in community and government levels, and public awareness through education.

### **NEED FOR RESPONSE<sup>9</sup>**

Individuals and churches have to respond with action plans for sustainability of all the country's resources, and ensuring environmental restoration. Four attitude-related actions are suggested. They are: loving God's creation, repentance on past failings, rethinking of priorities, and being good stewards of God's creation, through our way of life.

The book closes with the Goroka Declaration on Christians and the Environment, May 2003, which calls on all Christians and concerned people to work towards godly, just economies; to work for responsible public policies; and to affirm the biblical care of creation, "knowing that

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 133-138.

until Christ returns to reconcile all things, we are called to be faithful stewards of God's good garden, our earthly home".<sup>10</sup>

### **FORMAT AND PRODUCTION OF THE BOOK**

The book is the result of consultation meetings held in Goroka in May, 2003, and April, 2004. The team consisted of a number of pastors and teachers, representing different regions of PNG, led by the team leader, the General Secretary of the Evangelical Alliance of PNG, Mr David Kima. While acknowledgment was made of their contributions, and of the work of Graeme Swincer in bringing together the contributions of participants, it is not made clear who wrote the entire document. It would be of help to students and researchers if the writer's name, as the compiler, or editor, is highlighted on the facing page, and if segments or chapters of the book are the result of various contributions of the participants, that, too, must be made clear within the text under each heading. If the material is all one conglomerate of all the contributions, then the editor's name could suffice, with a note about the workshops and participants, and with due acknowledgments made elsewhere.

The footnoting would be helpful if superscripted numbers are used instead of symbols. This will enable students to be specific in noting their citations in their papers.

### **LAUNCHING OF THE BOOK**

The book was launched under the auspices of the Evangelical Alliance of Papua New Guinea at an official function held at the PNG University of Technology on September 31, 2005. One of the team members, Kirine Yandit, gave the keynote address at this gathering. Kirine highlighted the theology of the environment that is based on the positive affirmation of biblical teaching that God is the creator of the universe, and He has

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., pp. 139-141.

pleasure over all that He created. “God cares, and God is concerned for the welfare of the whole universe, man and nature.”<sup>11</sup>

### **THE ROLE OF THE EVANGELICAL ALLIANCE**

In making the book available to the public, the churches of the Evangelical Alliance, an organisation led by David Kima, came together for discussions on matters, such as environment conservation and Christians’ responsibility. In doing so, the churches have shown a willingness to deal with problems in the country, serving as positive role for the churches of PNG.

John Yejerla  
Papua New Guinea.

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<sup>11</sup> Kirine Yandit, “Keynote Address: Christians Caring for the Environment in Papua New Guinea”, *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 23-1 (2007), pp. 89-96.