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in the Solomon Islands**
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in East Sepik Province**
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from the Religion of the Missionaries**
Ma'afu Palu

Journal of the Melanesian Association of Theological Schools



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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.

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EDITORIAL

This volume presents a variety of topics related to Christian theology in the South Pacific: spirituality, prosperity, contextualisation, and pre-Christian religion.

In the first article, Gideon argues that the South Sea Evangelical church (SSEC) was spiritually vibrant at its founding, but now lacks in spiritual maturity, as evidenced by the recent Kingdom and Maeliau movements. Gideon believes there are a number of factors that have led to the present status, which can be remedied by contextually-relevant biblical teaching.

Rodney takes a critical look at the five laws of prosperity gospel: blessing, sowing, and reaping, faith, the proclaimed word, and the expiatory work of Christ. After summarising traditional cultural beliefs about prosperity, he warns that following the prosperity gospel movement can lead to a return to cultic beliefs.

Seik creatively relates the importance of coastal beacons, the Gabagaba mountain range, and the lone *Magi* tree to Christ, showing how Christ meets Gabagaba villagers' needs. Seik reveals such traditional practices of hanging smoked human bodies on the *Magi* tree, and of looking for two dancing women on the mountains as a sign of sailor safety.

In the final article, Ma'afu ponders if Tongans, before the missionaries came, could be considered Christians. His answer is a definite "no". Ma'afu notes a refreshing return in Tonga to the evangelical roots of the early missionaries.

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.

SPIRITUALITY: THE SOUTH SEA EVANGELICAL CHURCH IN THE SOLOMON ISLANDS

Gideon Fangalea

Gideon recently graduated with a Bachelor of Theology degree from the Christian Leaders' Training College in Papua New Guinea.

This was his Bachelor thesis.

INTRODUCTION

During the last ten years or so, the South Sea Evangelical church (SSEC) in the Solomon Islands has been going through difficult trials and hardships. The tension created by the fighting between the Guadalcanal¹ and Malaita² people from 1998 to 2003 is one example. In that occurrence, the unity of the church was severely shaken, and the church itself was almost brought to its knees. The confusion brought about by the movement, closely connected with the South Pacific Prayer Assembly movement,³ is another example of an incident causing disunity and conflict within the church. The latest example is the needless perplexity triggered by the inception of a new movement, known as “the Kingdom Movement” into certain churches in Malaita and Honiara,⁴ a little less than two years ago.

The SSEC has had its own spiritual hurdles over the years, but these latest experiences show that spiritual solidarity and, to a certain extent, leadership credibility within the church, are somewhat lacking. The apparently immature Christianity, demonstrated by many SSEC members

¹ Guadalcanal is one of the biggest of the islands within the Solomon Islands. It is very much the centre of development in the country, and is where the nation's capital is located.

² Malaita is also one of the biggest islands within the Solomon Islands. About 47 per cent of the total members of the SSEC come from this island.

³ The movement was instigated by Revd Michael Maeliau from North Malaita.

⁴ Honiara is the capital of the Solomon Islands.

(including leaders), in response to the recent occurrences, seriously brings into question the level of spiritual maturity the church has attained over the years. It is a sure sign that, although the church has been steadily progressing, in terms of its spiritual development, there is still a lot of room for improvement.

This article will attempt to evaluate the spiritual progress of the SSEC, up to this point, and suggest ways it can achieve maximum spiritual growth, in the light of what the Bible says about spiritual life, and its growth to maturity. To do this, the article will introduce the historical progression and spiritual upbringing of the SSEC, and identify where the church is today. It will also examine where the church should have been in its spiritual development. Furthermore, the article will determine the causes of spiritual immaturity within the church, and recommend practical steps it should take, in order to achieve the spiritual status it ought to have achieved by this time. It is the aim of this article to help the SSEC re-examine its own spirituality, in the light of what the scripture says about the subject matter, and to take the necessary actions, in order to move itself away from what appears to be a false Christianity, existing within the church today.

1. HISTORICAL PROGRESSION

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

During the 19th century, many people from nations around the Pacific were taken to work in plantations in Australia, New Zealand, and some other countries. Many white men engaged in what was known as “blackbirding”, forcing people to work in sugar cane, pineapple, and coconut plantations in exchange for food, clothes, guns, money, and other valuables. Oliver states that many of those people were actually kidnapped, while others went of their own choice.⁵ Among those who were taken to work in Queensland, Australia, were a number of Solomon Islanders who were contracted to work for a number of years in a sugar cane plantation in Fairymead. By the time these men were due to return

⁵ Douglas L. Oliver, *The Pacific Islands*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1951, pp. 92-94.

home, some of them had become Christians, and began to share their faith with their own people. Two of these men were Peter Abuofa, of North Malaita, and Samson Jacko, from Guadalcanal. Both returned home about 1894.⁶ This simple sharing of faith by these men led to what is known as the South Sea Evangelical Church in the Solomon Islands today.

BIRTH AND DEVELOPMENT

The SSEC is an offshoot of a mission organisation known as “Queensland Kanaka Mission” (QKM), formed in Bundaberg, Queensland, in 1886. The QKM initially grew out of a Sunday evening class program started by Florence Young in 1882, with ten of the kidnapped plantation workers and a house-girl.⁷ In time, many of the workers, including some Solomon Islanders, became Christians, and decided to return to their own people to share their newfound life with them. Not without many difficulties, the gospel then began to spread across the Solomon Islands. This led to the formation of the Solomon Islands branch of the QKM, in January 1904, known as the “South Sea Evangelical Mission” (SSEM), based in Sydney, Australia. The body, which was made up mostly of missionaries, was to oversee missionary tasks, as the gospel continued to spread, and local churches were planted across the islands.⁸

The idea of having the indigenous people of the Solomon Islands take on the full responsibility for running their own church was behind the establishment of the SSEM. This came to fruition in March, 1964, at Ambu, in Malaita when a total of 53 delegates from around the islands met together with a group of missionaries, for the first time, for a week-long conference. During the conference, a constitution for an indigenous church was adopted and inaugurated under the name “South Sea Evangelical Church (SSEC)”.⁹ By this time, about 300 spiritually-vibrant local churches had been established across the islands.¹⁰

⁶ Alison Griffiths, *Fire in the Islands*, Wheaton IL: Harold Shaw, 1977, pp. 27, 77.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁸ Florence S. H. Young, *Pearls from the Pacific*, London UK: Marshall Brothers, nd, p. 142.

⁹ Griffiths, *Fire in the Islands*, p. 165.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

SPIRITUAL UPBRINGING

The SSEC is coloured with a beautiful spiritual heritage, brought about by a number of factors, some of which are the influence of missionaries, revival experiences, and sound theological teaching, through the establishment of Bible schools within the islands. This section is included here to validate the main argument of this article – that the SSEC should have progressed further in its spiritual growth than it has to date.

Missionary Input

Missionaries played a very important role in the spiritual development of the SSEC. Before its inauguration, the church was governed by missionaries, through the SSEM base in Australia. Their tasks included administering the process of becoming a member of the church, and setting standards regarding practices and behaviours within the church. This vital missionary support moved the church forward, as it helped to shape the needed neutrality and effective governance of the church as it proceeded towards an indigenous denomination.

Much of what the missionaries introduced and established within the SSEC, especially with regard to doctrines, rules, and regulations concerning church life and order, set the right footing for the church to move away from its primitive state to a much higher standard of spirituality. For example, one will hardly find a case of polygamy within the SSEC today, because of its outright condemnation by the church from the outset. The same is true of the use of alcoholic substances, and practices that have strong animistic connections, such as honouring the dead, and the use of traditional magic and charms. Syncretism may be seen within the SSEC churches in some form, even today. However, it is clear that the SSEC, as a result of what God has been doing within the church through the missionaries, condemns almost all forms of practices that are syncretistic in nature.

Revival Experiences

Several years after its inauguration, the SSEC went into new heights, in its spiritual experience, with a great outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the infant church. This happened in August, 1970, after much prayer and deep

desire in the hearts of the church's newly-elected leaders, and Christians throughout the islands, to see spiritual transformation take place within the church. Beginning from Malaita, revival quickly spread throughout the islands, and, through the mighty working of the Holy Spirit, many people were convicted of the spiritual condition of their lives, and were able to make a clear decision for the Lord for the first time. A brand new outlook on life dawned, as many were restored from the power and fear of demons, through the ministry of prayer, and clear and powerful teaching of the Word of God. Reconciliation among individuals and groups took place, and a wave missionary movement was evident throughout the islands. This resulted in a dramatic increase in the number of people coming into the church.¹¹

Revival also added greater meaning to the Christianity of the then-existing members of the church, many of whom were still living in a Christianity deeply mixed with their animistic religion. It is obvious that the SSEC had moved a long way from its primal state, as a result of continuous revival, and in-depth working by the Holy Spirit within the lives of its members. Consequently, the church today is not the same, numerically and spiritually, as it was 40 years ago.

Establishment of Theological Institutions

One of the vital developments that took place, as the SSEC endeavoured to attain spiritual formation, was the establishment of theological schools during the early 1960s, or earlier in some of the islands. Theological training has long been the greatest need of the SSEC as a young church. These institutions played a major role in the contextualisation of Christianity into the local culture by training leaders and local pastors, both in their roles of leading the church, and preaching and teaching the Word of God in the way that people could understand and apply to their local context.

Onepusu Institute, established in Malaita in 1905, was one of the first schools run by the missionaries. The institution taught the pastors how to govern the church, handle its finances, and helped to keep the rapidly-

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 169-176.

expanding number of local churches together.¹² Over the years, more Bible schools were established; some being upgraded to institute level. Onepusu Institute was elevated to college level, offering a Diploma in Ministry for pastors, and a Certificate in Women's Ministry for women, to cater for the changing demands of the fast-growing church. In giving several reasons for the continuance of the revival movement in the Solomon Islands, Strachan made the following comments:

Firstly, from its beginning, the church (SSEC) had been steeped in God's Word. The vital place of the Bible in the life of the Christian has been stressed, through to the present day. Early missionaries concentrated on producing simple Bible literature. Students were taught to read from books with a Bible background, and Bible study books were written to form the basis of messages given at Sunday services and daily Bible classes. These studies, with later additions, laid a firm foundation for the church. When revival came, national leaders were able to give a strong scriptural lead. This has largely accounted for the continuance of the movement.¹³

This quotation shows that the Word of God was an important component of the spiritual upbringing of the SSEC. To a certain extent, this is true of the church today. In fact, in the SSEC's almost 120-year history, God has been blessing the church in tremendous ways.

2. SPIRITUAL GROWTH POSSIBILITIES WITHIN THE SSEC

Taking the above line of reasoning into consideration, the question that follows is: where is the SSEC today, with regard to spiritual growth?

THE BIBLICAL CONCEPT OF SPIRITUAL LIFE AND ITS GROWTH TO MATURITY

In order to make a fair assessment of what should have been possible today, in terms of spiritual growth within the SSEC, it is important to begin

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 153-154.

¹³ George Strachan, *Revival: Its Blessing and Battles*, Lawson NSW: Mission Publications of Australia, 1984, pp. 2-3.

this section by dealing with what the Bible says about spiritual life and its growth to maturity.

Spiritual Life

The word “spiritual”, according to *Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, “refers to non-material things, including a spiritual body (1 Cor 15:44–46), and spiritual things, as distinct from earthly goods (Rom 15:27; 1 Cor 9:11)”.¹⁴ Essentially, “spiritual life”, as it is used in the Christian sense, has to do with God, and His ultimate purpose for one’s life. According to Keating, it is “the sum total of responses, which one makes to what is perceived as the inner call of God”.¹⁵ This definition by Keating is probably the best description of spiritual life, and implies two things.

Firstly, spiritual life, as indicated by the term “spiritual”, is an “inner” relationship with God, meaning that it is something of the heart. Contrary to those who are not Christians, every believer in Christ has an inner relationship with God. This speaks of the relationship that believers have with Him, through Christ, not only as His own chosen people (Eph 1:4), but also as His children (Gal 3:26). This relationship is important, because believers have all that God has in store for His children (Gal 4:7). This enables them to live a life that is worthy of His calling and purpose for their lives (Eph 4:1). Without this relationship, there is no such thing as “spiritual life” in Christianity.

Secondly, this spiritual life does not confine itself only in the inner being of a person; it also shows itself in his/her behaviour towards other people, and the world around. This relationship is actually the basis of all Christian relationships (1 John 4:20-21). So, the Christian life, in this respect, is actually an inner, devoted relationship with God, showing itself out in godly relationships with other people, and in living for His glory in this sinful world (1 John 5:3-4). Thus, a spiritual person may be defined as someone who has a relationship with God in Christ, and seeks to make

¹⁴ “Spiritual”, in *Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (1995), np, Ronald F. Youngblood, ed., Nashville TN: Thomas Nelson, [CD-ROM]; Available from the Logos Library System Software.

¹⁵ Thomas Keating, *The Heart of the World*, New York NY: Crossroad, 1981, p. 13.

God's call and purpose the centre of the daily choices and activities of his/her life.

Spiritual Growth

One of the truths about spiritual life is that it is a process. This means that it begins at a certain point and grows to certain levels of spirituality. Schaeffer makes it clear that "it is impossible even to begin living the Christian life, or to know anything of true spirituality, before one is a Christian".¹⁶ The Bible makes it clear that the Christian life begins when a person puts his trust in Christ and accepts Him into his life through faith.¹⁷ In discipleship, this is called "conversion", and, according to Malins, it makes up only five percent of one's entire Christian life. The other 95 percent is the process of spiritual growth, known as discipleship.¹⁸ This section of the article is concerned with the second and larger portion of the Christian life.

What is involved in spiritual growth? Firstly, God is the cause of all spiritual growth. One of the passages that clearly speaks of growth in Christianity in the New Testament (NT) is 1 Cor 3:7. Paul says, "The one who plants and the one who waters really do not matter. It is God who matters, because He makes the plant grow" (GNB).¹⁹ In this regard, Gill says, "He gives them their abilities, assists them in the exercise of their gifts, makes their ministrations useful, and He has, as He ought to have, all the glory."²⁰ Since God Himself is the source of spiritual life, He is essentially the One who can cause it to grow, because, out of Him, comes all the essentials for Christian growth (Gal 5:22-23). As Richards puts it, "God is the source and initiator of each positive quality in the believer."²¹

¹⁶ Francis Schaeffer, *True Spirituality*, London UK: Hodder & Stoughton, 1972, p. 15.

¹⁷ John 5:24; 6:40; Acts 16: 31; Rom 1:17; Gal 2:16.

¹⁸ Ian Malins, "Studies in Discipleship Part 1: Come Follow Me" (class notes, CLTC, 1977), p. 17.

¹⁹ All scripture quotations are from the NIV unless otherwise noted.

²⁰ John Gill, *John Gill's Exposition of the Entire Bible* (1690-1771), [CD-ROM]; Available from e-Sword Software.

²¹ Lawrence O. Richards, *A Practical Theology of Spirituality*, Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1987, p. 29.

According to this statement, no spiritual growth can take place without God's divine provision and enabling.

Secondly, Christians have a part to play in the growth of their own spiritual lives. With regard to this, Richards says, "Spirituality engages every human capacity, and call for an active commitment to God's ways. In this sense, we are each responsible for our own spiritual development."²² Richard's assertion of spiritual growth here can be understood in the light of a number of verbs used by the scriptures with regard to the believer's spiritual life. Among other things, believers are required to yield themselves to God, abide in Him, submit to His authority, obey the truth, seek those things which are above, deny themselves and take up their cross daily, endure hardship, and, above all, be filled with the Holy Spirit.²³ These actions may be costly, and are yet required of all believers, if they are to progress to spiritual maturity.

Spiritual Maturity

One's spiritual life ought to grow to spiritual maturity. What does it mean to be spiritually mature? Probably, the easiest way to understand this is to find out its opposite, or, by comparison, what spiritual immaturity is all about. The NT speaks, to a considerable extent, about spiritual immaturity. In 1 Cor 3:1-2, as a result of the problem of division in the church in Corinth, Paul addresses the Corinthian Christians as infants in the Christian faith, or as those who are unable to understand deep spiritual truths. In addressing the problem of spiritual gifts in the church, he urges them to stop thinking like children (1 Cor 14:20).²⁴ The author of Hebrews speaks of those who were only able to understand the elementary lessons of God's Word as spiritual infants (Heb 5:12). So, the opposite of spiritual maturity, according to these verses, is being unable to understand the deep spiritual truths of the Word of God, as a result of an untransformed worldview. Gill describes those who are spiritually mature as follows:

²² Ibid.

²³ Rom 16:13; 1 Cor 7:24; James 4:7; Gal 3:1; Col 3:1; Matt 16:24; 1 Tim 2:3; Eph 5:18 (KJV).

²⁴ Thinking of spiritual gifts as something to impress other people.

Such who have their understandings enlightened by the Spirit of wisdom and revelation; who have their senses exercised to discern between divine and human wisdom; and who are perfect in a comparative sense, having more spiritual knowledge and understanding than others.²⁵

However, spiritual maturity is more than just being able to understand spiritual truths, and having a God-centred worldview; it is also a state of life, showing itself out in daily God-centred living. In Eph 4:2, Paul speaks of spiritual maturity as living in humility, gentleness, patience, love, and tolerance with one another. In Eph 4:13-14, spiritual maturity is referred to as believers being united in the faith and knowledge of Christ, and not being easily led astray by deceitful doctrines. Spiritual maturity involves being grounded in the scriptures, through consistent study and examination of its truth, as the Bereans demonstrated in Acts 17:11. In Col 1:11, it means endurance, and giving thanks in all circumstances. So, in essence, spiritual maturity is well summarised by Paul in Rom 12:2. It means to conform oneself to God's standard of life, through the renewal of the mind, or a transformed worldview.

AN EVALUATION OF THE SPIRITUALITY OF THE SSEC AS IT IS TODAY

This section will give an assessment of the spirituality of the SSEC, as it is today, as compared to the definition of spiritual life, and growth to maturity, given above. The discussion in this section will cover four main areas.

Knowledge of the Truth

Recently, the theological foothold of the SSEC was tested, and proved to be rather shaky, with the rise of movements, such as the "Kingdom Movement" in Malaita, and another movement, purported to be headed by Revd Michael Maeliau. The Kingdom Movement, which is very much like a cargo cult, has been the cause of much confusion within a number of churches in Malaita and Honiara. According to Dauara, the movement has literally split a particular local church in Honiara, and destabilised several

²⁵ Gill, *John Gill's Exposition of the Entire Bible* [CD-ROM].

others.²⁶ Similarly, the Maeliau movement, whose vision is the bringing of the gospel, in the glory of the Lord, from the uttermost part of the earth (believed to be the Solomon Islands) back to Jerusalem, is also threatening the unity of the church. According to Florence Uiga, in north Malaita, the SSEC churches are divided into groups of conservative SSEC and members of the Maeliau movement.²⁷

The argument here is not about who is right and who is wrong; it is simply to point out that many SSEC adherents are biblically illiterate, as demonstrated by the way they have reacted to these latest developments. There is no doubt that many follow their spiritual convictions, probably as a result of a certain amount of spiritual manipulation by movement leaders, rather than reacting according to what they know to be the truth. The fact that the SSEC had been exposed to numerous biblical teachings, by the establishment of Bible schools throughout the islands, and sound the theological groundwork laid by the early missionaries,²⁸ should have put Christians into a state of uniformity and solidarity in their doctrinal position. In contrast, some church members have been easily led astray by incoming movements. Observing the reaction of some SSEC Christians to these recent developments, it is not safe to assume that the SSEC is in a spiritually-mature state. To say the least, this is a sign of an immature church, one that is still living on the elementary teachings of the Word of God (Heb 5:11-14).

Spiritual Unity

After all these years, the SSEC should have reached a state of being a true body of Christ. Paul's use of the term "one body" in Eph 4:4 (KJV), as a definition of unity within the church, shows that the body of Christ is made up of believers, who come from different places, races, cultural, and educational backgrounds, speaking different languages, and having different gifts. It consists of people with various personal differences, yet

²⁶ Jeremiah Dauara, CLTC first-year student from Central Malaita, interview by author, CLTC, July 14, 2009.

²⁷ Florence Uiga, CLTC third-year student wife from North Malaita, interview by author, CLTC, July 13, 2009.

²⁸ Strachan, *Revival*, pp. 2-3.

they function together as a harmonious whole. Even as it is important for Christians to maintain their own distinctiveness, their first loyalty must be to the body of Christ.

The SSEC, as a multi-racial denomination, should have been able to, at this point, clearly demonstrate unity-in-diversity within itself. Now, being a fourth-generation church, its members should be able to place their primary loyalty in being members of the body of Christ, rather than in their racial uniqueness and individual differences. However, the opposite is often the case, as reflected in the reaction of many SSEC members during recent ethnic tensions in the Solomon Islands. There was clear evidence of disharmony among many SSEC Christians. While it is important to acknowledge the fact that the church played an important role in the reconciliation process of the nation after the crisis, deep within people's hearts, there was an obvious sense of resentment and hard feelings.

Another example of the presence of spiritual disunity within the SSEC is seen in church membership preferences. In some places, the local church is more like a federation, where people prefer to become members of the church, containing people of their own language, or family group, or those with whom they share the same spiritual values. This is true, both in rural and urban settings. According to Raoiasi,²⁹ this is actually the case with many churches in Honiara, and even in his West Areare Associations. This is to say, that, within the SSEC itself, people have different spiritual values and religious preferences. This paints a bad picture of Christianity, as it is not to be expected of a church, known for being deeply rooted in the Word of God, and having numerous revival experiences.

A Mature Attitude

The concept of endurance ($\acute{\alpha}\nu\acute{\epsilon}\chi\omega = anechō$), as it was used by Paul in 2 Thess 1:4 and 2 Tim 4:3, means “to hold oneself up against”,³⁰ or “to put up with difficult situations”. One way a church demonstrates maturity is by enduring hardships. Suffering and hardship are common and inevitable

²⁹ Micah Raoiasi, CLTC fourth-year student from West Areare, interview by the author, CLTC, July 14, 2009.

in Christianity, but it is expected that all Christians should put up with these unpleasant circumstances (2 Tim 2:3).

After many years of church presence in the Solomon Islands, the SSEC, by now, should be able to demonstrate a mature attitude, by showing endurance in difficult situations. As has been cited above, many SSEC Christians would naturally resort to hostility, and even violence, during a political crisis. But this is just one of many examples of an immature attitude, demonstrated by many so-called Christians within the SSEC. Another example may be seen in Christians deserting the church for other denominations, or forming themselves into some form of Christian movement. Continuous backsliding, and demonstration of nominal Christianity, by members of the church may be seen as other examples. While it is true that there are many mature and enduring Christians within the SSEC, to say that many more would demonstrate immaturity during trying times is also a fair assessment of the spirituality of the church. This is to say that there are an excessively high number of immature Christians within the SSEC.

Purity

Youngblood defines purity as “the quality or state of being free from mixture, pollution, or other foreign elements”.³¹ As it refers to Christianity, it means being free from worldly contamination (1 Tim 4:7; Titus 2:12). The SSEC, at this stage, has been entrenched long enough to embrace the noble things of life, things that are worthy of acceptance within the Christian circle. Christians, especially the so-called mature Christians, should now be able to keep themselves from being contaminated by any form of immoral practice. They should now know where they stand, in terms of the activities, in which they are involved, stories they tell or listen to, materials they read, movies and pictures they

³⁰ James Strong, “Endure”, in *Strong’s Hebrew and Greek Dictionaries* (1890), np [CD-ROM]; Available from e-Sword Software.

³¹ “Purity”, in *Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, Ronald F. Youngblood, ed., Nashville TN: Thomas Nelson [CD-ROM]; Available from Logos Library System Software.

watch, companions they choose, and their business dealings, among other things.

It is worth noting here that the SSEC has quite a high standard of church life, order, and disciplinary procedures. However, the sad reality is that many Christians are still finding it difficult to put away some habits of the old life. Some are still struggling with avoiding dirty jokes and stories, pornography, bad companions, and dishonest business dealings, just to name a few. Many are still striving to quit certain habits that are closely connected with their animistic practices. In Guadalcanal, some Christians, including pastors, still practise their traditional means of obtaining luck, when taking hunting or fishing trips. According to Sibia,³² a traditional practice, still entertained by some Christians within his area, involves taking a certain type of plant or tree bark, believed to contain some form of magic, and giving them to the hunting dogs. Traditionally, it is believed that chances for successful hunting depend very much on this. This practice shows a mixture of animism and Christianity in the Christian's belief system. These are just hints of a number of impure habits that are still bothering many Christians within the SSEC today.

3. CASE STUDY: HYPOCRISY IN CHRISTIANITY (REV 3:14-22)

In trying to find out how God would have felt about the spiritual condition of the SSEC, in the light of the assessment made in the previous section, this section will introduce an exegetical case study on the life of the church in Laodicea, as seen in Rev 3:14-22. Laodicea, an important trade location during the time of the Romans, was known for its wealth and religion. According to the passage, the church received only condemnation, and no commendation, from Christ, as a result of the hypocritical Christianity that was prevalent among the believers. The aim of this case study is not to assume the worst of SSEC, but to draw the attention of its adherents to what God would have thought of the church, should it find its own spirituality somehow similar to that of the church in Laodicea.

³² Boaz Sibia, CLTC fourth-year student from Central Guadalcanal, interview by the author, CLTC, July 22, 2009.

The word “hypocrisy” comes from its noun, “hypocrite”, and, according to Orr, it means, “an actor”, taking the idea of someone playing the role of another in a drama or movie. Hypocrisy, in this sense, means “deceptive”, or “outwardly righteous and good, but inwardly insincere, unrighteous, or evil”.³³ Hypocrisy in Christianity was clearly highlighted by Christ, when He said of the Pharisees, in Matt 23:28, “In the same way, on the outside, you appear good to everybody, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and sin” (GNB). It is a Christianity that appears genuine from the outside, but is really not so on the inside. This case study will look at hypocrisy, under the following headings: The Nature of Hypocrisy, The Reality of Hypocrisy, and The Danger of Hypocrisy.

THE NATURE OF HYPOCRISY (REV 3:15-16A)

In Rev 3:15-16, the Lord repeatedly describes the spiritual life of the Laodicean Christians as “neither cold nor hot”. According to Keener, this description had contextual relevance to Laodicea, as there was no natural water supply. The only supply available was that piped in from hot springs, about six miles to the east, and, like any cold water that could be obtained from anywhere within the same distance, the water would be “neither cold nor hot” by the time it reached Laodicea. Because of its neither-cold-nor-hot condition, the water was often the cause of ill health for the Laodiceans. This lack of safe drinking water in Laodicea had long been the standard complaint of its residents, many of whom were wealthy, and, no doubt, lived a sophisticated lifestyle.³⁴ The Lord used this as a fitting example of how He was feeling about the spiritual condition of the church in Laodicea. He said, “Thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot” (KJV). But what does He really mean by this? Gill puts it this way:

A lukewarm professor is one that serves God and mammon; that halts between two opinions, and knows not what religion is best, and cares little for any, yet keeps, in a round of duty, though indifferent to it, and contents himself with it; and is unconcerned about the life

³³ John Orr Sr, ed., “Hypocrisy”, in *International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, nd [CD-ROM]; Available from e-Sword Software.

³⁴ Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, Downers Grove IL: IVP Academic, 1993, p. 774.

and power of godliness, and takes up with the external form of it; and has no thought about the glory of God, the interest of Christ and truth.³⁵

This description of the nature of hypocrisy shows what was true of the church in Laodicea would fit into what is known as “nominal Christianity” in many churches, including the SSEC, today. Hughes regards such religion as good for nothing, as far as Christ is concerned.³⁶ Should God feel comfortable with the current level of spirituality within the SSEC today? This is a question that the SSEC, as a church, needs to seriously consider.

THE REALITY OF HYPOCRISY (REV 3: 17)

The second thing to be discussed here is the true condition of those who profess to be Christians, but have nothing in their lives to show that they have been transformed by a relationship with Christ.

Miserable and Pitiful

In Rev 3:17, the Laodicean Christians boasted of being rich.³⁷ In their blindness, they saw themselves as having been sufficiently religious. Of this, the Lord says, “you do not know how *miserable and pitiful* you are!” This statement gives a picture of someone in desperate need, and portrays the reality of the Laodicean hypocrisy. Even though they claimed to be richly religious, the reality was that they were miserably and pitifully poor. The word “miserable”, in the King James Version, is “wretched”, and carries the idea of someone being “sunk into deep affliction or distress”, either from want, anxiety, or grief.³⁸ The true spiritual condition of the Laodicean church is not what they have persuaded themselves to believe; it is that they have actually sunk deeply into an affliction in their spiritual lives, without being conscious of it. It is hoped that the SSEC is not like this.

³⁵ Gill, *John Gill's Exposition of the Entire Bible* [CD-ROM].

³⁶ Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *The Book of the Revelation*, London UK: IVP, 1990, p. 65.

³⁷ Scholars have different opinions as to whether this refers to material or spiritual riches.

³⁸ Noah Webster, “Miserable”, in *Webster's 1828 Dictionary of American English* (1828), [CD-ROM]; Available from e-Sword Software.

Poor, Naked, and Blind

In the same verse (17), in response to the Laodiceans' boastfulness, the Lord says, "you are poor, naked, and blind" (GNB). The term "poor" takes on the idea of what a Jew would call "poor in the Law", a reference to the Laodiceans' poverty in "purity and spiritual insight".³⁹ The word "blind", here, may refer to their being unable to see their own imperfections, and to figure out in which direction they are heading as Christians. The term "naked" has to do with unrighteousness. Sin stripped mankind of God's righteousness (Rom 6:20; 1 Pet 2:24).⁴⁰

Hypocrisy is a state of spiritual nakedness, and poverty in life. By comparison, what is the true condition of the spirituality of the SSEC? How would God look at the church today?

THE DANGER OF HYPOCRISY (REV 3: 16B)

Why is it dangerous for the body of Christ to live a hypocritical life? In Rev 3:16b, the Lord says; "So, because you are lukewarm . . . I am about to 'spit' you out of My mouth" (GNB). Wall says that spitting symbolises God's negative verdict of those who are unfaithful to Christ, who is the standard of His (God's) future judgment.⁴¹ The word "spit", here, literally means "to vomit",⁴² and speaks of destruction, or the literal removal, of Laodicea as a church. Interestingly, Smith tells of how the Mohammedan invaders destroyed the city sometime later, making it a "scene of utter desolation".⁴³ This shows how uncomfortable Christ was with the spiritual condition of Laodicean church.

A church that does not live up to Christ's expectations is a disgrace to Him, and faces the danger of being rejected, and removed from its status as a

³⁹ Onesimus Ngundu, "Revelation", in *Africa Bible Commentary*, Tokunboh Adeyemo, ed., Nairobi: World Alive Publishers, 2006, p. 1554.

⁴⁰ Albert Barnes, *Albert Barnes' Notes on the Bible* [CD-ROM]; Available from e-Sword Software.

⁴¹ Robert W. Wall, *New International Biblical Commentary: Revelation*, Peabody MA: Hendrickson, 1991, p. 86.

⁴² *The NIV Study Bible*, Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1995, p. 1929.

⁴³ William Smith, ed., *Smith's Bible Dictionary*, Nashville TN: Thomas Nelson, 1997, [CD-ROM]; Available from Logos Library System Software.

church. The reason for this is simple: God does not take pleasure in, and will remove His presence from, those who dishonour His name. While it is true that God is full of love for His people, it must also be understood that He is holy, and this holiness does not allow Him to compromise with sin.

What is the condition of the relationship that exists between God and the SSEC at present? As is obvious in what the Lord did to the church in Laodicea, a church will continue to remain as a church, only if it continues to maintain the level of spirituality required of it. The SSEC, as a church, needs to be careful that it does not become *an organisation*, just like any other secular entity in the world today.

4. THE CAUSES OF SPIRITUAL IMMATURITY WITHIN THE SSEC

There are a number of reasons why the SSEC is yet to fully achieve the desired spiritual status it always has had the potential to achieve. This section will discuss five examples.

TRADITIONAL INFLUENCES

As a Melanesian church, the SSEC has been greatly influenced by the traditional Melanesian upbringing of its members. This section will cover two factors.

The Melanesian Wantok System⁴⁴

The initial idea behind the setting up of the South Sea Evangelical Mission was, “to bring into being churches, which, from the outset, are self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating”,⁴⁵ a process known as indigenisation. But, while the idea to have the indigenous people of the Solomon Islands take over the full responsibility of their own church is honourable, the process itself has its own weakness, as it often clashes with the Melanesian *wantok* system. According to Arua and Eka, “the *wantok*

⁴⁴ A system that places high value on people who are closest biologically, linguistically, culturally, regionally, etc. When dealing with others, especially in making decisions and choices, preferential treatment will always be given to *wantoks*.

⁴⁵ Griffiths, *Fire in the Islands*, p. 159.

system is a way of life for the Melanesian people”⁴⁶ It is a way of showing unity among a certain group of people.

As it relates to the growth of the SSEC, the sad reality is that it often undermines the neutrality of the administrative and leadership functions of the church. This is true, not only within the local level, but also within the regional and the national levels of church government. This is often the case when one person, family, or ethnic group of people happens to control most, sometimes all, of the key leadership positions within the church. It sets the multi-racial denomination back, especially when it comes to equal opportunities in ministry, training, and other aspects of church life, as the system becomes characterised by the spirit of domination, and elements of discrimination and nepotism. This makes the church seem like a business entity, as the decision-making processes would often be monopolised by its dominant figure(s). This situation has sometimes been the cause of infighting, backsliding, and division, resulting in breakaways by some factions of the church to other denominations, or to form alternative ministerial movements.

Syncretism

Another undermining factor of spiritual growth within the SSEC, in connection with Melanesian tradition, is the problem of syncretism within the church. Because of the strong past-animistic experiences of many of its members, the SSEC, like other Melanesian churches, struggles with this problem. Some of them are converts from pure animism, whose former lives have been very much part of their animistic belief system – where gardening, fishing, hunting, and other aspects of life are all part of their religion. Tippett gave the following account about the spiritual encounter that took place when Christianity first came into the Solomon Islands:

When Christianity arrived, the religious encounter was not between a pagan deity and the Christian God, Creator, and ruler of the Universe, and Father of Mankind. The encounter had to take place on the level of daily life, against those powers which dealt with the

⁴⁶ Daniel Ako Arua and John Eka, “Wantok System”, in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 18-1 (2002), p. 7.

relevant problems of gardening, fishing, war, security, food supply, and the personal-life crises.⁴⁷

According to Tippett, the spiritual encounter that took place in converting Solomon Islanders to Christianity had to do with the elements concerning their daily human livelihood, an encounter that is still bothering many SSEC Christians, even now. Murray affirms that many Christians from his area are still holding on to some of their animistic fears today. Some do not eat certain types of fish or animals, believed to be the emblem of their tribes. Some still live in fear of, or are practising, witchcraft and sorcery, even as Christians. Many still believe in protection by traditional means.⁴⁸ Ruhia also confirms having seen similar practices among Christians in his church. For example, he claims that if a person is sick, and is taken to the hospital for treatment, or to a pastor to be prayed for, and no healing occurs, the next natural option is to go to witchdoctors for healing.⁴⁹ As mentioned earlier in this article, some Christians are still holding to their traditional ways of obtaining success in hunting and fishing.⁵⁰ These examples illustrate the existence of syncretism within the SSEC today.

FOREIGN INFLUENCES

In addition to the influences of the people's own traditions, the spiritual growth of the SSEC, to a certain extent, has also been hampered by influences from outside the people's traditional way of life. The most-common example of this is the unavoidable adoption of the Western way of life into the people's local culture. The Solomon Islands, like other developing countries of the world, is quickly changing its society today, for better or worse, because of this influence. White men brought with them their own way of life, introducing things, such as education, health services, transportation, communication, their style of clothing, and much

⁴⁷ Allan R. Tippett, *Solomon Islands Christianity*, London UK: Lutterworth Press, 1967, p. 5.

⁴⁸ Thomson Murray, CLTC third-year student from East Malaita. Interview by author, CLTC, August 30, 2008.

⁴⁹ Nicholas Ruhia, CLTC fourth-year student from East Central Guadalcanal. Interview by author, CLTC, July 21, 2009.

⁵⁰ Refer to p. 18, above.

more. Many of these things, although completely strange to the people's way of life, are good and beneficial to them.

Some aspects of Westernisation clearly have negative influences. However, there are still other, which are subtle and difficult to discern. One of these is Western formalism. For example, in the SSEC, marriage is commonly considered to be holy, when it is held formally inside a church building, and the newly-wedded couple wears Western clothing.⁵¹ An unholy marriage is considered to be one held outside of the church, for couples who have been living together for some time before their wedding. In this type of marriage, the couple wears ordinary clothes. While the idea behind this is noble, in that it discourages people from living together before marriage, it also promotes the notion that religious activities, which are done in a formal way, or inside the church, are more Christian, and holier, than those that are not. Consequently, this creates in people the idea that Christianity is more a formal in-church activity than an inward change of heart, and a daily demonstration of the life of Christ, through activities in the home, school, workplace, or playing field. Furthermore, it makes Christianity irrelevant to many people, as they prefer to remain within their own cultural setting. In other words, one has to add a certain amount of Western influence to faith, in order to become a true Christian. This issue is a real problem within the SSEC today, as many Christians tend to believe that they become more spiritual and holier in this way, while, really, they are only becoming more formal and Westernised in their lifestyle. Certainly this is not Christianity.

NOMINALISM

Nominalism is yet another factor that is detrimental to the spiritual development of Christians within the SSEC. A nominalist, as described by Kendi, is "one, who professes faith and membership to a particular denomination, but fails to live according to his/her profession of faith".⁵² Agosautu observed, during the recent ethnic tension in the Solomon

⁵¹ This marriage is normally held between couples, who have not lived together prior to marriage.

⁵² Wayne Kendi, "The Doctrine of Justification: The Remedy to the Ills of the Melanesian Church", in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 21-2 (2005), p. 83.

Islands, that many SSEC Christians, including some senior pastors, were either directly or indirectly involved in the crisis. Some even died as a result of it.⁵³ In another example, Uiga asserts that gambling is quite a concern in the church, where he once served as a pastor. Some Christians would join fraudulent money schemes almost without hesitation.⁵⁴ These are classic evidences of the existence of nominalism within the SSEC, making it one of the biggest hindrances to the spiritual growth of its members.

THE OVERLAP BETWEEN THE CHURCH AND TRADITIONAL LEADERSHIP

In many local churches within the SSEC, there is often a leadership overlap between the church and the traditional community. For example, a church elder may also be the chief or an elder of the community. The same may be true of the pastor and the other leaders of the local church. This overlap in leadership between the church and the community is largely because of the strong influence of Christianity within the wider community. While there is a need to promote Christian values in society, people feel that it is also important to maintain some aspects of their traditional values, so as not to lose their heritage and identity. Because of this, the church often runs into the situation of having leaders, who are leaders of the community as well.

Strengths

There are good things about having church leaders, who are also leaders of the traditional community. Some of these are: it unites the church with the general community; avoids having too many different leaders within the same community; and may minimise suspicion and misunderstanding between the church and the wider community. It may also promote unity and common understanding, bringing the needed support of the larger community into the church. On the spiritual side of things, this so-called leadership overlap gives the opportunity for Christians to impact their own culture. Community leaders, who are Christians or leaders of the church,

⁵³ Venasio Agosautu, CLTC fifth-year student from South Guadalcanal. Interview by author, CLTC, August 30, 2008.

⁵⁴ Pastor Jessie Uiga, CLTC third-year student from Malaita. Interview by author, CLTC, August 30, 2008.

are the best people to be used in dialogues that will see the truth of the scriptures contextualised into the traditional culture and belief system of the people.

Weaknesses

While the overlap in leadership between the church and the community has some advantages, it has some weaknesses, also. Firstly, it undermines the sanctity of Christian leadership, because a Christian leader is called of God, only for His holy purpose (1 Tim 6:11, 20). Secondly, it weakens leadership in general, as there will often be conflicts of interest, resulting in compromises for, or against, the values of either side of one's leadership responsibilities. According to Taku,⁵⁵ this is true of some churches in Guadalcanal, where pastors and elders have often compromised their stand as church leaders in order to give prominence to traditional values. Another reason why this style of leadership is not helpful is that, it will see Christian leaders working in partnership with unbelievers. Furthermore, this overlap in leadership often leads to the abuse of power within the church. Community leaders, who are also leaders of the church, may be tempted to take into the church their "big-man" mentality,⁵⁶ using it to promote their own status and reputation. Even though church leaders must maintain some control over God's people, they really are the servants of the church, for true leadership requires an attitude of servanthood (Matt 3:11).

It is obvious, by looking at the above discussion, that the weaknesses of the overlap in leadership between the church and the traditional community outweighs its strengths, thus, it is one of the contributing factors to the slow progress of the spiritual development of the SSEC.

LACK OF SPIRITUAL APPETITE

Another factor that contributes to the slow progress of spiritual growth of the SSEC is that many members of the church do not have the desire for

⁵⁵ Hezekiah Taku, CLTC fifth-year student from Guadalcanal. Interview by author, CLTC, July 5, 2009.

⁵⁶ A term used of the act of assuming very important status within the society or community.

spiritual things, such as the Word of God, prayer, personal time with God, fellowship with other believers, and telling others about Christ. Their value system is largely based on worldly things, rather than on those things that will make them grow spiritually. There are two major reasons for this.

Lack of Proper Teaching

Firstly, some Christians do not have an appetite for spiritual things, because they have very little or no idea about their value, resulting from a lack of proper teaching within the churches. Despite having a strong theological foundation, it seems that the Word of God has neither been consistently, nor systematically, taught within many SSEC churches for many years. It appears that Christians have rarely been taught facts about their own spiritual life, and their growth to maturity, making the process of Christian growth not well understood. Consequently, Christians do not take time to see if they are progressing spiritually, because, to them, it is not an issue at all.

Preoccupied With Other Things

A story, adapted from Michael Green's *Illustrations for Biblical Preaching*, goes something like this:

One night, a mother fixed a special meal for her family: It was everyone's favourite meal. The aroma filled the house, and, as the children came in from playing, they could hardly wait for dinner to begin. The last child appeared only a few minutes before dinner time, and sat through the meal without eating, even though he especially loved those foods. Why? Because he had filled himself up on peanut butter at a friend's house. In settling for something good, he had lost his appetite for the best.⁵⁷

This story illustrates what seems to be true of many SSEC Christians today. They prefer to settle for some seemingly good things, such as sport, business, land issues, and current affairs; and, as a result, they do not have the desire for what is best for their spiritual development.

⁵⁷ Michael P. Green, "Appetite", in *Illustrations for Biblical Preaching*, Grand Rapids MI: Baker Book House, 1989, CD-ROM available from Logos Library System Software.

5. HOW CAN THE SSEC ACHIEVE THE DESIRED SPIRITUAL STATUS?

The discussion made of the spirituality of the SSEC in this article shows that the church is still trailing behind its age, insofar as spiritual growth is concerned. While the fact that the SSEC has demonstrated quite a desirable spiritual progress over the years must be acknowledged, it seems clear that it has never fully achieved its potential, due to reasons discussed previously. In this section, a number of suggestions will be given as to the measures SSEC can take, in order to achieve this growth.

REPENTANCE FROM DEAD RELIGION – CASE STUDY (REV: 3:18)

This section of the article features the last part of the case study given under point three: Hypocrisy in Christianity – the solution to hypocrisy. In reference to Rev 3:18, repentance was the solution to the problem of hypocrisy in Laodicea. Since the problem dealt with in this article is basically a spiritual one, the first and foremost solution to it must also be a spiritual one.

In this verse, Rev 3:18, the Lord said to the church in Laodicea, “I counsel you to buy from Me *gold* refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and *white clothes* to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness, and *salve* to put on your eyes, so you can see”. Barnes elucidates that gold is a symbol of true religion, white cloth is the emblem of purity and salvation, and salve speaks of the gospel, which enables people to clearly see the beauty of God, and the way of salvation.⁵⁸ All along, as observed by Tenney, the Laodiceans had been putting their trust and confidence in their own goodness and riches,⁵⁹ putting them into a dangerous position in life. However, as in His grace, the Lord summons them to buy from Him the riches they ought to have possessed.⁶⁰ In fact, the Lord’s rebuke, according to Wilcock, is a sign of His love for the church.⁶¹ Since God Himself is the author of true religion, He is the only one who can mend

⁵⁸ Barnes, *Albert Barnes’ Notes on the Bible* [CD-ROM].

⁵⁹ Merrill C. Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation*, Grand Rapids MI: Baker Book House, 1963, p. 6.

⁶⁰ Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *The Book of the Revelation*, London UK: IVP, 1990, p. 66.

⁶¹ Michael Wilcock, *The Message of Revelation*, Leicester UK: IVP, 1975, p 57.

lives, even if they seem beyond repair. All that was required of the Laodiceans was to recognise it, and turn from their hypocrisy, and call to God for spiritual healing and restoration.

If the SSEC is to reach its desired spiritual status, and to fully achieve the mission that God has intended it to accomplish, there is a need for Christians to repent and turn away from anything that is not of God, and ask for His forgiveness, healing, and restoration.

IN-DEPTH THEOLOGICAL TEACHING

Part of what is hindering the spiritual progress of the SSEC today is attributed to the fact that many of its members are biblically illiterate. Many have fallen victim to strange movements coming into the church, simply because of their inability to distinguish right from wrong. While the fault could be placed upon individual Christians, the SSEC, as the body responsible for their spiritual well-being, must assume a certain amount of the blame. It must see to it that its members are well acquainted with the truth. In order to achieve this, the following needs to be done.

Clear Biblical Statement of Beliefs

Firstly, the SSEC should have a clear biblical statement of beliefs for its members. This statement should clearly stipulate the doctrines and beliefs held by the church, with clear biblical backing. The statement would serve, not only as the standard for behaviour and practices within the church, but also as a guard against beliefs and practices that are foreign in nature, from creeping into, and destabilising, the unity and stability of the church. All SSEC pastors should have access to this statement, and should teach it to their local congregations on a regular basis. This will help members know the theological basis of their faith, and what is expected of them, as adherents of their particular church. It will subsequently promote uniformity, and minimise the variety of beliefs and practices within the church itself. Such material must be developed to also cater for the inevitable changes that are forcing their way into the church today.

Upgrade Theological Institutions

Secondly, there is a pressing need for the SSEC to upgrade the theological training given in its Bible institutions to Diploma of Theology (Dip.Th.)

and Bachelor of Theology degree (B.Th.) levels. At the moment, students have to spend enormous amounts of money to attend overseas training, in order to acquire these qualifications. The need for the SSEC to upgrade the level of training given in its current institutions lies in the fact that the church needs to have as many qualified pastors as possible serving in its local churches. Many pastors currently have very little or no theological training at all, as indicated by the increasingly high level of biblically-illiterate Christians within the churches today. As Stott says, “For the health of the church depends very largely on the quality, faithfulness, and teachings of its ordained ministers.”⁶² The SSEC needs to ensure that its pastors are intellectually and spiritually equipped, if it is to expect good results.

CONTEXTUALISATION

As the traditional customs and cultural values of the people are very much the cause of syncretism within the SSEC, the church would do better, in alleviating this problem, with the assistance of adequate contextualisation. Contextualisation, according to Hitchen, is the art of applying the message of the scriptures into the contemporary life setting. It involves a careful study, and clear understanding, of what the scriptures say and mean to their original hearers, and explaining it in such a way that it will have the same impact in the lives of its modern hearers, without taking away valuable aspects of their cultural values and identity.⁶³ While it is true that many Melanesian traditions and values cannot be merged with Christian values, it is feared that some of the practices, presumed within the SSEC to be biblical, are really a Western way of doing things.

An example of this is the way people ought to dress as Christians. While it is important for Christians to dress decently, there also exists the danger that Christianity may be confused with Westernisation. In this case, the notion would be that those in the urban centres are more Christian than those in the remote villages, as they would almost always be in a better position to dress in a Western style. This is a form of deception, which

⁶² John Stott, *The Message of 1 Timothy and Titus*, Leicester UK: IVP, 2006, p. 89.

⁶³ John Hitchen, “Culture and the Bible: The Question of Contextualisation”, in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 8-2 (1992), p. 30.

creates the impression in some people, that they can never be good Christians because of their comparatively uncivilised state of living. Both extremes are erroneous notions of the Christian faith, and contribute, to some extent, to the misunderstanding about Christianity within the SSEC. Christianity must be relevant to people, in their culture. One must feel as good a Christian in his own cultural setting as others do in their cultural settings. He must be able to understand and apply the Word of God, as he is, without having to become like someone in another culture (Gal 3:6). This can only come about through proper contextualisation.

RELEVANT APPROACH

Another thing the SSEC needs to do, in order to move forward spiritually, is to take into consideration the unavoidable changes the church is facing today in its leadership and pastoral approaches. Life, and its challenges, is different today from what it was 40, or even 20, years ago. The two extremes must be avoided to ensure that the church is both relevant and strong in the world today.

Too Conservative⁶⁴

Churches need to avoid dwelling too much on the past way of doing things. Some leaders within the SSEC do not readily accept changes in their local churches, believing that the only right way of doing things is what was introduced into the church by the early missionaries. Some of the things, introduced by the missionaries, who seemed like absolutes in the SSEC churches, today, are: singing from the SSEC hymn book, teaching from the SSEC Bible Outline and Lesson Help materials, and church programs being run on Thursdays and Sundays only. Some churches feel that using modern musical instruments, and praise and worship songs, during times of worship, or introducing other activities, such as cooking and sewing in the women's program, are not the SSEC way of doing things, and therefore, must not be encouraged. Some people even believe that *Thursday* is the only legitimate day for the women's program, because it has always been associated with that day since the missionary era. Others feel that

⁶⁴ The term "conservative", as it is used here, carries the idea of being too traditional in practices, or wanting to stick to the ways of doing things that are irrelevant in today's world.

activities, such as sports and businesses, are not good for Christians to be involved.

However, just because something has been done a certain way in the past, does not necessarily mean that it is the absolute, or the only correct, way of doing it. On the other hand, just because something was not done in the past, is not an adequate reason to prevent it from being introduced today, if it is relevant and helpful to the church's growth. While the ways things were done in the past were not bad, some of them may not be suitable in today's world. The SSEC must ensure that the necessary changes be allowed into the church, in order to effectively address the changing needs of the people under its pastoral obligation.

Too Progressive

The other extreme that the SSEC needs to avoid is the tendency to get carried away by changes. Some changes are good, but others can be detrimental to the church. For instance, while it may be acceptable to use modern musical instruments, and sing new praise songs, during worship, the SSEC hymns must not be altogether discarded. Furthermore, young people must be encouraged not to use musical instruments in church, as though they are using them during social activities, or in a nightclub. Similarly, while it may be courteous for Christians to wear a certain type of dress at home, work, or during sports, it may not be very modest for ladies to wear men's clothing, or excessively fancy clothes, during church services, or other religious gatherings. It is important that the SSEC has its own standards regarding issues affecting the life of the church, so that changes do not take people by surprise, or go to extremes. Moreover, it is also important to note that the SSEC is a Melanesian church; church rules and practices must meld themselves with the Melanesian way of life.

CONCLUSION

Even though the SSEC has been steadily progressing, in terms of its spiritual development over the years, there is still a lot of room for improvement. Due to a number of reasons, the church is yet to reach the level of maturity it ought to have reached at this point. Historically, the SSEC has had the benefit of much missionary input into the church, which

includes clear fundamental teaching of the Word of God, through the establishment of Bible schools throughout the islands, and the adoption of a very high standard of church life and order. The church has also experienced inward changes, brought about by continuous revival over the years – just to mention a few of many blessings the Lord has bestowed on the church.

However, the evaluation made of the spirituality of the church shows that the SSEC is still struggling spiritually, as reflected in the inability of many of its members to cope with the real tests of life. Recent spiritual struggles, which the church has experienced, seem to indicate that many Christians within the SSEC are still unable to distinguish truth from error, or show endurance and loyalty to the true body of Christ, especially during a crisis. These signs indicate the need for the church to do more, in order to move itself forward to where it should be, as one of the major agents of spiritual change in the Solomon Islands. The recommendations given in this article may be seen as a roadmap to what the church has not been able to achieve over the years. They are not exhaustive, but can help improve the situation, if given due attention. Long live SSEC!

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BIBLICAL PROSPERITY: ABELAM CHRISTIANS IN THE EAST SEPIK PROVINCE

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[In the printed edition of this article, on page 69, starting with the third last line of the second paragraph (in this online edition, the last three lines of text on page 69), the words “against the idea” were omitted from before “that being poor means living in sin, and being rich indicates no sin”. This then conveyed a meaning opposite to that which was intended. The three missing words have now been reinserted for this edition. – Revising ed.]

INTRODUCTION

Prosperity theology has been, and continues to be, a hot topic of preaching and teaching within many Assemblies of God (AOG) churches in Papua New Guinea (PNG), including the other Pentecostal denominations. Sadly, this teaching has had tremendous negative consequences among AOG Christians throughout PNG. The prosperity message is an issue debated in many churches today because of its impact on believers.¹

This article will give a proper biblical perspective of prosperity to the AOG church within the Abelam² societies of Maprik District in East Sepik Province (ESP). It will seek to show that Abelam Christians must come to

¹ The churches include the wider Bible-believing churches of both the evangelical and the mainline denominations.

² The Abelam are a people group in the Maprik district of East Sepik Province. They make up three local-level governments (LLGs), namely: Maprik-Wora, parts of Albiges-Mambleip, that is Mambleip and Yamil-Tamaui. The Abelam also make up about three-quarters of the total population in the Maprik electorate, and speak the Ambulas vernacular. The Ambulas languages they speak are samu, mamu, and kamu dialects.

understand that biblical prosperity has a broader application, including quality relationships, spiritual growth, and social health.

1. THE CHANGING BELIEFS OF ABELAM CHRISTIANS CONCERNING PROSPERITY

The cultures and beliefs of the Abelam have changed dramatically from its traditional practices to the contemporary ways, in a similar manner to the various changes being experienced throughout PNG. This section will explain the changes that have occurred.

PAST ABELAM CULTURAL PATTERNS OF PROSPERITY

The Abelam established patterns of experiencing prosperity within their cultural setting that were linked to their traditional lifestyles. They followed their traditions, and experienced prosperity, spiritually and socially.

Spiritual Aspects

The Abelam prospered spiritually, as they pledged allegiance to, and interacted with, their forefathers' spirits.³ Forbes rightly states, "The people of Papua New Guinea were strong in their animistic ways of life. They believed in spirits and ceremonies to appease them."⁴ Forbes further says, "He [speaking of those, such as an Abelam] strongly believes in the power of the spirits of his ancestors to give him success with hunting, growing yams, and keeping good health."⁵ Consequently the ancestral spirits controlled the Abelam way of life.

³ These spirits lived in rivers, mountains, trees, and within each different clan's territories, whether up in the mountains, down in the valleys, deep within the jungles, or beside the rivers and creeks.

⁴ George Forbes, *A Church on Fire: The Story of the Assemblies of God of Papua New Guinea*, Mitcham Vic: Mission Mobilisers International Inc, 2001, p. 18.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

Harmony with the Spiritual World

Traditionally, the Abelam people were disciplined, and observed the laws of the land, as they devoted themselves to the deities, to experience successful living. They paid homage, and were loyal, to the spirits, thus experiencing harmony with the spirit world. They trusted⁶ in the spirits, through their allegiance and devotion. Everything that manifested physically was directed by its spiritual realm. Hence, relating harmoniously with the spirit world involved pleasing the spirits in various ways: firstly, by right belief in the spirits and rituals; secondly, by fasting and abstinence from certain foods and sexual intercourse; and thirdly, by following restrictions on entering forbidden areas and strict observance of certain taboos.⁷ Failure to observe those laws resulted in the spirits' punishment of the offenders.⁸ Thus, the Abelam won the approval of the spirits, when these laws were closely observed. On the other hand, they believed the land "feels angry, upset, and dissatisfied", whenever any misconduct was easily sensed, because it had a special connection with the people.⁹ Therefore, as Melanesians, total well-being of wealth, health, and prestige was regraded as the fruit of a right relationship with the spirits.¹⁰

The Abelam observed strict rules of separation between men and women. According to Nikulak men lived in separate houses, abstained from sex, and refrained from getting close to menstruating women and menstrual houses.¹¹ Contact with women defiled the men, angered spirits, land, and

⁶ The faith the Abelam had in the ancestral spirits was not mere mental assent. They did not just believe, but knew things would come to pass. Their faith was a reality.

⁷ Paura Nikulak, of Kinbangua. Interview by author, January 27, 2009.

⁸ Barbara Huber-Greub, "Land in the Abelam Village of Kimbangua", in *Sepik Heritage: Tradition and Change in Papua New Guinea*, Nancy Lutkehaus, ed., Bathurst NSW: Crawford Press, 1990, p. 282.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ David Vincent, "Can We Be Both Rich and Christian?", in *Catalyst* 19-4 (1989), p. 353.

¹¹ Paura Nikulak, of Kinbangua. Interview by author, January 27, 2009. Other special sites include ceremonial houses, central plazas, in special times of the year: ceremonial yam gardens [for men], or domains that are open to both sexes, but in which increased attentiveness is demanded (e.g., burial places, sleeping places, "pathways of the ceremonial yam", waters, stones, tabooed bush, and hunting grounds).

the ceremonial yams.¹² Consequently, Abelam men became strong, powerful, and skilled in cultivating ceremonial yams. They became brave warriors and lived long lives. Furthermore, blessings¹³ were imparted to those who faithfully observed these laws. Moreover, the Abelam were guaranteed the spirits' protection, through magic and spells.

Social Aspects

Social prosperity was seen in living harmoniously with others, and with the land, which were interwoven together. Cooperation was an essential part of living within Abelam societies. "Cooperation makes it possible to give help to others, strengthens relationships between friends and relatives, gives pleasure, and allows people to know other cultivators nearby."¹⁴ Hence, cooperation includes relationships between men and women within and among other neighbouring villagers.

Raising children, gardening, and traditional ceremonies were the focus of the relationships between men and women. Although the men regarded women as inferior, they were, nevertheless, superior in some aspects. Both men and women made gardens,¹⁵ but the women were mostly responsible for household crops.¹⁶ They also reared pigs, did housework, and wove *bilums*.¹⁷ The men hunted, built, and carved, but were heavily involved in cultivating ceremonial yams. They were also dominant in the rites of

¹² These were not ordinary yams, but like spirits, who were thought to have feelings. The yams sensed their planters' lives.

¹³ Michael Wama, of Kinbangwa. Interview by author, January 29, 2009. The blessings were released to the sons by their fathers, uncles, or the elders. These blessings constituted words of prosperity and success in gardening, hunting, fighting, and leadership. In addition, these blessings were also given to others who were obedient to their fathers, and followed their instructions.

¹⁴ Huber-Greub, "Land in the Abelam Village of Kimbangwa", p. 277.

¹⁵ Gardening included clearing of the bush and making fences.

¹⁶ Household crops are those for daily consumption, like sago, banana, taro, and potato. The women have nothing to do with growing of yams and *mami*. The latter food crops belong to men, and it was their responsibility.

¹⁷ String bags for carrying food, firewood, and little children, including babies. The *bilums* vary in size, depending on what is to be carried.

initiation, building ceremonial houses, and “industrial arts”.¹⁸ The women were highly esteemed, because they reared pigs and cooked for the yam cultivation and ceremonies. Huber-Greub asserts:

The whole complex of ceremonial yam cultivation, for the villagers of Kimbangwa, involves men and women in a way typical of the Abelam, occupying a sort of middle ground in the contradiction between considering women worth nothing at all and considering them worth much more than men.¹⁹

Relationships between immediate family members and relatives were also evident among the same age group, or within the different genders.²⁰

Relationships between villages were very strong among the Abelam, and made it possible for the yam ceremonies,²¹ which were the climax of tireless work and sacrifice by the men in planting ceremonial yams.²² “Dissension is believed to anger the *tambaran*, and yam spirits, and affect the growth of yams”,²³ because yams were wealth themselves, and the commodity of the Abelam economy. Thus, the Abelam’s prosperity²⁴ was all connected to the ceremonial yams.

¹⁸ All art objects, such as elaborately patterned plaits for the ceremonial house, carvings, and paintings, as well as decorated pots and bone daggers, are made by men for their ceremonial life. <http://www.everyculture.com/Oceania/Abelam.html>, Internet; accessed July 24, 2009.

¹⁹ Huber-Greub, “Land in the Abelam Village of Kimbangwa”, p. 279.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 283.

²¹ In the yam ceremonies, the Abelam assemble all the yams they have harvested for display at the *ame*, or hamlet, for others to see. These ceremonial yams are neatly dressed with coloured paints, and tied onto poles.

²² Jeremiah Wama, of Kimbangwa. Interview by author, January 29, 2009. Hard work goes together with fasting, and applying special fertilisers to the yams, so they grow longer and bigger in size. The longest yams grow between two and three metres long.

²³ Kayberry M. Phyllis, “Political Organisation among the Northern Abelam: Anthropological”, in *Anthropological Forum* (Vertical File, CLTC Banz Library, 1965-1966), p. 352.

²⁴ Both the spiritual and social prosperity of the Abelam people centred around the ceremonial yams.

Trading pigs and yams is the culmination, as “long yams, together with pigs and shell rings, constitute wealth: the acquisition of a fine harvest brings prestige to the owners of yams, and enables them to play their part in ceremonial activities, which involves wealth distribution”.²⁵ The hosts²⁶ challenge²⁷ the *kawas*²⁸ to repay the yams and pigs when distributing wealth. These ceremonies strengthened relationships, through ceremonial exchanges of pigs and yams, commendation,²⁹ and verbal encouragement, to inspire the harvesting of ceremonial yams.³⁰

A successful harvest of ceremonial yams brought their grower fame, power, and authority over others, who failed in planting them. The *singsing* added flavour to the yam ceremonies, and the *kawas* returned feeling satisfied.³¹ Phyllis comments on the Abelam, “on the whole, they are a good-tempered people, and a premium is placed on kindness and courtesy”.³²

²⁵ Phyllis, “Political Organisation among the Northern Abelam”, p. 339.

²⁶ The hosts are the owners of the yams, and the village that hosts the yam ceremony.

²⁷ The challenges cause an Abelam man to think seriously about hard work, being innovative and creative, and to carefully observe the rules and rituals, so he can also harvest huge ceremonial yams to make repayment during the next harvest season. The Abelam’s hard-working ability was activated through this challenge, and that is one of the reasons why they are strong, working people.

²⁸ *Kawas* are the exchange partners from other neighbouring villages, who challenge each other by giving them pigs and yams. The *kawas*, who receive the pigs and yams, must repay the exact worth of pigs and the size of yams when their turn comes. Otherwise, they will be regarded as unfit, and shamed by other yam planters.

²⁹ Praise and approval were given to those who harvested the huge ceremonial yams.

³⁰ Paura Nikulak and John Tika, of Kinbangua. Interview by author, January 27, 2009. They also stated that ceremonial yams bring wealth into the village that is expert in its cultivation. The yam cultivators of different villages go with pigs, and shell money, as fees for the training they will receive from the experts. Therefore, they build up the wealth of the clan and community.

³¹ The *kawas* will not go back empty-handed, but will return with food and meat, betel nuts and *brus* (smoke/cigarettes), inspirations and challenges for harvesting big ceremonial yams.

³² Kayberry M. Phyllis, “The Abelam, Sepik District, New Guinea: A Preliminary Report”, in *Oceania* 11 (Vertical File, CLTC Banz Library), p. 238.

Hence yams are significant to the Abelam, because: firstly, they are the king of all the garden foods; secondly, they bring wealth into the community; thirdly, they cause people to live rightly; and fourthly, they are used for resolving conflicts, in providing hospitality, and, finally, to bring fame and prominence.³³ Therefore, yams were the source of Abelam prosperity.

Harmony with the Land

The Abelam survive by cultivating gardens. Hence, they have high regard for their land.³⁴ “The soils in the area yielded considerable harvests of different species of yam and taro.”³⁵ As horticulturists, the Abelam know the practice of garden cultivation³⁶ and management. For the Abelam, it is good soil, combined with correct cultivation techniques, and knowledge of magic, that leads to a successful harvest.³⁷ The elderly people recall the olden days when there was plenty of food for everyone, because every man cultivated his gardens, as established by the ancestors, by using spells and magical ritual.³⁸

However, the land refused to produce food if the “laws of the ground were not followed”.³⁹ It was known in Abelam that “land itself has ears to hear and eyes to see”.⁴⁰ Therefore, an Abelam, who planted crops on another’s plot of land, harvested nothing. The owners’ ancestral spirits “smell” when someone has no right to plant on the land, and consequently harm him, or

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ W. R. Stent, *The Development of a Market Economy in the Abelam* (Boroko PNG: Institute of Applied Social and Economic Research, 1984), p. 129.

³⁵ <http://www.everyculture.com/Oceania/Abelam.html>; <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abelam>, Internet; accessed July 12, 2009.

³⁶ The right season for making gardens, the choosing of sites, and various seasons for planting different food crops, were all known by the Abelam.

³⁷ Huber-Greub, “Land in the Abelam Village of Kimbangwa,” p. 278.

³⁸ J Whiteman, “Change and Tradition in an Abelam Village”, in *Oceania* 36-2 (1965), p. 105.

³⁹ Huber-Greub, “Land in the Abelam Village of Kimbangwa”, p. 280.

⁴⁰ The land in Abelam was like a man who knew its owners. Any person who tried to remove his neighbour’s boundaries, or made gardens on another person’s or clan’s piece of land, harvested nothing but thorns and thistles.

his family, or his harvest.⁴¹ Breaking other taboos also affected the land. A common taboo includes illegal trespassing on the land and river.⁴² Nevertheless, the Abelam cultural patterns of prosperity have greatly changed, due to outside influences.⁴³

THE MISSIONARIES' GOSPEL AND ITS IMPACT

The coming of AOG missionaries to Maprik had a great influence upon the Abelam⁴⁴. Although they experienced prosperity, within their traditional concepts, spiritually and socially, the Christian gospel, brought by the missionaries, affected the Abelam's traditions and cultural worldview, transforming them in many areas. However, the most significant included ancestral spirit worship, sorcery, and tribal fights.

Spiritual Transformation

Ancestral Spirit Worship. Indeed, the Abelam people experienced breakthrough and deliverance from the bondage of ancestral spirit worship, as a result of the gospel. Forbes mentions some of the prominent men among those who broke the bondage of strong taboos associated with ancestral spirit worship.⁴⁵ God used them as pioneers of the AOG movement throughout ESP. The allegiance and devotion these men had with the ancestral spirits for success came to an end. They were freed from all the lies, deceptions, and fear imposed on them, through their cultural belief. They now had a transformed worldview about the different deities

⁴¹ Huber-Greub, "Land in the Abelam Village of Kimbangwa", p. 276. The land knew its owners, and they must be consulted prior to gardening on another's piece of land. The ancestors, and the important spirits, knew the primary users of the clan's land.

⁴² It was believed the Abelam women destroy the ground or expose it to danger. If a man slept with a woman at the wrong time, came into contact with her menstrual blood, came into contact with the blood of a younger person of either sex, and crossed the land or river, then the ground and the spirit beings "on the other side", withheld their cooperation from the guilty person, because, as the Abelam believe, they feel angry, disappointed, and discontented.

⁴³ These influences came as the result of the civilisation brought in by the explorers, government officials, and missionaries.

⁴⁴ Forbes, *A Church on Fire*, tells the story of how the gospel transformed the Abelam, East Sepik Province, and PNG as whole. This Pentecostal church started within the land of the Abelam in 1948, and then spread out to the nation.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

that controlled the environment in which they lived. Hence, their allegiance shifted from the ancestral spirits to the worship of the true living God. However, it took time for the Abelam to sever connections from ancestral worship.

Sorcery. Killing among the Abelam was evident and common, through witchcraft and sorcery. This unethical behavioural lifestyle started to change slowly, as the light of the gospel penetrated their land. The sorcerers and magicians began to respond to the gospel message, by neglecting those evil practices, and surrendering their lives to Christ. They also destroyed the things used for committing sorcery and witchcraft, and started to abandon the rituals they followed.

Tribal Fights. Fighting between enemy villages also lost its grip on the Abelam, by the power of the gospel. The villages in Abelam had warring tribes, with whom they did battle. They also had alliances with other villages to fight their enemies.⁴⁶ Consequently, the gospel brought two enemies together, and diminished clashes between rival villages. Nevertheless, “cultures are not sealed off in containers from time and change. They emerge from and into history.”⁴⁷ This is true in Abelam, as important principles and laws of the forefathers are evident today. Yet, the transformation of traditions and cultures are undeniable, according to the changes that have happened, and are even escalating in this contemporary world. Therefore, “the culture you see in an Abelam village today is a composite of the history of the Abelam people, and their contact with neighbouring villages and foreigners.”⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Phyllis, “Political Organisation among the Northern Abelam”, pp. 362-363. Phyllis noted that Kalabu had its friends and enemies in tribal fights. The enemies of Kalabu were Kinbangua, Waikakum, Malba, and Makutukum, and its friends were Jame, Lonem, and Bainyik. This was similar to other Abelam villages that had their own friendly alliances and enemy tribes.

⁴⁷ Diane Losche, *The Abelam: A People of Papua New Guinea*, Sydney NSW: Australian Museum, 1982, p. 14.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

Social Transformation

This section will discuss the social transformation, experienced by the Abelam through the gospel. The social changes that took place, with the coming of the gospel, include health, education, business, and relationships.

Health. Aid posts were established, along with the preaching of the gospel. This resulted in transformation in the physical lives of the Abelam people. Prior to the advanced medical assistance, brought by the missionaries and the government, only the strongest survived. Previously, many people died of sicknesses and diseases, such as malaria, pneumonia, dysentery, and diarrhoea.⁴⁹ Many babies died, and the infant mortality rate was high,⁵⁰ but, with the commencement of immunisation programmes, it was greatly reduced.⁵¹ Consequently, the Abelam improved in their health, grew stronger physically, and lived long lives.

Education. Teaching literacy was vital to the Abelam so they might be able to read God's word.⁵² Hence, the missionaries set up adult literacy schools. They also built vocational schools. Those who completed primary education, through the government-established schools, went on to the vocational centre⁵³ for training in basic farming, husbandry, poultry, sawmilling, mechanical repairs, carpentry, and woodwork.⁵⁴ Consequently, some Abelam people have achieved higher education through both mission and government schools.

Economic Activities. Business and economic activities bloomed as the Abelam were transformed mentally by the gospel, and through educational programmes established both by the mission and the government. The Abelam were the first to introduce coffee into Maprik. Kundimbui states, coffee was first introduced to the Abelam people of Maprik District in the

⁴⁹ Forbes, *A Church on Fire*, p. 61.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁵³ Hayfield was a second major mission centre, stationed 5 km south of Maprik town.

⁵⁴ Forbes, *A Church on Fire*, p. 209.

early 1950s as a pioneer cash crop, and the first seedling garden was established in Kinbangua village, for seed production and distribution to the farmers for cultivation.⁵⁵ Rice⁵⁶ and peanuts⁵⁷ were other crops introduced into Maprik, but gold panning started in 1937.⁵⁸ “By the mid-1970s, an enormous increase in Abelam income from cash cropping and market goods was found throughout the area.”⁵⁹ Hence, business activities flourished, and expanded into transportation and retail shops.

Relationships between different villages and people improved, through the inception of health and education, and with the blooming of economic activities. Although the former traditional ties among the various villages remained, the changes coming into Abelam societies transformed their relationships.

The Cargo Movement. Although the social and economic transitions were evident, how Western goods came to be was a mystery among the traditional Abelam people. Their existence was unexplained by the Westerners.⁶⁰ Therefore, with the traditional belief of a better life that would be ushered in by the ancestors, some Abelam people advocated cult

⁵⁵ Cornelius Kundimbui, Service Provider for Coffee Industry Corporation. Interview by author, July 8, 2009.

⁵⁶ Stent, *The Development of a Market Economy in the Abelam*, pp. 122-123. “In 1950, under the influence of the Department of Agriculture, and the wartime leader Simogun, a few villages established small ‘experimental’ plantings of hill rice in communal gardens. . . . The establishment of a central rice mill at Bainyik in 1957, together with the reorganisation of RPSs in 1956 and 1957, led to a marked improvement in the marketing of rice.”

⁵⁷ Stent, *The Development of a Market Economy in the Abelam*, p. 125. “At the beginning of 1956, the prospect of a market for peanuts opening up in Australia led the Department of Agriculture to encourage growing of peanuts for cash in the Sepik District.”

⁵⁸ Losche, *The Abelam*, p. 14. Gold was discovered in the 1930s. “In 1937, the township of Maprik was built for the Australian administration to accommodate the influx of gold seekers, and it became the centre from which the Australians governed the surrounding area.”

⁵⁹ Stent, *The Development of a Market Economy in the Abelam*, p. 142.

⁶⁰ Includes the missionaries, government workers, and business people.

thinking. They joined the famous Peli cult movement, which emerged in the Sepik around 1969.⁶¹

For some, the gospel was the secret, hidden from them by the missionaries, for experiencing a better life of wealth and prosperity.⁶² Other factors also greatly influenced cargo mentality: firstly, the fluctuations of the coffee price; and secondly, the exploitation by outsiders in the coffee industry.⁶³ The failure of rice was another factor.⁶⁴ Hence, the simplest way to experience the millenarian⁶⁵ life was through the cult. Hueter asserts, “The Europeans are deceiving us that they are getting their wealth through hard work.”⁶⁶ Consequently, they abandoned cultural practices and initiation, in preparation for the advent of cargo, as prophesied by some prominent men.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, some Abelam people retained their initiation ceremonies into the 1970s, in order to resist the temptations of the cargo cults.⁶⁸ Therefore, either abandoning the cult movement, or retaining initiations, was all geared towards future prosperity.

⁶¹ R. J. May, “Political and Social Change in the East Sepik: A Research Agenda”, in *Sepik Heritage: Tradition and Change in Papua New Guinea*, Nancy Lutkehaus, ed., Bathurst NSW: Crawford Press, 1990, p. 178.

⁶² Vincent, “Can We Be Both Rich and Christian?”, p. 354. Vincent stated this about Melanesians generally, which also includes the Abelam.

⁶³ Bryant Allen, “The Importance of Being Equal: The Colonial and Postcolonial Experience in the Torricelli Foothills”, in *Sepik Heritage*, p. 194. “The people claimed (were suspicious) that outsiders; SPCA coffee buyers, Port Moresby bureaucrats, and Chinese businessmen, were exploiting them, and was widespread and deep-rooted among the people.”

⁶⁴ May, “Political and Social Change in the East Sepik: A Research Agenda”, p. 178.

⁶⁵ “Millenarian” or “millenarianism” were terms used by writers who addressed the problems of cargo cults. Millenarianism is the doctrine, or belief, in a future 1,000-year age of blessedness, beginning with the second coming of Christ. However, the Abelam believed that a better life of blessedness would come.

⁶⁶ D Hueter, “The Battle for Abundant Life in The church and the Adjustments Movements”, in *Point 1* (1974), p. 129.

⁶⁷ Paul Roscoe and Richard Scaglione, “Male Initiation and European Intrusion in the Sepik: A Preliminary Analysis”, in *Sepik Heritage*, p. 417, quoting M. S. Dewdney, “The Maprik Open Electorate”, in *Papua New Guinea Elections 1964*, D. G. Bettison, C. A. Hughes, and P. S. van der Veur, eds, Canberra ACT: Australian National University Press, 1965, p. 184.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 417.

WESTERN PROSPERITY GOSPEL

Mombi asserts, “The prosperity gospel became popular in the mid-1990s, after the collapse of the PNG economy in 1996.”⁶⁹ This gospel turned the Abalam Christians away from the previous prosperity they had enjoyed, especially the spiritual fellowship with the Lord. The prosperity gospel stressed material wealth and riches, and that has shipwrecked the Abalam believers’ faith. Therefore, prosperity, as defined by its proponents, will be addressed here.

Health-Wealth Prosperity

“Prosperity gospel, or prosperity theology, is a theological current that states, if certain principles are followed, the expiatory work of Christ guarantees to all who believe, divine healing, the riches of this world, and happiness without suffering.”⁷⁰ Its proponents teach that “by virtue of Christ’s death, the believer is entitled not only to salvation, and the sanctifying indwelling of the Holy Spirit, but also to the material benefits of health and prosperity.”⁷¹ Success in relationships and good health are also emphasised.⁷² Thus, the health-wealth blessings come as different aspects of Christian living.

⁶⁹ George Mombi, “The Impact of the prosperity gospel in the Assemblies of God churches of Papua New Guinea”, in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 25-1 (2009), p. 39. Mombi further mentions that world-renowned evangelists from the West (Benny Hinn, Morris Cerulo, Creflo Dollar, and Tim Hall from Australia) were invited to preach in PNG. During their visits, the prosperity gospel was introduced. It then took a foothold in the churches in Port Moresby, and spread through the church networks across the country.

⁷⁰ J. N. Saracco, “Prosperity Theology”, in John Corrie, ed., *Dictionary of Mission Theology: Evangelical Foundations*, Nottingham UK: IVP, 2007, p. 322.

⁷¹ Andrew Perriman, ed., *Faith, Health and Prosperity: A Report on “Word Faith” and “Positive Confession”*: Theologies by The Evangelical Alliance (UK) Commission on Unity and Truth among Evangelicals, Carlisle UK: Paternoster Press, 2003, p. 19.

⁷² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Health_and_Wealth_Gospel#Health, Internet, accessed; July 24, 2009.

Financial Prosperity

Prosperity theology teaches that the blessings of material wealth come with salvation, and they should be experienced by any born-again person. Preachers of prosperity theology promote the idea that God wants Christians to be “abundantly” successful in every way, with special emphasis on financial success.⁷³ It is God’s desire that financial blessing take precedence over other aspects. Believers should have a lot of money in their pockets and in their bank accounts.

Some advocates argue that Jesus and the apostles were also financially wealthy,⁷⁴ owning homes, having monetary resources, and businesses. Their arguments are based on: (1) Jesus’ ability to travel without working to earn a living for three years; (2) and the apostles’ references to owning homes;⁷⁵ (3) Jesus had a treasurer;⁷⁶ (4) Jesus consorted with the upper echelons of society; and (5) the businesses that the apostles owned.⁷⁷ This contradicts the traditional view of Jesus, who is often viewed as being a poor, wandering teacher.⁷⁸

Material Prosperity

The blessings of a spiritual life must also be seen in wealth that consists of good houses and expensive cars. Tilton said, “Being poor is a sin, when God promises prosperity. New house? New car?”⁷⁹ Accumulating material wealth, in the form of expensive houses and cars, is what God

⁷³ David van Biema and Jeff Chu, “Does God Want You to Be Rich”, in *Time Magazine*, September 18, 2006, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1533448-1,00.html>, Internet; accessed 24 July, 2009.

⁷⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Word_of_Faith. *Atlanta Journal Constitution* 10/22/2006; <http://www.ajc.com/living/content/living/faithandvalues/stories/2006/10/18/1022SLJESUS.html>, Internet; accessed July 24, 2009.

⁷⁵ www.harvestchurch.org/Jesus%20was%20not%20poor.htm, Internet; accessed 24 July, 2009.

⁷⁶ <http://www.letusreason.org/wf15.htm>, Internet; accessed July 24, 2009.

⁷⁷ http://rawstory.com/news/2007/Nightline_The_Gospel_of_bling_0118.html, Internet; accessed July 24, 2009.

⁷⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Word_of_Faith, Internet; accessed July 24, 2009.

⁷⁹ Gary Giley, <http://www.rapidnet.com/~jbeard/bdm/Psychology/char/more/w-f.htm>. Giley, quoting Robert Tilton, in “Charismatic Chaos”, p. 285, Internet; accessed July 24, 2009.

desires of believers. Thus, proponents say, nothing creates more joy in the average believer than the promise to make them wealthy, as evidenced by opulence, luxury, and riches.⁸⁰ Nevertheless, financial and material prosperity alone cannot make a believer joyful, without being healthy.

Health Prosperity

Firstly, the proponents of the prosperity gospel believe that being prosperous includes good physical health. They want to feel well enough to enjoy their financial and material prosperity.⁸¹ Therefore, sickness is not supposed to be experienced by believers. Christ has provided for physical healing at the cross. Consequently, not only are Christians saved from sin, but they are promised a life of health and healing, as God's children and joint heirs with Christ.⁸² As Hinn asks, "If healing is part of the atonement, why do Christians get sick?" He further explains, "The Bible declares that the work was done 2,000 years ago. God is not going to heal you now – He healed you 2,000 years ago."⁸³ Thus, good health is prosperity in your body.

Secondly, prosperity involves healthy relationships. Success in relationships, and good health, should also be expected.⁸⁴ A good marriage is a prosperous relationship between spouses. It also involves living harmoniously within the family, and among one's neighbours.

PRINCIPLES OF EXPERIENCING PROSPERITY

Prosperity gospel teaches and assures that the health-wealth blessing can be enjoyed by its adherents, if only they apply certain principles.⁸⁵ The principle of faith is the key to bringing forth the financial, material, and health blessings. Faith opens the hidden blessings within the spiritual

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid., Giley, quoting Kenneth Copeland, in "Healed . . . to Be or not to Be:", p. 25, Internet; accessed July 24, 2009.

⁸³ Ibid., Giley, quoting Benny Hinn, in "Rise and be Healed", p. 44, Internet; accessed July 24, 2009.

⁸⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prosperity_Theology, Internet; accessed July 24, 2009.

⁸⁵ Gary Giley, <http://www.rapidnet.com/~jbeard/bdm/Psychology/char/more/w-f.htm>, Internet; accessed July 24, 2009.

realm for them to materialise. They say faith is a force applied to bring forth the desired results. It is believed that faith works like a mighty power or force, through which anything wanted – health, wealth, success, whatever, is obtained.⁸⁶ However, this force is only released through the spoken word. The power discharged to accomplish the desires of faith is released orally.⁸⁷ Hagin states that this principle operates by this simple formula: “Say it, do it, receive it, and tell it.”⁸⁸ Faith operates through “positive confession”.⁸⁹ Positive confession releases power, and activates the force of faith to work towards bringing the desired thing that was “named and claimed”.⁹⁰ It is believed words can be used to manipulate the faith-force, and, therefore, create what scripture promises (health and wealth).⁹¹

The proponents of prosperity theology founded their teachings on spiritual “principles” or “laws” that function according to the principles or laws, which operate through faith in God.⁹² Saracco states that these spiritual “principles” or “laws” lay down the grounds for the five main doctrines about prosperity theology. Firstly, there is the law of blessing. Prosperity theologians say the main reason for the covenant God made with Abraham was to bless him materially. Hence, Christians, as spiritual sons of Abraham, are heirs of the covenant blessing.⁹³ Secondly, the law of sowing and reaping states that whatever is put into God’s hands will be

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Rom%2010:&version=9.htm>, Internet; accessed July 24, 2009.

⁸⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Word_of_Faith. A favourite term in the Word of Faith movement is “positive confession”. It refers to the teaching that words have creative power. What you say, Word of Faith teachers claim, determines everything that happens to you. Your confessions, especially the favours you demand of God, must all be stated positively, and without wavering, Internet; accessed July 24, 2009.

⁹⁰ <http://www.rapidnet.com/~jbeard/bdm/Psychology/posit.htm>. “Name it” and “claim it” is another term used with positive confession by the proponents of the prosperity gospel, Internet; accessed July 24, 2009.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Saracco, “Prosperity Theology”, p. 323.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 323.

reaped 100 times, as interpreting Mark 10:29-30.⁹⁴ Thirdly, the law of faith is translated as having the faith of God. Instead of having faith in God, Mark 11:22 is translated as having the faith of God. God created everything out of nothing, by activating His faith.⁹⁵ Thus, everything wanted will be achieved through the act of faith. The fourth is the law of the proclaimed word. The formula is “proclaim to have”. Mark 11:23-24 is used to support this idea. It is interpreted as “the force of faith is released by words”.⁹⁶ Confession is made, based on the word before possession. Finally, there is the law, based on the expiatory work of Christ. In His redemptive work on the cross, Christ provided both divine healing and material wealth.⁹⁷

2. A CHANGING ATTITUDE TOWARDS PROSPERITY IN BIBLICAL TIMES

This section will discuss how prosperity was understood within the biblical cultures. It begins with the Old Testament (OT) attitude towards prosperity, and how it progressed to New Testament (NT) times.

PROSPERITY IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Prosperous living was God’s plan for mankind before the creation. God demonstrated His desire to bless humanity with the abundance of the material world, from the beginning of creation (Gen 1:28-31).⁹⁸ It originated in Eden, when God created man in His own image and likeness, and blessed him with the ability to have dominion over His creation. However, what was the Creator’s intent in prospering the first human beings?

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 324.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ <http://yuling.wordpress.com/2007/02/07/wealth-and-poverty-in-the-bible-part-1/.htm>,

Internet; accessed July 24, 2009.

ORIGINAL MEANING

The word “blessed” first appeared in Gen 1:22,⁹⁹ and was later used 1:28¹⁰⁰ when God blessed both the animals and the couple He created. Its Hebrew root is בָּרַךְ = *bārak*,¹⁰¹ meaning “to bless” or “pronounce a blessing”. בְּרָכָה = *b'ērākā*¹⁰² is the blessing that “generally denotes a bestowal of good, often in contrast to the curse and . . . used of the formula of words, which constitutes a blessing”.¹⁰³ Thus God blessed them and commanded them to increase in number. God blessed them to prosper. The word prosperity has its origin in Middle English from Old French *prosperer*, from Latin *prosperare*, meaning “doing well”.¹⁰⁴ It means to succeed in material terms, but, within the context of Gen 1:22, 28, prosperity would mean doing well in fruitfulness and dominion.

PURPOSE

Firstly, God commanded Adam and Eve to be fruitful, and increase in number, and, secondly, He authorised them to have dominion over all creation.¹⁰⁵ God blessed them to prosper in fruitfulness and dominion: fruitfulness in producing likeness after their own kind, and dominion in being good stewards of creation. Blomberg states, God fashioned humans, uniquely, and gave them dominion, or stewardship, over all the earth.¹⁰⁶ Moreover, fellowship was an essential blessing they were to enjoy with

⁹⁹ God blessed them, and said, “Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the water in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth.” All scripture quotations are from the NIV unless otherwise noted.

¹⁰⁰ God blessed them, and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number, fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

¹⁰¹ Spiros, Zodhiates, ed., *The Hebrew-Greek Study Bible*, Chattanooga TN: AMG Publishers, 1996, p. 1918.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ J. D. Douglas, N. Hillyer, F. F. Bruce, D. Guthrie, A. R. Millard, J. I. Packer, D. J. Wiseman, eds, *New Bible Dictionary*, 2nd edn, Wheaton IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1982, p. 144.

¹⁰⁴ *The New Oxford Dictionary of English*, p. 1489.

¹⁰⁵ Creation includes the animal kingdom, the birds, the living creatures of the aquatic world, and the entire material world.

¹⁰⁶ Craig L. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Material Possessions*, Leicester UK: Apollos, 1999, p. 34.

one another and with God. Humans, as image bearers of God, rule over the material world, and have a qualitatively-unique capacity for interpersonal relationships among themselves and with the Godhead.¹⁰⁷ The Garden of Eden functioned as the meeting place between the Lord and the first human couple.¹⁰⁸ Fruitfulness and stewardship became evident in this fellowship. Hence, they were empowered to prosper in fruitfulness; stewardship, and fellowship.

Patriarchal Times

With the calling of Abraham, the definition of prosperity changed from thriving in fruitfulness, dominion, and fellowship.¹⁰⁹ God promised to bless Abraham for a purpose. These promises, with some variation in wording, are repeated throughout Genesis, not only to Abraham, but to Isaac and Jacob.¹¹⁰ However, God called Abraham, to bring blessing, rather than curse, upon the nations of the earth, as it was His desire.¹¹¹ Thus God blessed Abraham so he would prosper. God blessed him with land, animals, and material blessings. He was a wealthy man.¹¹² Most importantly, Abraham was promised the blessing of descendents.¹¹³ After Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were also blessed with livestock and material substance.¹¹⁴ God blessed the patriarchs in many ways,¹¹⁵ including

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ T. Desmond Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land*, Carlisle UK: Paternoster Press, 1995, p. 21.

¹⁰⁹ The Lord had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people, and your father's household, and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and, whoever curses you, I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

¹¹⁰ Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches*, pp. 35-36.

¹¹¹ Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land*, p. 21.

¹¹² "So Abram went up from Egypt to the Negev, with his wife, and everything he had, and Lot went with him. Abram had become very wealthy in livestock and in silver and gold."

¹¹³ Gen 15:5.

¹¹⁴ Gen 30:43; 32:9, 12; 39:2.

¹¹⁵ Even though spiritual prosperity is not stated, it should be noted that Abraham was called God's friend (James 2:23). Abraham, through his faith in God's mercy, had a relationship with God, and thus thrived spiritually through obedience. This is clear throughout the OT, with the people God called.

wealth. However, “Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob all take turns sojourning in Canaan, but none are allowed to remain there permanently.”¹¹⁶

Although the patriarchs prospered materially, it should be noted that Abraham, through faith, was called God’s friend.¹¹⁷ He had a relationship with God, and thus prospered spiritually, as he is called “the father of faith”. This is clear throughout the OT, with the people whom God called. Therefore, “Bergmann says blessing [and prosperity] is concerned with the sphere of growth, well-being, success, and permanence”,¹¹⁸ which includes all aspects of life.

Possession and Use of Wealth

All wealth and material possessions, in the patriarchal times, came from God, and were viewed as part of His covenant blessing with Israel, as covenanted through Abraham. However, He gave them laws to observe, in order to prosper and regulate wealth. Faith and obedience were prerequisites for blessings and wealth. But wealth was created through work.

The patriarchs’ wealth was a group wealth. Smith asserts, “Patriarchal wealth, for the most part, could be called either ‘private’ or ‘communal’, for the patriarch owned it, in the sense that he controlled it, but his family [also owned it], in the sense that every member had a right to its use.”¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches*, p. 36.

¹¹⁷ James 2:23.

¹¹⁸ Ulrich Bergmann, “Old Testament Concept of Blessing”, in *Point 1* (1974), p. 177.

¹¹⁹ Charles Ryder Smith, *The Bible Doctrine of Wealth and Work in its Historical Evolution*, London UK: Epworth Press, 1924, p. 28.

Exodus

Israel prospered abundantly in Egypt, especially in population growth, despite the slavery they suffered.¹²⁰ They multiplied and spread as oppression increased.¹²¹ Consequently, God used Moses to deliver Israel from slavery and take them into Canaan – the Promised Land, abundantly flowing with milk and honey.¹²² However, Israel plundered Egypt of all its wealth before going into the land of Canaan. The Egyptians willingly gave the Israelites everything they asked for: articles of gold and silver, clothing, herds, and flocks.¹²³ They plundered Egypt “as if they had conquered them in battle”.¹²⁴ Blomberg says, “Plundering the Egyptians shows that God wants His people to go into their land with a measure of wealth.”¹²⁵ Nevertheless, Israel was going to a new place to settle, which had no gardens and homes. This wealth helped them all the way through, before they finally settled in Canaan as God’s covenant people. Therefore, it was according to God’s covenant with Abraham.¹²⁶

Laws on Wealth

The Ten Commandments were given to Israel, after they had plundered Egypt and left. They “stressed the immorality of theft and covetousness, and these prohibitions were considerably expanded elsewhere in the law”.¹²⁷ Given with the commandments, were various laws on wealth. They included management ethics, the right use of riches, and the giving of tithes and offerings of all their silver and gold, animals, and produce from the land. “Lev 25:20 reminded the Israelites that all their possessions ultimately belonged to the Lord, and were merely leased to them, so they might be good stewards.”¹²⁸ They were reminded to remember the Lord,

¹²⁰ “Now Joseph, and all his brothers, and all that generation died, but the Israelites were fruitful and multiplied greatly, and became exceeding numerous, so that the land was filled with them.” Ex 1:6-7.

¹²¹ Ex 1:12.

¹²² Deut 11:9.

¹²³ Ex 12:35-36.

¹²⁴ Kenneth L. Barker, ed., *NIV Study Bible*, Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2008, p. 93.

¹²⁵ Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches*, p. 38.

¹²⁶ Gen 15:14.

¹²⁷ Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches*, p. 40.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

who brought them out of Egypt, and empowered them to prosper. Hence, Israel was cautioned to use honest scales in weighing,¹²⁹ and was warned against accepting bribes,¹³⁰ and against stealing from the poor.¹³¹

Conquest, Settlement, and Monarchy

Israel's prosperity and success in Canaan centred on the principles of obedience and disobedience,¹³² yet God's covenant still remained. Although His sovereignty was evident, Israel had the possibility to experience success and prosperity continually. Israel was responsible for farming the land to either graze animals, or plant gardens, and obey the commandments. Israel conquered other heathen nations,¹³³ and was successful in military strength and intelligence. They prospered in military weaponry, chariots, and horses. Once the people of Israel were settled in Palestine, leaving the nomadic way life for an agricultural life, their ideas of wealth changed.¹³⁴ Hence the Israelites demanded a king rule over them instead of judges. King David, Solomon, and other successive kings of Israel, also became enormously wealthy, partly due to their covenant faithfulness.

The monarchy would also co-opt the best of the fields, vineyards, and groves of land, and demand a tenth of the produce and flocks, so, in essence, God's people became slaves of the kings.¹³⁵ With the establishment of economic ties with other nations, tax was imposed on Israel. Redford states, "By the time of Solomon, policies of taxation and servitude closely paralleled Egyptian practices."¹³⁶ Hence, those who

¹²⁹ Lev 19:35-36.

¹³⁰ Ex 23:8; Deut 16:19.

¹³¹ Deut 15:7-8.

¹³² Deut 28 gives detailed instructions about the blessings for obedience (1-14), and curses for disobedience (15-68).

¹³³ Hittites, Jebusites, Canaanites, Perrizites.

¹³⁴ John C. Crawford, *Your Money and God: From an African Perspective*, Dodoma Tanzania: Central Tanganyika Press, 1974, p. 24.

¹³⁵ Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches*, p. 54.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, Blomberg, quoting D. B. Redford, "Studies in Relation between Palestine and Egypt During the First Millennium BC: The Taxation System of Solomon", J. W. Wevers and D. B. Wevers, eds, *Studies on the Ancient Palestinian World*, Toronto Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1972, pp. 141-156.

could afford little became poor, while others grew rich. Their disobedience led to poverty, pain, and struggle. But the faithfulness of a covenant-keeping God to the people, who were frequently faithless, overshadows any concerns with merely socio-economic issues.¹³⁷

Job, Psalms, and Proverbs

The “wisdom literature”¹³⁸ has much to say about prosperity. Some prominent wealthy men’s attitudes towards wealth here are very interesting. “Job was man of great wealth and high social position.”¹³⁹ He was also blameless and upright, feared God, and shunned evil.¹⁴⁰ However, with divine permission from God, Satan came, in a single day, and attacked his oxen and donkeys, destroyed all his flocks, herds, and camels, and struck down all his children, including the servants.¹⁴¹ Job himself was the last person Satan afflicted.¹⁴²

He was stripped of his wealth, children, and health. Nevertheless, he fell to the ground and worshipped God, acknowledging Him as the giver of wealth, blessing, and life. Job acknowledged the sovereignty and goodness of the Lord at a time when all his wealth and riches were gone. Consequently, Job viewed wealth and riches as: firstly, blessings from God; secondly, temporal things; and thirdly, valueless, compared to God.

Psalms and Proverbs hold material well-being in tension with justice for the poor.¹⁴³ They ask God for blessings (Ps 128; Prov 13:21),¹⁴⁴ yet are concerned about justice for the poor (Ps 82:3-4; Prov 29:7). Proverbs also warns of the danger of accumulating wealth, as a goal in itself (Prov 8:10-

¹³⁷ Ibid., p. 56.

¹³⁸ The author will discuss some vital truths about prosperity, and the important principles that are linked to it, only within the three books of Job, Psalms, and Proverbs in the wisdom literature.

¹³⁹ I. H. Marshall, et al, eds, *New Bible Dictionary*, Leicester UK: IVP, 2003, p. 589.

¹⁴⁰ Job 1:1.

¹⁴¹ Job 1:13-19.

¹⁴² Job 2:7.

¹⁴³ <http://yuling.wordpress.com/2007/02/07/wealth-and-poverty-in-the-bible-part-1/>, Internet; accessed July 24, 2009.

¹⁴⁴ Including material blessings.

11; 15:16-17; 23:4-5).¹⁴⁵ Proverbs continuously exhorted hard work if Israel was to experience material prosperity. Laziness was strongly condemned and discouraged.¹⁴⁶

Proverbs regarded wisdom as more precious than gold and silver, needed by all men, whether rich or poor. Wisdom shows that life, in fellowship with God, ultimately makes sense.¹⁴⁷ Solomon realised that the missing commodity in those days was wisdom, and he asked God for it. Hence, his God-given wisdom attracted wealthy and prominent people to Israel. Therefore, right application of wisdom can create wealth and prosperous living. Without wisdom, wealth can become useless, and bring misery. The wise and wealthy king, after enjoying all the riches, determined that it is all vanity of vanities. Solomon's conclusion of all matters is to "fear God, and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of men".¹⁴⁸ Therefore, the person who lives wisely, who bases his life on the principles of life, which he has from God, of which he has been able to test the value, is going to live a prosperous life.¹⁴⁹

Prophets

The prophets ministered during the time when material wealth corrupted the monarchy. The expansion and prosperity of Israel led to unfaithfulness to Yahweh, godlessness, and abuse of power and privilege.¹⁵⁰ The kings exercised their power to cheat the poor, and used their wealth in sacrificial cult worship, which brought some blessing, but mostly ruin.¹⁵¹ Hence, the prophets condemned the monarchy, who lived luxuriously, without

¹⁴⁵ <http://yuling.wordpress.com/2007/02/07/wealth-and-poverty-in-the-bible-part-1/>, Internet; accessed July 24, 2009.

¹⁴⁶ A hard-working person will be satisfied with the fruit of his labour, but a lazy person will lack any good thing. The hard-working person will enjoy prosperity, while the lazy will have nothing to enjoy (Prov 10:4; 19:15; 24:33-34).

¹⁴⁷ G. Goldsworthy, "Proverbs", in T. D. Alexander, and Brian S. Rosner, eds, *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, Leicester UK: IVP, 2000, p. 210.

¹⁴⁸ Eccl 12:13.

¹⁴⁹ Crawford, *Your Money and God*, p. 24.

¹⁵⁰ Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, Leicester UK: Apollos, 1995, p. 355.

¹⁵¹ Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches*, p. 52.

concern for the poor who toiled for them.¹⁵² The prophets spoke against the injustice done to the poor, and reproved the kings for profaning God's name for their own selfish indulgence. They called for social justice and equality, to restore relationships among the people, and with God. Therefore, the prophets spoke against the sins of materialism that hindered the worship of Yahweh.¹⁵³ Blomberg outlines five major categories of Israel's sins, with respect to material possessions.¹⁵⁴ These are: worshipping idols made of costly materials; trusting in rituals rather than in repentance; extorting, robbing, and oppressing, to gain more land; boasting in wealth; and being motivated by wealth.

PROSPERITY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The NT definition of wealth and prosperity is different to the OT. This section will address the teachings of Jesus and the apostles.

Jesus' Teachings on Wealth

Jesus mainly taught about the riches that the gospel would give to both the wealthy and the poor. He never condemned material possessions, but, rather, defined their proper use, for lasting value. He understood the importance of wealth for supporting the gospel, as He repeatedly encouraged its use for the kingdom. Blomberg states, "The good news of the gospel is consistently holistic, according to the teaching of Jesus."¹⁵⁵ Jesus' teachings centred on spiritual blessings, the stewardship of wealth, and the dangers of riches.

¹⁵² Ibid., p. 56. Blomberg, quoting N. W. Porteous, "The Care of the Poor in the Old Testament", in James I. McCord and T. H. L. Parker, eds, *Service in Christ*, Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans; 1966, p. 34.

¹⁵³ Hosea prophesied against the sin of idolatry, as Israel turned to cult prostitution, as they thought the fertility gods gave them fertility in agricultural prosperity (Hos 2:5-14). Amos spoke about social justice, relationships, and social health (Amos 3-6).

¹⁵⁴ Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches*, pp. 71-75.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 145.

An Emphasis on Spiritual Blessings. Jesus taught the blessedness of the poor in spirit, the mourning, the meek, the seekers of righteousness, the merciful, the peacemakers, the pure in heart, and the persecuted.¹⁵⁶ The Greek word translated “blessed” is μακάριος = *makarios*, which means to be “fully satisfied”.¹⁵⁷ In the NT, *makarios* is used of the joy that comes from salvation, which is received at conversion. Boerman said, “They enjoy spiritual blessings, which often stand in stark contrast to their present physical situations, experience His love, joy, and forgiveness, rooted in a spiritual reality that transcends their present circumstances.”¹⁵⁸

Jesus brought peace to broken lives. The Greek word for peace is εἰρήνη = *eirēnē*, which means “peace, tranquillity, repose, calm, harmony, accord; well-being, prosperity.”¹⁵⁹ The Hebrew equivalent of *eirēnē* is שָׁלוֹם = *shālom*.¹⁶⁰ *Shālom* denotes “a satisfied condition, a state of peacefulness, a sense of well-being, both externally and internally”.¹⁶¹ However, only spiritual blessings were promised in the NT, as taught by Christ.¹⁶² He emphasised the blessings of love, kindness, mercy, grace, joy, and forgiveness and reconciliation. The churches of Smyrna and Laodicea, in Revelation, are good examples. Smyrna is poor and suffering, yet spiritually rich.¹⁶³ Laodicea, by contrast, has much wealth, but is actually wretched and poor spiritually.¹⁶⁴ Moreover, Christ stressed spiritual

¹⁵⁶ Matt 5:3-10.

¹⁵⁷ Spiros, Zodhiates Sr, ed., *The Hebrew-Greek Study Bible*, Chattanooga TN: AMG Publishers, 1996, p. 1129.

¹⁵⁸ Daniel Boerman, “The Banner: Is Prosperity a Blessing?” http://www.thebanner.org/#magazine/article.cfm?article_id=1825., Internet, accessed; July 24, 2009.

¹⁵⁹ Zodhiates, *The Hebrew-Greek Study Bible*, p. 1615.

¹⁶⁰ *Shalom* speaks of health, security, tranquillity, welfare, success, comfort, peace, salvation, and greetings. *Ibid.*, p. 1557. Consequently, Christ and the apostles continuously used peace; Jesus, when He rebuked the storms, and gave assurance to the people of His healing and His abiding presence, and the apostles used it in their letters in greetings and exhortations (Mark 4:39; John 14:27; Rom 1:7; 2 Cor 13:11; 1 Thess 5:13).

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶² See the beatitudes from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount in Matt 5:3-12.

¹⁶³ Rev 2:9.

¹⁶⁴ Rev 3:17.

growth and fruitfulness.¹⁶⁵ Believers should grow into maturity, and manifest the fruit of the Spirit, as evidence of prosperous Christian living. The NT never describes blessing in terms of material prosperity.¹⁶⁶ Jesus focused on spiritual blessings.

The Stewardship of Material Possessions

Care for the Poor and Orphans. Jesus embraced people from different socio-economic backgrounds:¹⁶⁷ the outcasts, orphans, and the poor, including the blind, deaf, mute, and the paralytics. He invited them to come to Him, and, throughout the NT, He blessed them.¹⁶⁸ He went beyond meeting their spiritual needs, however, and stressed their need for physical and social welfare. He appealed strongly to the rich to help the poor.¹⁶⁹ He also emphasised throughout the gospels that wealth is to be generally shared with the poor.¹⁷⁰ Christ encouraged lending to the poor, without expecting anything in return, as He would reward those who give generously.¹⁷¹ Consequently, Christians in Acts generously sold any spare possessions they had, such as land or houses, and gave to their needy brothers and sisters, especially widows and orphans.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁵ Jesus talked a lot about growth and fruitfulness throughout His teachings (Matt 3: 3-23; Luke 8:15; and John 15:1-16). The apostles also emphasised maturity and fruitfulness (1 Cor 2:6; Eph 4:13-15; Gal 5:22-23; James 1:4; Heb 6:1).

¹⁶⁶ Boerman, "The Banner: Is Prosperity a Blessing?", Internet; accessed July 24, 2009.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Matt 11:28

¹⁶⁹ Matt 19:21

¹⁷⁰ Kenneth L. Barker, ed., Zondervan *NIV Study Bible*, Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2008, p. 1592.

¹⁷¹ Luke 6:35. However, the rewards will not be material but spiritual.

¹⁷² Acts 2:44-45; 4:34-37. Andrew Strom, "Lie# 5: Prosperity and 'Seed Faith' ", <http://homepages.ihug.co.nz/~revival/lie-5.html>.

Using Wealth for God's Purposes. Jesus taught many parables that had practical applications for the stewardship of material possessions.¹⁷³ A common parable is the one on the talents.¹⁷⁴ Jesus stressed the outcome of the good stewardship of talents that results in fruitfulness. A good disciple is seen as a steward who manages God-given talents, including wealth, so God's kingdom can grow. It demands the kind of devoted servant in Christ's kingdom that produces results.¹⁷⁵ Blomberg affirms that all our time, talents, and treasures are to be used for kingdom purposes.¹⁷⁶

Wealth as a Potential Obstacle to Faith. Jesus met many rich people in the NT, who desired eternal life, yet struggled to experience it. Christ identified that their wealth hindered them. Not only had their accumulated riches become an obstacle, but also their craving for more. The rich coveted wealth and material possessions more than eternal life. Hence, covetousness of wealth prevented the rich young ruler from having eternal life.¹⁷⁷ The other rich man, in Luke's gospel, ended up in hell, because he failed to pay attention to scripture and its teachings.¹⁷⁸ They were fully committed to accumulating wealth, and had no time for Christ. Jesus said, "You cannot serve both God and money."¹⁷⁹ "What will it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his soul?"¹⁸⁰ Wealth and riches are hindrances to eternal life. The wealthy were warned about materialism, and not to trust in them.

The craving for wealth also led to profaning the temple. Jesus strongly condemned trading in the temple, when He turned the tables over, and drove out the people who were buying and selling, with their animals and

¹⁷³ <http://yuling.wordpress.com/2007/02/07/wealth-and-poverty-in-the-bible-part-1/>, Internet; accessed July 24, 2009.

¹⁷⁴ Matt 25:14-30. The talents here include the use of spiritual gifts and material possessions.

¹⁷⁵ Barker, *Zondervan NIV Study Bible*, p. 1506.

¹⁷⁶ Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches*, p. 125.

¹⁷⁷ *NIV Study Bible*, p. 1495.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, Luke 16:19-31.

¹⁷⁹ Matt 6:24.

¹⁸⁰ Mark 8:36.

possessions.¹⁸¹ Instead of being a house of prayer for all nations, God's temple had become a den of thieves. The pursuit of wealth had led to the neglect of the temple's significance and purpose.

The Apostles' Teachings on Wealth¹⁸²

The apostles also viewed wealth as gifts from God. Hence this section focuses on what they taught, as portrayed in the NT.

Generosity. The apostles encouraged generosity. All Christians should practise generosity, without the expectation of reciprocity.¹⁸³ The stewardship of wealth, through generous giving to the genuinely needy, should remain a priority. James says the practise of true religion expresses itself through showing generosity to orphans and widows.¹⁸⁴ Paul, throughout his letters, appealed to and encouraged Christians to be generous to the poor and the widows.¹⁸⁵ He further exhorted the practice of providing hospitality,¹⁸⁶ supporting ministers of the gospel,¹⁸⁷ and missions.¹⁸⁸

Warning Against the Love of Money. The apostles, throughout their letters, strongly warned Christians about the dangers of loving money. Paul taught Timothy not to be driven by the love of money, but to handle wealth in a godly manner.¹⁸⁹ He cautioned that the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸¹ Matt 21:12-13.

¹⁸² The Apostles includes the disciples of Jesus, Paul, and other NT writers. This section incorporates their teachings on wealth, as seen in their writings, and its use, as discussed in all NT writings and letters.

¹⁸³ Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches*, p. 175.

¹⁸⁴ James 1:27.

¹⁸⁵ 1 Tim 5:3.

¹⁸⁶ 1 Tim 5:10; 6:18; and Rom 12:13.

¹⁸⁷ 1 Tim 5:17-18.

¹⁸⁸ 2 Cor 9:6-13.

¹⁸⁹ Alison Weymouth, "Pastoral Epistles" (Class Notes, Banz PNG: Christian Leaders' Training College, 2009), p. 25.

¹⁹⁰ 1 Tim 6:10.

Greed is evil, and a form of idolatry.¹⁹¹ Therefore, Christians must not be greedy for money, but eager to serve.¹⁹² In their pursuit of money, committed Christians go astray to gain more. Consequently, they open doors for greed and idolatry that eventually leads to their advocating false doctrines. Hence, for them, godliness becomes the means for gain.¹⁹³ Peter further warned that false teachers are experts in greed,¹⁹⁴ and, in their greed, they will exploit the church.¹⁹⁵ The love of money, through greed, leads them away from the truth, and sound doctrine.¹⁹⁶ This pursuit of wealth results in them teaching doctrines that sound godly, but were for personal gain. Thus, money has now become an idol for most people, and many Christians are looking for a means of easy gain.¹⁹⁷

Paul warned Timothy that the love of money has caused some people to wander from the faith, and have pierced themselves with much grief.¹⁹⁸ Faith is something lasting and valuable, yet it can be destroyed through pursuing money. James says the rich person must humble himself, and glory in his humiliation, because, like a flower of the field, he will pass away.¹⁹⁹ In his pride in riches, he must recognise his state of spiritual dependence on God.²⁰⁰ In other words, the wealthy should have a sense of contentment with what they have. Paul says godliness with contentment is great gain.²⁰¹ Thus, being content with what one has, together with the purity of God, is great blessing and spiritual wealth.

¹⁹¹ Col 3:5.

¹⁹² 1 Pet 5:2.

¹⁹³ 1 Tim 6:5.

¹⁹⁴ 1 Pet 2:14.

¹⁹⁵ 1 Pet 2:3.

¹⁹⁶ 2 Tim 3:2.

¹⁹⁷ Philip Kagl, "Pastoral Epistles Class Presentation on Wealth and Poverty", CLTC Banz, Term 2, 2009.

¹⁹⁸ 1 Tim 6:10.

¹⁹⁹ James 1:10.

²⁰⁰ Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches*, p. 149.

²⁰¹ 1 Tim 6:5; Phil 4:10-12.

3. EVALUATION AND CRITIQUE

IMPACT OF THE PROSPERITY GOSPEL

Prosperity gospel teachings have greatly affected Abelam Christians. The believers, who accepted the prosperity gospel message without properly evaluating it, have ruined their spiritual lives. Some have left church ministries and gone into entrepreneurial work. Others, in their pursuit of material blessings, have messed up their faith, testimony, and ministry. Furthermore, others, in their pursuit of material prosperity, have advocated false teachings.²⁰² Vincent asserts, “Western theology has grown away from the biblical attitude to wealth.”²⁰³ “On a positive note, the prosperity gospel helps the adherents to break free from emotional bondage, impart a positive self-image, and a new worldview.”²⁰⁴ Subsequently, Abelam Christians have transformed their communities, socially, and economically.

CRITIQUE

The critique will focus on the five major doctrines of prosperity, the Abelam, biblical and Western cultures, and the commonalities between them.

Problems of Biblical Interpretation

Since prosperity gospel teaching is said to be founded upon the scriptures, scrutinising its interpretation is crucial. The misinterpretation of biblical

²⁰² “Life in the Spirit Ministry” is the current one in Maprik now. David Dii is the founder of this ministry in PNG. Dii, through his network with some Christians, finds out about wealthy men’s background prior to preaching in their church. He asks bank tellers how much money the wealthy men have in their accounts, and asks fellow villagers about the number of coffee trees, or pigs Christians have. Then Dii goes to that particular church, and, based on the information he got, will prophecy, saying, you have K10,000, and God wants you to give Him K5,000. Selecting the scriptures on prosperity, he preaches out of context, emphasising that if Christians give, God will prosper them materially. However, he wants to gain wealth and riches, and accumulate more for himself. Gideon Karl, student at Christian Leaders’ Training College. Interview by author, May 17, 2009.

²⁰³ David Vincent, “Can We Be Both Rich and Christian?”, in *Catalyst* 19-4 (1989), p. 353.

²⁰⁴ Mombi, “The Impact of the Prosperity Gospel in the Assemblies of God churches of Papua New Guinea”, p. 50.

prosperity is due to a lack of proper hermeneutical skills.²⁰⁵ Hence, the five laws of prosperity, as advocated by prosperity gospel proponents, will be critiqued in this section.

Law of Blessing. The proponents of the prosperity gospel state that God primarily covenanted with Abraham to bless him materially. Therefore, Christians, as spiritual sons of Abraham, have the right of access to that covenant blessing. However, it would be incorrect to equate the Abrahamic covenant with that of the NT era, which is more spiritual. God's covenant with Abraham and the patriarchs is a physical one. In the patriarchal covenant, the promises were made for the multiplying of their offspring and the inheritance of the Promised Land.²⁰⁶ Blomberg states, "The wealth of the patriarchs must, therefore, be understood within its clear covenantal context."²⁰⁷ "Abraham needed the material blessing, because God promised to build a nation out of Abraham's own seed, and [riches were] important for this purpose."²⁰⁸ Hence, it is related to the promises of descendants, and the land of Canaan.²⁰⁹ Therefore, "God's covenant with Abraham was partly material blessing."²¹⁰ God's blessing of Israel with material wealth does not necessarily mean the same for Christians today, "because it was a national covenant, and not universal".²¹¹ "The land and its blessings were promised gifts to those whom the Lord had chosen to be His people."²¹² Consequently, in the Christian era, believers do not have a unique promise of a land, and it is not

²⁰⁵ Andrew Perriman, ed., *Faith, Health and Prosperity: A Report on "Word Faith" and "Positive Confession": Theologies by The Evangelical Alliance (UK) Commission on Unity and Truth among Evangelicals*, p. 81.

²⁰⁶ D. R. W. Wood, *New Bible Dictionary*, 3rd edn, Leicester UK: IVP, 2003, p. 235.

²⁰⁷ Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches*, p. 36.

²⁰⁸ Mombi, "The Impact of the Prosperity Gospel in the Assemblies of God churches of Papua New Guinea", p. 50.

²⁰⁹ In Gen 15, God made a covenant to bless Abraham with offspring, and the promise of the land is made in Gen 17. Both of these promises stem from Gen 12:1-3, with the calling and blessing of Abraham.

²¹⁰ Gen 12:7; 15:18; 17:8; 22:17. Mombi, "The Impact of the Prosperity Gospel in the Assemblies of God churches of Papua New Guinea", p. 39.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

²¹² David E. Holwerda, *Jesus and Israel: One Covenant or Two?*, Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1995, p. 91.

necessary to assume that wealth necessarily represents God's blessings.²¹³ Nevertheless, NT Christians enjoyed spiritual blessings in Christ, through the spiritual covenant.

Although the NT blessing is mainly salvation, God also blesses NT believers in their work and businesses. There are Christian businessmen, whom God has blessed, so they can support His work financially. These faithful men, through time and progress, have known God's blessings. Bergmann states, "Many people know from experience what it means to be blessed, or to have God's blessings withheld."²¹⁴ Their relationship with God brings His blessings to create wealth.²¹⁵ Prov 10:22 states "The blessing of the LORD brings wealth, and He adds no trouble to it." God is the source of wealth, and gives the wisdom needed for creating it. Therefore, one cannot argue against the individual's prospering financially and materially. Yet, Pitoi insists their reason for being prosperous should be the measure.²¹⁶ He further argues against the idea that being poor means living in sin, and being rich indicates no sin.²¹⁷ However, success in life is not always a sign of God's blessings, and misfortune does not imply curse.²¹⁸

²¹³ Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches*, p. 36.

²¹⁴ Bergmann, "Old Testament Concept of Blessing".

²¹⁵ The opponents of the prosperity gospel should consider the practical application of faith to believe God for blessing His people. God is a miracle-working God, and His miraculous power should not be limited.

²¹⁶ Seik Pitoi, student at CLTC, "Thesis Writing and Research Method" class, CLTC Banz, August 27, 2009.

²¹⁷ This thinking is seen throughout the teachings of prosperity gospel advocates.

²¹⁸ Wisdom literature, and the prophets, on the one hand, talk a lot about the unrighteous prospering throughout, while the righteous suffer (Ps 73:3-5; Prov 29:16; Eccl 8:14; Jer 12:1). The story of Job, on the other hand, clearly portrays the righteous suffering, yet not because of sin and curse. More than that, God still blesses the righteous, and not only materially.

Law of Sowing and Reaping. By interpreting Mark 10:29-30, proponents of prosperity theology say that whatever is put into God's hands will be reaped 100 times. However, Mark 10:29-30 refers to reaping a hundredfold, through suffering as disciples of Christ, rather than sowing and reaping material wealth. There are various biblical meanings concerning sowing and reaping. Firstly, it means harvesting the produce from the land;²¹⁹ secondly, it implies the reaping of the consequences of sin and righteousness;²²⁰ thirdly, the rewards of faithfulness, as disciples of Christ;²²¹ and fourthly, the reaping of souls.²²² Sowing and reaping can also be used as a general principle for investing in God's kingdom, and is often referred to as receiving crowns in eternity.²²³ Hence sowing and reaping is less applied to financial provision.

"It is important to determine its interpretation from the context, not from one's theological, cultural, or personal preference."²²⁴ McQuilkin says, "Context must control."²²⁵ Therefore, this law of sowing and reaping is incorrectly interpreted, by the prosperity gospel proponents, as receiving an abundance of riches and wealth. Nevertheless, the practicality of sowing and reaping, within some churches, cannot be denied. Abelam Christians have applied the principles of sowing and reaping through monetary terms, and have reaped, in various measures.²²⁶ Some Christians argue theology, but do not prove it in practical applications.²²⁷ Thus, both sides need to have a balance. But this principle cannot become a universal principle for

²¹⁹ Lev 19:9; Deut 16:5.

²²⁰ Job 4:8; Prov 22:8; Hos 10:12; Rom 6:22; Gal 6:7.

²²¹ Matt 25:21, 23; 1 Cor 9:25; 2 Tim 4:8; James 1:12; 1 Pet 5:4.

²²² John 4:37.

²²³ 1 Cor 9:25; 1 Thess 2:9; 2 Tim 4:8; James 1:12; 1 Pet 5:4.

²²⁴ Robertson McQuilkin, *Understanding and Applying the Bible*, Chicago IL: Moody Press, 1992, p. 280.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

²²⁶ The Abelam AOG churches and Christians have experienced God's provisions and blessings through the application of the principles of sowing and reaping. The church has survived through tithes and offerings. The Christians have reaped in abundance, as they have tithed, and given their offerings. God, indeed, has blessed their businesses, vocations, cash cropping activities, and gardening.

²²⁷ The author, in doing his research, read through numerous critiques against Christians who embrace the principle of sowing and reaping.

all, because experiences vary, and are not authoritative. Moreover, the law of sowing and reaping is seen as manipulating God, so He gives Christians what they want.²²⁸

Law of Faith. Prosperity gospel proponents interpret faith in Mark 11:22 as God having faith to create, and speak into existence, everything out of nothing.²²⁹ That faith was activated in God when He spoke things into existence. Hence, “faith is a force that both God and man can use”.²³⁰ However, the common interpretation of Mark 11:22 is contradictory to the supporters of the prosperity gospel. This text simply means having faith in God to answer prayers. “Jesus used the withering of the fig tree as an example of the results of believing prayer.”²³¹ Within that context, Israel was like the fig tree, with leaves, yet without fruit, when it was the season for fruit. However, the implication is about Jesus praying to God in faith for His will to be done.²³² Hence, Christians should pray with faith in God, to see “seemingly impossible difficulties”²³³ removed, according to God’s will.

Prosperity theology also teaches that faith is a matter of what we say, more than whom we trust, or what truths we embrace and affirm in our hearts.²³⁴ Hence, it is implied that faith is blind, and can be built upon foundations other than God’s word. However, “faith is no blind groping in the dark, but the certain conviction, born of love and experimental relationship, that God’s revealed word is true.”²³⁵ Duffield and van Cleave outline three

²²⁸ Saracco, “Prosperity Theology”, p. 325.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 324.

²³⁰ <http://www.rapidnet.com/~jbeard/bdm/Psychology/posit.htm>, Positive Confession/PMA – Prosperity Gospel & The New Age, Internet; accessed July 24, 2009.

²³¹ Alan Cole, “Mark”, in D. A. Carson, R. T. France, F. A. Motyer, G. F. Wenham, eds, *New Bible Commentary*, 21st century edn, Leicester UK: IVP, 1994, p. 968.

²³² *Ibid.*

²³³ *Ibid.*

²³⁴ Positive Confession/PMA – Prosperity Gospel & The New Age, <http://www.rapidnet.com/~jbeard/bdm/Psychology/posit.htm>, Internet; accessed July 24, 2009.

²³⁵ Guy P. Duffield and Nathaniel M. van Cleave, “*Foundations of Pentecostal Theology*”, Manila: OMF Literature, 1990, p. 217.

elements of faith: the intellectual, the emotional, and the voluntary.²³⁶ Hence, faith is based on knowledge. Faith is emotional, as it affects the feelings, as evidenced by joy and tears. Faith reaches out and appropriates what is provided, because it is active and not passive. For some Christians, faith is not just mere belief. It is a confident knowing, based on scripture, that something will happen as believed. Hueter states, “He knows that it is there.”²³⁷ The belief leads the believer to knowing. Also, if faith is an applied force, then it is not the substance of things hoped for, and the evidence of things not seen, as founded upon the scriptures.²³⁸ It is confidently trusting God’s promises of faithfulness and provision, especially on the spiritual aspects of Christian living.

Law of the Proclaimed Word. In prosperity theology, this law simply states confession is made before possession. Faith is released by speaking words of confession, in order to possess what is desired, and we should never make a negative confession.²³⁹ “It emphasises speaking, stating, or confessing verses found in the Bible, called the Word of God. The belief is that, if one believes the Word of God, and confesses it, then the believer shall receive what they confessed.”²⁴⁰ Power is discharged to accomplish the desires, as faith is spoken.²⁴¹ The scriptures applied to support this belief are Mark 11:22-23, as described by Jesus.²⁴²

²³⁶ Ibid., pp. 217-218.

²³⁷ D. Hueter, “The Battle for Abundant Life”, in *The Church and the Adjustments Movements, Point 1* (1974), p. 131. Hueter discussed believing in ancestral spirits, witchcraft, and sorcery, and gives a classical example about faith in sorcery. Hence, having faith in God and His word are similar to the traditional faith.

²³⁸ Heb 11:1.

²³⁹ Positive Confession/PMA – Prosperity Gospel & The New Age, Internet; accessed July 24, 2009.

²⁴⁰ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Word_of_Faith, Internet; accessed July 24, 2009.

²⁴¹ Gary Giley, <http://www.rapidnet.com/~jbeard/bdm/Psychology/char/more/w-f.htm>, Internet; accessed July 24, 2009.

²⁴² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Word_of_Faith, Internet; accessed 24 July, 2009.

Positive confession is not wrong, as Christians can speak well of others, as a way of exhortation, and building good self-esteem. Nevertheless, positive confession limits God and His word as the object of faith. God must be understood as the omniscient, omnipotent, and the omnipresent One. Therefore, Mark 11:23-23 speaks about faith in this all-knowing, all-powerful, and ever-present God, who is all-sufficient. The law of the proclaimed word makes God as not sufficient in Himself.²⁴³ A simple faith in Him, on the trustworthiness of His word, can answer prayers.

However, it should be noted that, since faith is active, it speaks. Faith that is established on the scriptures expresses itself through confession. What is believed is affirmed. In receiving salvation, confession is made, based on the belief.²⁴⁴ Likewise, Christians should proclaim their faith for blessing, healing, and protection in God, who is the object of faith, because those who diligently seek Him will be rewarded.²⁴⁵ But God answers in His unlimited ways, sometimes according to one's desires, and, at other instances, differently. Most importantly, God will never be manipulated by mankind.

Expiatory Work of Christ. Prosperity gospel proponents believe Christ, through His redemptive work on the cross, has provided both divine healing and material wealth. Nevertheless, the redemption offered by Christ was for the sins of the world. It must be understood that forgiveness of sins was the primary purpose for Christ's death on the cross. Jesus took upon Himself the sins of the world. Healing is also included within that redemption package, yet the "real life's experience is quite the opposite".²⁴⁶ Righteous people like Job and Paul suffered, but God did not heal them quickly. Nevertheless, He made known to them His all-sufficient grace. Hence, the expiatory work of Christ does not mean sickness and pain are forever removed. These proponents have a wrong

²⁴³ Positive Confession/PMA – Prosperity Gospel & The New Age, Internet; accessed July 24, 2009.

²⁴⁴ Rom 10:9-10.

²⁴⁵ Heb 6:11.

²⁴⁶ Mombi, "The Impact of the Prosperity Gospel in the Assemblies of God churches of Papua New Guinea", p. 51.

view of redemption and the cross of Christ.²⁴⁷ However, true prosperity, which Jesus and the apostles taught, is spiritual, and begins at the foot of the cross, and sometimes includes suffering.²⁴⁸ Yet divine healing should not be overlooked. Those who are advanced in medical science tend to deny divine healing. God's healing power is evident today, as it was in the days of Jesus. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow.²⁴⁹ Divine healing displays God's power, which leads to people's salvation.

Mombi observes the five laws of prosperity, when not diagnosed scripturally, would lead to cult practices, as experienced by Melanesians previously.²⁵⁰ Another false teaching in Maprik has that nature, but in a different form.²⁵¹

Various Cultures

Knowing different cultures, and how they have changed, is crucial to understanding prosperity in contemporary Abelam.

Abelam Culture. To the Abelam, prosperity was a communal and group thing, since they were tribally-oriented, like other Melanesians. Consequently, the successes or failures in any endeavour²⁵² belonged to the family, clan, and the village. Paura affirms the harvesting of huge ceremonial yams by the Abelam brought joy and pride to his people.²⁵³ Trompf asserts, "Wealth, in a primal society, is a group-wealth."²⁵⁴ For

²⁴⁷ "Positive Confession/PMA – Prosperity Gospel & The New Age", Internet; accessed July 24, 2009.

²⁴⁸ Rom 5: 3; 8:17-18; Heb 2:10.

²⁴⁹ Heb 13:8.

²⁵⁰ Mombi, "The Impact of the Prosperity Gospel in the Assemblies of God churches of Papua New Guinea", pp. 48-49.

²⁵¹ Apart from being finance-oriented, the Life in the Spirit Ministry in Maprik teaches that its members can remarry as the Spirit leads. Being led by the Spirit is the emphasis of this group. Hence a spouse can leave his or her married partner and be married to another man or woman, if the Spirit allows.

²⁵² Gardening, economics, and fighting, to mention a few.

²⁵³ Paura Nikulak of Kinbangua. Interview by author, January 27, 2009.

²⁵⁴ G. W. Trompf, "God as the Source of Wealth", in *Melanesian Journal of Theology*, 3-1 (1987), p. 74.

example, the wealth,²⁵⁵ made through cultivating yams, is enjoyed by all. The community releases their blessing as they enjoy the wealth so that the ceremonial yam planters continue to increase in productivity and abundance. The Abelam used their wealth and riches, not only to compete with other neighbouring villages, as was common in those days; they also helped those in debt, and cared for the poor. This custom is inherent and practised among contemporary Abelam Christians. Consequently, the churches are supported by the Christians' wealth and finances.

Biblical Cultures. Israel was people-oriented, and lived in groups. "Extended family groups were housed in multiple family compounds"²⁵⁶ This implies that the sharing of wealth and blessings, and helping the needy, were common occurrences. The social organisation of the Israelites, from the time of the exodus through to settlement, was based on the extended family.²⁵⁷ Village life centred on agricultural pursuits, and maintenance of small flocks of sheep and goats.²⁵⁸ "The patriarchal period narrative gives the overwhelming impression of a time when the Hebrews were new to the land, and still depended on the tribe, not the nation, for their identity."²⁵⁹ However, many things have changed since then. With the drifting towards civilisation and urbanisation, people may have neglected living together as clans and families.

Western Cultures. Western culture includes two ways of living. Firstly, it is individualistic. It is not group-oriented like the Abelam and Israel. Therefore, the sharing of wealth and other things is uncommon among it. Christians do share with others, yet the means of sharing varies. They greatly encourage hard work, and assume responsibility for their living.

²⁵⁵ Harvests of huge ceremonial yams brought in wealth to the Abelam. Wealth came in the form of pigs, shell money, or rings, and food. Wealth was also made by the Abelam villages, who taught others the secrets; the rituals to observe, and rules to follow, in order to produce huge, healthy, and good looking ceremonial yams. Paura Nikulak and John Tika of Kinbangua. Interview by author, January 27, 2009.

²⁵⁶ Victor H. Matthews, *Manners and Customs of the Bible*, Peabody MA: Hendrickson, 1991, p. 41.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

Interdependence is not common, and most believe in personal success and achievement, through education and business.

Secondly, Western culture is more materialistic. Since Western society has developed and advanced in many aspects, the living standard is luxurious. However, that does not mean everyone lives in the same manner. Yet, compared with the developing world, generally the Western world is rich. Therefore, Saracco rightly affirms,

Though born in the USA, and containing elements of American culture (individualism, achievements through personal effort, the idea of success linked to economic prosperity), what happens in different countries is not a copy of this model.²⁶⁰

Consequently, they need new cars, houses, and wealth. Their advancement in modernisation has allowed that kind of living to be acceptable.

The Abelan, who are still growing socially and economically, cannot afford that Western standard of living, yet they try to possess the material things the prosperity gospel proponents preach. They can prosper within the development that PNG, as a third-world nation, is experiencing. However, prospering materially by Western standards of living is not what biblical prosperity is all about.

Relationships

Relationships are another important aspect of prosperity that the prosperity gospel proponents advocate, yet they confine it to marriage only.

The sole purpose of God blessing Israel was so they could know Him personally, not only as a nation. The NT believers, through Jesus Christ, have access to that same God. Hence, having been called to that relationship with God, Abelan Christians need to grow spiritually, and, thereby, become mature. Jesus and the apostles consistently taught this. Boerman says, “God’s blessing included the spiritual realities of

²⁶⁰ Saracco, “Prosperity Theology”, p. 325.

forgiveness and fellowship with God.”²⁶¹ This relationship brings blessings that bear characteristics that God considers desirable. They enjoy spiritual blessings in Christ, as they put their faith in Him, experience His love and forgiveness, and work faithfully for the coming of His kingdom. Even though Christians may be poor, destitute, and persecuted, they experience joy, rooted in a spiritual reality that transcends their present circumstances.²⁶²

Consequently, Christians must feel content with what God blesses them. They must become satisfied with whatever God provides through others. In this relationship, faith and trust in God grow progressively, and Christians become mature and strong. John prayed that Gaius would enjoy good health, and that all might go well with him, as his soul was getting along well.²⁶³ True prosperity, then, is walking in the truth, and making progress in it.²⁶⁴

Even though Christians can accumulate much material wealth and riches, the absence of good relationships with immediate family, the extended family, and fellow members of the church and community, proves that they are not prospering at all. Love, care, and concern should be reflected, and extended, to others. Proverbs talks about the absence of love during a meal, making the good food is not enjoyable.²⁶⁵ Where contentions are, blessings are not properly enjoyed.

Therefore, if the prosperity gospel proponents, and their adherents, emphasise healthy marriage and family relationships, as evidences of prosperous living, and yet do not experience their reality, then they are not prospering as God intended them to be.

²⁶¹ Boerman, “The Banner: Is Prosperity a Blessing?”, Internet; accessed July 24, 2009.

²⁶² Ibid.

²⁶³ 3 John 2. Some translations use the word “prosper”. However, in this context, John did not mean prosperity in material wealth and riches.

²⁶⁴ Leon Morris, “Commentary 1, 2 & 3 John”, in D. A. Carson, R. T. France, F. A. Motyer, G. F. Wenham, eds, *New Bible Commentary*, 21st century edn, Leicester UK: IVP, 1994, p. 1412.

²⁶⁵ Prov 15:16-17; 17:1.

Commonalities

People of the Abelam, biblical, and Western cultures all work, in order to survive. Every culture emphasises hard work, either through agriculture, entrepreneurship, or formal employment. Abelam Christians are so privileged, unlike the rest of the world, to own their land. They derive their wealth from the land. However, the land needs to be tilled in order to produce the wealth Abelam Christians are trying to acquire.

God blessed Israel with land, and they prospered through cultivating it. Westerners, on the other hand, thrive on education, enterprise industry, and employment opportunities. However, like Israel, God has indeed blessed the land of Abelam Christians for them to prosper. Yet the spiritual well-being of Abelam Christians is the emphasis here. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, as far as their spiritual life is concerned, and what the Lord requires of them. The NT stresses the essentiality of spiritual prosperity as the primary and social well-being for Christians. With that in mind, the world economy must be considered seriously. Currently, the Western world is leading the globe economy, and third-world nations are yet to reach that stage. This affects the entrepreneurship of Abelam Christians.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

This section will offer theological and practical recommendations for Abelam Christians.

BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

A common cause of misunderstanding, which lies within the clergy and the Christians of the AOG church in Abelam, is a lack of sound knowledge of biblical interpretation. Consequently, without properly scrutinising the preaching of the prosperity gospel teachers, Abelam Christians have taken it as truth, and have felt the effects. Therefore, how can the AOG clergy, and the Christians in Abelam, correctly interpret the scriptures?

Although the NT is linked to the OT, the generally-accepted rules of interpretation need to be applied. McQuilkin has outlined some key principles for correct interpretation of the Bible. The major one to be

noted is “identifying the audience God intended”.²⁶⁶ This means knowing the immediate context of any passage of the Bible, the audience designated by the author, and the historical significance.²⁶⁷ However, in every interpretation, context is the key factor, and guiding principle. Therefore, the clergy of Abelam AOG churches especially need further training in hermeneutics,²⁶⁸ and also incorporation of these courses into their Bible College curriculum.

CONTEXTUALISATION

“Contextualisation is an issue that every generation will wrestle with. Whenever and wherever we deal with the Word of God, contextualisation is unavoidable.”²⁶⁹ Without proper understanding of the Western context, Abelam Christians have accepted everything presented to them as final and authoritative. Hence, the style of interpretation and preaching that seems “superior and attractive, has been copied in the churches”.²⁷⁰ Since God’s Word is relevant to every given culture, the Bible needs to be applied relevantly within the Abelam context.

All cultures have both strengths and weaknesses; hence, no one is superior. Since Abelam culture has its unique way of experiencing prosperity, Abelam AOG clergy need training in contextualisation, because many do not have that knowledge. Although it is a difficult task, “contextualised theology will minimise transplanting of the message from a foreign culture, and will pave the way for Melanesian theology to bloom”.²⁷¹ “There exists a real and helpful relationship between ancestral spirits and the gospel,

²⁶⁶ McQuilkin, *Understanding and Applying the Bible*, p. 279.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 279-280.

²⁶⁸ Hermeneutics is the art of biblical interpretation.

²⁶⁹ Mombi, “The Impact of the Prosperity Gospel in the Assemblies of God churches of Papua New Guinea”, p. 53.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

which allows Melanesians to move from faith in the spirits of their ancestors to faith in Jesus, with cultural integrity and continuity.”²⁷²

WORK

Abelam Christians have many opportunities to experience prosperity, as Westerners do, however, within their own context. The priceless commodity they possess is their land. It is their God-given inheritance, which neither the government nor any person can control. Like Israel, Abelam prosperity is tied to the land. As horticulturists, Abelam Christians must cultivate their land. More cash cropping activities should be encouraged, and time and commitment given to it. Kapris affirms, “I’d like people to look at improving agriculture, and consider alternate cash crops besides vanilla, cocoa, and coffee.”²⁷³ Kamanambi also points out that government backing is needed for the Maprik district to realise its potential in agriculture, and should focus on revitalising it.²⁷⁴ Apart from working the land, Christians should improvise methods of wealth-creation by encouraging economic activities through investments.²⁷⁵

However, the Abelam people must shift their mindset away from the Westerners’ influence of experiencing prosperity, and focus on farming their land. Christians should be encouraged to work, because God will

²⁷² Joshua Kurung Daimoi, “An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage from an Indigenous Evangelical Perspective” (Ph.D. diss., University of Sydney, 2004), p. v.

²⁷³ Damaris Minikula, “A New Wind Blowing in PNG’s Forgotten Maprik”, April 20, 2005, *The National*, www.thenational.com.pg/, <http://archives.pireport.org/archive/2005/April/04-28-ft.htm>, Internet; accessed July 12, 2009.

²⁷⁴ Raymond Kamanambi, a community leader, and former finance and planning deputy secretary, and People’s Progress Party candidate for Maprik Open Electorate in 2007 PNG National Elections. <http://www.postcourier.com.pg/20070412/momase01.htm>. *Momase Post*, March 12, 2007. Internet; accessed July 12, 2009.

²⁷⁵ Kofi Anane-Fenin, “Leadership Seminar on Wealth Creation”, CLTC Banz, February 7, 2009. Kofi Anane-Fenin outlined nine lessons of wealth creation in his wealth-creation seminar that the Abelam can apply to create wealth. These include take personal responsibility of your life, put away poverty mentality, wealth is not income, wealth creation is not taught in school, learn to pay yourself first after your tithe, learn to buy assets and not liabilities, we reap more than we sow, money invested multiplies in compound interest, avoid the debt trap.

bless their efforts, and make them prosperous. “Encouraging people to work creates dignity and sustainability. We must not create dependence. As a general rule, people should support themselves by working.”²⁷⁶

HUMAN RESOURCES

Upon realising the current changes in living standards, the Abelam need innovative primary industry. Hence, training skilled personnel is a prerequisite for improvising primary industry, managing economic activities, and doing good administration and accounting. Millions of kina have been committed for Maprik, which includes funds for upgrading the Bainyik Sepik Agriculture College to university status.²⁷⁷ Abelam people should take this opportunity to train their human resources, to improve their economic activities. Therefore, a holistic approach is needed for setting the pace towards prosperous living among Abelam Christians.

CONCLUSION

The traditional Abelam experienced prosperity: spiritually and socially, through their allegiance to ancestral spirits, and they centred on farming the land, through cultivating ceremonial yams. However, the gospel brought them spiritual prosperity that greatly changed their social and economic life. Yet the Western prosperity gospel, which is more materialistically-oriented, has caused some major problems for Abelam Christians.

Consequently, by evaluating the changing beliefs of Abelam Christians concerning prosperity, and how the attitude towards prosperity changed in biblical cultures, we understand that prosperity includes the whole of human living. Prosperity comprises both the spiritual and social well-being of Christians. Therefore, Abelam Christians should understand that prosperity is not confined only to the Western standard of living, but,

²⁷⁶ Rianto and Ratna, “Millionaire Missionaries’ Principles for Giving”, in *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 41-4 (2005), p. 468.

²⁷⁷ “Maprik gets projects worth K12 mil.”, in *The National* (Papua New Guinea), July 6, 2009. Member for Maprik, the Hon Gabriel Kapris, “has delivered K12 million worth of impact projects, and signed two memoranda of understanding with University of Vudal and UPNG for the start of two universities in Maprik, East Sepik Province.”

rather, includes broader-quality relationships, spiritual growth, and social health. Prosperous living belongs to Abelam Christians, too, through Christ, but it includes all aspects of living.

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CONTEXTUALISING CHRIST: THE USE OF TRADITIONAL LANDMARKS IN GABAGABA VILLAGE

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INTRODUCTION

This article will explore, through the stories of the people of Gabagaba village (a coastal village about 50 kilometres out of Port Moresby), ways of preaching Christ, based on the significance of certain landmarks. It will begin with an explanation of the landmarks, and their use today, and in years gone by. It will then conclude with scriptural references that can be used to explain how Christ can be seen in these items.

THE LANDMARKS

THE BEACONS

Many beacons stand in the waters along the Papuan coastline. They help seagoing vessels steer clear of dangerous reefs that could cause a shipwreck. A handful of beacons stand in the waters around Gabagaba.

GABAGABA ORORO (GABAGABA MOUNTAIN RANGE)

Looking back from the Lokuro beacon, about a couple of miles off shore from Gabagaba village, one can make out a range of mountains that ends right at the edge of the village. The Gabagaba Mountains are a special landmark for the village folk. Seafarers will always find their bearings by looking at certain parts of the range. It acts like the beacons out at sea; this time, however, it guides fishermen home.

MAGI AUNA (THE MAGI TREE)

As the mountain range dips towards the edge of the village, one notices a particular tree that stands out. It is the *Magi*, a rather large, leafy tree that, as far as many elders are concerned, has stood there for very many years. (It is sad to say that the tree was almost burnt to the ground about three years ago in a bush fire. A part of the tree is alive, and its battles on to survive.)

The *Magi*, and the surrounding area on the mountain, were used as a burial site in ancestral times. When the first Motuans arrived from their original village of Lakwaharu (now called Tubuseria, about two kilometres out of Port Moresby), they found a convenient location to settle. There was a nice beach with surrounding mangroves. The place was found unsettled, however, the inland villagers, who are the true owners of the area, stood peering cautiously, from the *magi* on the mountain, at these new visitors.

After initial hostilities, the barter system brought peace. Fish from the Motuans were traded for banana and yams from the Rigo inlanders. Soon, relationships were formed and intermarriage took place. Each group of people familiarised themselves with the spiritual beliefs and practices of the other. That was when it was learned that the Gabagaba Mountains, and the *magi* tree, were burial sites. Bodies of prominent people from the clan were preserved by smoking them over the fire. They were hung on the branches of the tree, and positioned in a way to look over the enclave that was to become the coastal village of Gabagaba. Other people were buried on other parts of the mountains.

Development work began on the mountain in the late 1970s, when bulldozers were sent up to build a road. It is interesting to note that the work did not get completed. Today, two rusting relics of bulldozers lie at the side of the mountain. They developed “engine trouble”, but efforts to fix them failed. They were abandoned on the mountainside, seemingly as a silent reminder that the mountain did have spiritual significance to a people of yesteryear!

UNDERSTANDING THE LANDMARKS

The beacons, mountain, and *magi* tree served the people in a variety of ways.

BEACON

As explained earlier, the *beacons* help huge liners and small dinghies steer clear of trouble in the waters. Many fishermen from Gabagaba have been saved by the beacons, not just to avoid reefs in low tide, but when they get thrown overboard, or when the dinghy sinks. If it is near a beacon, they will swim up to it and wait for passing canoes or dinghies to rescue them.

MOUNTAIN

The person who feared his enemies would simply look up to the *mountain*. His ancestors from ancient times lie buried there. That gave him confidence to go about his daily business, knowing that they watch over his affairs of life. During the *Hiri* expedition, *lagatois* from Gabagaba participated. It is said that villagers would look up to the mountain to check for the safety of the crew. If the form of one woman was seen dancing, it meant the *lagatoi* had been thrown overboard in a storm, and men had died. If two women were seen dancing, it meant the vessel was sailing safely home.

MAGI TREE

Before beacons were erected in the seas, fishermen, returning home, looked along the range for a marker to show the location of the village. The *magi* tree stood conspicuously clear atop the mountain. It seemed to beckon to the weary child of the village to return to the safe havens of home.

SEE CHRIST IN THE LANDMARKS

One can see opportunities that exist to communicate Christ to the people, using the landmarks, as explained above. Scriptural references will now be given to show how Christ serves the same purposes as the *beacon*, the *mountain*, and the *magi* tree.

Firstly, fishermen today, are guided at sea by the *beacons* (especially when they shine their lights at night), so they do not get shipwrecked. Likewise, God's Word is a lamp, which shines to show the path we should follow (Ps 119:105). It guides us away from the dangers of a shipwrecked life (Prov 6:23). Moreover, Jesus is the light of the world (John 8:12). Keeping our eyes on Him will result in walking a safe path in life. And for the person who has been thrown overboard in sin, he simply needs to make his way to the cross, and feel the warm embrace of God's forgiving grace in Jesus!

In the next parallel, both the Gabagaba *Mountain* range, and the *magi* tree atop it, guided weary sailors home. In this analogy, one can again see a picture of the cross, the "tree", on which Jesus died (Acts 5:30), this time atop a mountain (Calvary or Golgotha – John 19:17). Indeed, the open arms of Jesus beckon weary travellers of life to come home (Matt 1:28). The best safe haven one can find is the Lord's presence. God beckons, yet it is up to the individual to respond. The mountains also gave assurance that all was well, because the ancestors who lie buried there watched over the affairs of their people. But Christ is the "firstborn", thus, He is portrayed as the "preeminent ancestor" of all who believe (Heb 1:6, 12, 23). Just as the people once looked up to the Gabagaba Mountains, Christians today must look up to the Cross on Mount Calvary, where the great "Ancient of Days" (Dan 7:9) watches over His people. Furthermore, one does not need to check how many ladies are dancing, to see if everything is fine! In times of anguish and doubt, one simply needs to move confidently to God's throne to find grace and mercy (Heb 4:16). God will hear His children's petitions (Ps 3:4). Indeed, all is well in Jesus!

CONCLUSION

The above is small example of how landmarks in Melanesian culture can be used to picture Christ. While most people in Gabagaba village today have a fairly clear understanding of who Jesus is, it is nonetheless important to know traditional stories, which could be used prayerfully to share another dimension of the understanding of Christ to them!

DISTINGUISHING THE RELIGION OF OUR PRE-CHRISTIAN ANCESTORS FROM THE RELIGION OF THE MISSIONARIES

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INTRODUCTION

Lotu is the term widely used in the Pacific for “religion”. One of the 19th-century missionaries to Tonga, Revd Dr James Egan Moulton (1841-1909), defined *lotu* as “humanity’s proper duty to God their Maker”. He further explains that this “proper duty” has two essential elements, namely, faith and practice. Faith is the content of the believer’s belief, as it has been shaped by the Bible, and practice is the believer’s lifestyle, as an embodiment of that faith.

Here in the Pacific, there has emerged a view that the missionaries, who came to the Pacific in the 19th century, did not bring the gospel message with them. Rather, the God of the missionaries was already worshipped by our pre-Christian ancestors here in the Pacific. The underlying conviction is that the gods, which our pre-Christian ancestors worshipped, whether it was a shark, a tree, and so forth, were cultural expressions of the God the missionaries brought to the Pacific.

WERE OUR PRE-CHRISTIAN ANCESTORS WORSHIPPING THE GOD OF THE BIBLE?

This claim is only half true. Like all half-truths, it is very convincing, at face value, but very dangerous when it becomes foundational for making sense of the world in which we live. Of course, our ancestors were religious. They were worshippers of some kind of deity, or deities. In fact, when the missionaries first arrived in Tonga in 1797, they found religious

shrines, devoted to various deities, scattered throughout the country. But were our pre-Christian ancestors worshipping the God of the Bible, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God, who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, through their shrines?

If the Bible were to be our sole authority in matters of faith and practice, we must firmly respond in the negative to this question. For, even though our ancestors were religious, and were already observing various forms of religious rites, and so forth, they were not, in any reasonable sense, worshipping the God of the Bible, the God, who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. One surveys in vain the Tongan pre-Christian pantheon for a deity that palely reflects the God of the Bible, in His personality and character.

William Mariner, who lived in Tonga in the opening decades of the 19th century, has documented the deities of our pre-Christian Tongan ancestors, and none of those listed represented anything close to what one finds in the Bible.¹ Moreover, the way our pre-Christian ancestors worshipped these deities, as described by Mariner, was very impersonal. Accordingly, pre-Christian Tongans looked to their deities to help them cope with situations beyond the grasp of their physical senses. So, for example, when someone, especially from the chiefly families, was sick, human sacrifice became a desperate attempt to please their deities, and procure healing. Most incidents of human sacrifice, recorded in Mariner's account, did not result in the restoration of the patient.

In the Bible, we find that human sacrifices were not demanded by the God of the Bible. Abraham, of course, was requested to sacrifice Isaac, his son, but we are clearly told in Gen 22 that this was to test him. Hence, Abraham's faith is shown in his willingness to do according to God's word. But this incident cannot be the basis of saying that human sacrifice was acceptable to God. In fact, when human sacrifice became official religious policy in Israel, under King Manasseh of Judah, it was one of the

¹ See J. Martin, *An Account of the Natives of the Tonga Islands in the South Pacific Ocean*, 2 vols, Edinburgh UK: Constable and Co., 1927, book I, chapter 18.

reasons why the wrath of God came upon Judah, in the form of the Babylonian exile.

In addition to that, the morality of our pre-Christian ancestors, as it is described in historical accounts from the time, can be closely identified with those of the pagan nations condemned in the Bible. Captain Cook, for example, told of the harsh measures, which his crew would implement, in order to prevent the Tongans from stealing things from his ship. Cook also told of how the Tongan ruler at the time, *Finau Ulukalala*, tested one of Cook's guns by shooting a Tongan man who was climbing on one of the ship's masts. When Cook confronted *Finau* about the killing as being murder, he was told that, as the king, he was entitled to do what he had just done.

What Cook failed to understand in that incident is that *Finau* was, indeed, entitled to such activities against humanity, in accordance with the underlying worldview of our pre-Christian Tongan ancestors. In pre-Christian Tonga, it was held that those of chiefly and kingly origin were the only group born with a "soul". Hence, they were the only people entitled to enter *Pulotu*, the Tongan paradise, at their death. The rest of the population, the commoners, were regarded as "eaters-of-the-soil" (*kainangaefonua*), because they were born simply to "eat the dust" of the land. This kind of thinking seems to reflect the kind of oppression that was justifiable in pre-Christian Tongan society. It was probably seen as a way of maintaining the power of the chiefs, and thus preventing any thoughts of revolt from the common people. Hence, the biblical view of all human beings being treated equally before God their Maker had no place in the worldview of our pre-Christian Tongan ancestors.

The incidents, just described, are meant to help Tongan theologians to reconsider the view that has been more-recently popularised by some; that the gospel was already with us in the Pacific before the arrival of the missionaries in the 19th century. This view cannot be supported by historical evidence, and, even more so, in regard to the biblical statement of the gospel message. Paul the Apostle, "handed on" to believers "as of first importance" what he "in turn, had received" as the gospel message

from the risen Jesus and the 12 Apostles: “that Christ died for our sins, in accordance with the scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day, in accordance with the scriptures” (1 Cor 15:3-4). There is absolutely nothing in Tongan cultural heritage that resembles, in any sense, this message of Christ crucified. Worse still, the view that the gospel was already in our possession, tends to overlook the significant changes brought about in our cultural worldview, as a result of the arrival of the biblical gospel, through the 19th-century missionaries.

This essay, of course, is not an attempt to justify the missionaries in all their activities in the Pacific, not the least in Tonga. Indeed, the Tongan church has been struggling with the issue of church division ever since the time of missionary activity here in Tonga – church divisions, not on a doctrinal basis, but on personal differences, as a result of the conflict between two 19th-century missionaries, Shirley Baker and James Egan Moulton. In spite of that, there is a pressing need for the church of God in Tonga, and the Pacific, to appreciate the 19th-century missionaries’ effort in bringing the gospel of Christ crucified to our people. Actually, this is an appeal to contemporary Pacific theologians to reconsider the history of Christian mission in the Pacific, critically considering their thinking, in the light of evidence – both historical and biblical.

Now, if our pre-Christian ancestors did not worship the God of the Bible, what were they worshipping? Here, we must turn to the biblical worldview to instruct us in thinking about the religion of our ancestors in the Pacific.

THE BIBLE’S VIEW OF RELIGION

The Bible tells us that God created the universe, and all that is in it, by His Word (Ps 33:6). Moreover, we are told that things created are meant to express the invisible, eternal, and divine qualities of God: “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of His hands” (Ps 19:1). Creation itself, therefore, is God’s sermon to all of humanity about His own glory and power. Humanity is meant to look at creation, and know that there is a Creator God, simply by being confronted with what God made. This knowledge should then be expressed in gratitude and worship to Him (cf. Rom 1:21).

Since creation is declaring to us the eternal and divine invisible character of God, humanity is meant to gain their knowledge of God from it. For “since the creation of the world, God’s invisible qualities – His eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made” (Rom 1:20). Because we can know God from creation, we are left with no excuse at all for being ignorant of Him. On judgment day, no one can defend themselves before God by saying that he or she did not have the opportunity to know Him. Creation functions to render creatures without excuse before God’s throne of judgment.² If God has made the knowledge of Himself readily available for us in creation, why is it then that we, as creatures, do not obtain a saving knowledge of Him from it?

The problem, according to the Bible, lies in human nature. The Bible tells us that we are, by nature, sinful, even at the point of conception in the womb (Ps 51:5). Jesus affirms that the human heart is an evil-manufacturing factory that makes us spiritually unclean, and unacceptable before God, and before our neighbours (Mark 7:23). Thus, according to the Bible, we are, by nature, sinful.

This sinful nature was not the state of humanity in creation. God created all things, and saw that it was “good”. It was the disobedience of Adam, however, that resulted in human nature being corrupted (Gen 3). The Bible contains God’s plan to reverse the effect of human sin, and to transform the kingdoms of this world to be the kingdom of His Christ. This plan has been fulfilled in Jesus, and will be consummated when Jesus returns (cf. Mark 1:14-15; Rev 11:15).

² In this sense, it would be helpful to distinguish the biblical view from the traditional Roman Catholic approach to natural theology, which is very open to the possibility of persons coming to know God truly from creation. [See documents of Vatican I (1870) Session III.] While it is true that a knowledge of God can be subjectively received from nature, its main function, according to Rom 1:19-21, is not to give humanity a saving knowledge of God. Saving knowledge can only be obtained from hearing the message of the gospel of Christ (Rom 10:17). See also K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II, 1; pp. 107-141.

SINNERS CANNOT AND DO NOT WANT TO KNOW GOD

The implication of the sinfulness of human nature suggests suppression of the true knowledge of God, which He has made available to us in creation (Rom 1:18). Ultimately, this suppression is expressed in idolatry. Having been informed by nature that there is a Creator, Paul says, we “exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man, and birds, and animals, and reptiles” (Rom 1:23). As a result, we worship created things rather than the Creator Himself (Rom 1:25). In other words, humanity’s suppression of the knowledge of God is clearly expressed in the very practices of their various religious shrines. In that sense, religion is not a seeking after God’s glory, but rather a running away from God.³

This is the situation, in which the 19th-century Christian missionaries found our Tongan ancestors, when they arrived. Were our ancestors worshipping God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ? Absolutely not! Rather, they were worshipping creatures. *King Taufa’ahau*, the founder of modern Tonga, worshipped a shark as his god, for example.

Thus, it seems profoundly wrong to claim that our pre-Christian ancestors, here in the Pacific, were worshipping God – God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, through their religious practices, before the arrival of the missionaries. One thing that is clear from the available historical evidence – they were not doing that.

THE LOTU (RELIGION) OF OUR ANCESTORS AND THE LOTU (RELIGION) OF THE 19TH-CENTURY MISSIONARIES

The observation that our ancestors were worshipping idols confirms that they were religious people. The term *lotu* (religion), which was eventually adopted by missionaries all over the Pacific, as the designation of the Christian faith, was used in the pre-Christian era as a name for idol

³ It is helpful to note that Christianity is not a “religion”. If all religions were to be humanity’s effort in seeking after God (and this is how the concept of religion is most popularly understood) then Christianity is not a religion, in that sense, since Christianity is God reaching out to mankind, in the person of Jesus Christ. In fact, becoming a Christian involves turning away from religion “to serve the living God, and wait for His Son from heaven” (1 Thess 1:9-10).

worship. If our ancestors already had their own *lotu*, then what is the main difference between their *lotu* and the *lotu* that the 19th-century missionaries brought to our shores?

In one of the many hymns he composed for the Methodist church in Tonga, Moulton says that, when the missionaries arrived in Tonga, the natives heard the “preaching” of the Bible, and, as a result, they turned to the living God (391 *Tongan Hymn Book*):

*He na 'e tu'u ki ai 'a e lotu
Omi 'a e kau faifekau
'O fanongo 'e he motu
ki he me'a 'a e Tohitapu
'O takofi 'a e hou 'eiki mo e Hau*

The idea of this verse can be expressed in English, as follows:

*Christianity [lotu] came to Tonga;
Through the missionaries;
And [all the people of] the island heard;
The message of scripture;
[As a result] The king and the nobles repented.*

What is interesting to note from this verse is the conviction, at least of one of the missionaries, that the conversion of Tongans was brought about by the Bible. True, the missionaries came to Tonga to evangelise the natives. But it was the Bible that accomplished that noble aim on their behalf. In other words, the Bible was the “missionary” that brought Christianity – the new *lotu* – to Tonga, and not any of the missionaries. It was through the *preaching of the Bible* by the missionaries that our ancestors turned from their native deities to embrace Christianity. This, indeed, is the pattern of Christian missionary activities since New Testament times. For example, even though it was Paul’s associate, Epaphras, who evangelised the Colossians, Paul described the preaching activities of Epaphras as the coming of the “word of truth, the gospel” to the Colossians (Col 1:6).

This is how the *lotu* (religion) of our pre-Christian ancestors, and that of the missionaries, can be distinguished. The *lotu* of the missionaries was, as Moulton named it, *lotu tohitapu* or *biblical Christianity*. It is the *lotu*, in which scripture holds the authority to determine what must be believed, and what must be practised. In other words, the missionaries brought the *lotu* (religion) in which the *tohitapu* (scriptures) defined what ought to be believed, as well as what ought to be practised. The term *lotu tohitapu* (biblical Christianity) occurs twice in Moulton's *Tongan Hymn Book* (Hymns 449; 538 THB). This term (*lotu tohitapu*) not only captures the idea of the *lotu* (Christianity) the missionaries brought to the Pacific, it also distinguishes their *lotu* from our ancestors' *lotu*.

The missionaries' *lotu* is a specific type of religion. It is the Christianity of the New Testament. It is a form of Christianity, in which the Bible determines what we must believe, and how we must express that belief in practice. This type of Christianity is traditionally known as *evangelicalism* (*lotu tohitapu*). Although there are different types of evangelicalism today, its true nature is seen in those, whose faith and practice are confined to what the Bible says. To be confined to what the Bible says, in matters of faith and practice, does not rule out the application of the critical apparatus of exegesis to the biblical text. But such an undertaking is carried out with the conviction that the biblical text should be allowed to transform the reader's worldview.

In the past, evangelicalism was neglected, and almost became a forgotten "branch" of Christianity. Today, however, the tide has turned, and evangelicalism has become fashionable in Christian circles. However, there are many different forms of evangelicalism today. One can even now speak of "evangelical Catholics" and "liberal evangelicals", which, a generation ago, would have been understood as a contradiction in terms. However, the kind of evangelicalism that the 19th-century missionaries brought to Tonga, as it is expressed in written documentation, is an evangelicalism which is true to its traditional sense.

In actual fact, evangelicals derive their name from the Greek expression εὐαγγέλιον = *euaggelion*, which means "gospel" or "good news". The

term “evangelical”, as it has been used for centuries, is shorthand for *gospel-centred Christianity* – “that is, Christianity that puts its whole-hearted trust in God’s word; which accepts and loves the ancient gospel of Christ’s atoning death and glorious resurrection; which sees Christian discipleship as a matter of everyday commitment”.⁴ In other words, in its biblical sense, evangelicalism is “the church returning to basics; it is the church returning to the purest and simplest form of the gospel; it is the church at its straightforward best”.⁵

If Jesus’ life, as depicted by the gospels, was lived, at every point, in fulfilment of the scriptures, then the Christianity, whose teaching and practice are restricted to what the Bible says, is the most Christ-like form of Christianity. This is the kind of *lotu* brought to our shores by the 19th-century missionaries, as described in the available historical evidence.

CONCLUSION

Hence, we may conclude that evangelicalism, or *lotu tohitapu*, in its most traditional and biblical sense, was the *lotu* that the 19th-century missionaries brought to Tonga. Our pre-Christian ancestors only had *lotu*, but it was a form of worship that was idolatry, which cannot be identified in any way with the message of biblical Christianity, proclaimed to them by the missionaries, the message of Christ crucified. Otherwise, they would not have received the gospel proclaimed by the missionaries, which actually gave them a sense of belonging, and made sense of their surroundings.

⁴ See P. D. Jensen, and T. Payne, *Have Evangelicals Lost Their Way?: and other . . . Stuff*, Homebush West NSW: Lancer Books, 1991, p. 8.

⁵ See Jensen and Payne, *Evangelicals*, p. 42.