

# **OBLIGATION IN THE MELANESIAN CLAN CONTEXT AND ITS EFFECT UPON THE UNDERSTANDING OF THE GOSPEL OF GRACE**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Culture – it has been defined as “the integrated system of learned behaviour patterns, which are characteristic of the members of a society”.<sup>1</sup> Key to this definition is the word *learned*. One’s behavioural patterns are not a given, rather they are culturally conditioned, being shaped and influenced by the cultural environment in which one lives. What’s more, it is not simply one’s behavioural patterns, which are conditioned by culture, but also the thought patterns, which lie at the root of any given behaviour. Culture thus influences both the way a man acts, and the way he thinks. To state it concisely, culture shapes the man.

If the above-stated premise is true, then it is indispensable that those who seek to communicate the gospel, understand how culture has shaped the

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<sup>1</sup> E. Adamson Hoebel, *Anthropology: The Study of Man*, 4th edn, New York NY: McGraw-Hill, 1972, p. 6; quoted in Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologising in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1979, p. 46.

thoughts, perceptions, and beliefs of those in their audience, for those who hear the gospel message will necessarily interpret that message from within their own cultural framework. As it has been pointed out, man can “understand and interpret the world, and all that is beyond this world, only in terms of his cultural or subcultural experience”.<sup>2</sup> Because the influence of culture is all pervasive, and because the goal of communication is not simply the passing on of information, but a true comprehension, on the part of the receptor audience, an understanding of the cultural influences, which are at work in a given audience, is crucial to our communication of the gospel. To ignore these influences, is to invite miscomprehension and confusion.<sup>3</sup>

Bearing this in mind, what aspects of culture need to be considered, when communicating the gospel, within the Melanesian context? Taking into account the rich cultural heritage of the Melanesian peoples, this is certainly a loaded question, for, in reality, all of culture needs to be considered. At the same time, however, we can ask, are there particular aspects of Melanesian culture, which highly influence, or influence to a greater extent, how a Melanesian views and understands the message of the gospel? While countless aspects of culture could be considered here, it is the intent of this article to consider just one such aspect, namely Melanesian clan relationships, and, in particular, how the obligatory nature of these relationships affects the understanding of the gospel of grace. Toward this end, the clan relationship will first be examined. We will then consider how clan relationships shape and influence one’s understanding of the gospel of grace. Finally, we will consider the implications of this influence.

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<sup>2</sup> Louis J. Luzbetak, “Unity in Diversity: Ethnotheological Sensitivity in Cross-Cultural Evangelism”, in *Missiology: An International Review* 4-2 (April, 1976), p. 209.

<sup>3</sup> Many will readily admit to the value of this endeavour for intercultural communication. It should be pointed out, however, that the importance of understanding cultural influences is not limited to those who seek to communicate cross-culturally, but is equally relevant to those who communicate within their own cultural context. To ignore the influence of culture is just as fatal to a clear understanding of the gospel for the one who communicates within his own culture as it is to those who communicate across cultures.

## MELANESIAN CLAN RELATIONSHIPS

At the heart of Melanesian cultural life lies the clan – that group of individuals who “claim, but cannot always substantiate, descent from a common . . . ancestor.”<sup>4</sup> Clan members, state Hiebert and Menses, “believe they are related, but they cannot always trace the actual genealogical links between them.”<sup>5</sup> In the end, it is not the reality of a common ancestry that is important. It is the perception that counts.

Clan members relate at many different levels, starting with the nuclear family, and then extending beyond, in a series of ever-expanding social groupings. A group of closely-related families forms the sublineage. Here, members will often reside in a single location, with land held jointly, and chores, which relate to the group, being shared among individuals. Beyond this, is the lineage or subclan, comprised of “those, who can trace their genealogical relationship to one another, through a common *known* ancestor”.<sup>6</sup> Lineages, which recognise some sort of connection among them, then make up the clan. As stated above, it is not the actual genealogical link that counts. The simple perception of the link, often through that of a mythological ancestor, is enough to cement the relationship, and unite the lineages as a single clan.

The nuclear family, the sublineage, and the lineage, all exist as social groupings within the clan context. Yet, clan members relate outside of the clan as well. Clans are joined together as phratries, or tribes, and, beyond this, is the society as a whole. While all relationships are important, it is, nevertheless, the close kinship ties found within the clan that serve as the foundation of Melanesian society. Relationships outside the clan may fail; clan relationships are expected to last. In Melanesia, the clan tie is strong, and serves, in effect, to promote the life of the clan. One’s support, provision, and security are all provided for within the

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<sup>4</sup> Kenneth McElhanon, and Darrell Whiteman, “Kinship: Who is Related to Whom”, in *Point 5* (1984), p. 111.

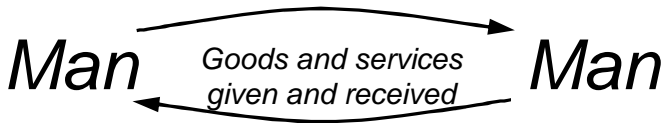
<sup>5</sup> Paul G. Hiebert, and Eloise Hiebert Menses, *Incarnational Ministry: Planting Churches in Band, Tribal, Peasant, and Urban Societies*, Grand Rapids MI: Baker Books, 1995, p. 93.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

clan environment.<sup>7</sup> It has been said that, within the Melanesian context, the traditional community “lent the support, the individual needed, in his or her life’s journey”.<sup>8</sup> This is certainly true of the clan.

### THE PRINCIPLE OF RECIPROCITY

It is commonly agreed that, central to Melanesian clan relationships, is the principle of reciprocity.<sup>9</sup> To be sure, some relationships will always be more one-sided than others – some will give more and receive less, within the clan. In addition, certain relationships will exhibit a greater level of reciprocity than others. The closer the tie within the clan, the greater the degree of reciprocity that will be demonstrated. Regardless of the extent, however, the principle of reciprocity remains a basic worldview assumption within the Melanesian context. For the Melanesian, real relationships are reciprocal, and must be expressed in mutual giving and receiving. This is the norm and expectation within the clan.



**Figure 1. The Reciprocal Clan Relationship**

The reciprocity referred to here can be clearly seen in the mutual dependence clan members have on one another. Clan members are

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<sup>7</sup> What is said of the clan here would also be true of that which exists as part of the clan, namely, the lineage or sub-lineage. The Bogaia of the Southern Highlands have a population of only 300. Living among them over the past 14 years, I have seen clan members relate to one another on an almost daily basis. For the Bogaia, it is the clan which serves as the chief means of support and security to the individual. For larger cultural groups, however, it may be the lineage or sub-lineage that fulfils this role. Regardless, while Melanesian cultures are admittedly diverse and populations vary greatly, it can still be argued that it is the clan relationship, in some shape or form, that serves as the foundation of all Melanesian societies.

<sup>8</sup> Mary MacDonald, “Melanesian Communities: Past and Present”, in *Point 5* (1984), p. 224.

<sup>9</sup> See Darrell Whiteman, “Melanesian Religions: An Overview”, in *Point 6* (1984), pp. 109-110.

expected to help each other with gardening, house-building, and fighting, in paying out bride price and compensation claims, and in paying school fees, and other expenses. Each member of the clan participates, as one who gives to fellow clan members, and, in turn, as one who receives.

That reciprocity exists within the clan, is clearly evident. But, we may ask the question, “Why does it exist?” Why is exchange seen as crucial, within the Melanesian context, or why is reciprocity the chosen means of expressing relationship? Some have argued that, just as compensation payments serve to redistribute wealth within the society, so, too, does reciprocity maintain a state of equality: through reciprocity, “a relationship, tending towards equivalence, is sustained between members, by giving and receiving, by helping, and being helped”.<sup>10</sup> Others have argued that the true value of reciprocity lies in its ability to create, maintain, and strengthen the relationships, upon which “the only way to ‘life’ is built”.<sup>11</sup> In this sense, reciprocity is inseparably linked to the Melanesian concept of salvation – that “fullness-of-life” ideal, where man experiences the blessings of health, success, and prosperity, and the absence of such ills as death, defeat, sickness, and poverty.

For the Melanesian, “fullness of life” can only be found within the community. It is never found in isolation from one another, but only in relationship, or partnership, with others. Reciprocity binds clan members together, and, in this relationship of interdependency, one’s welfare is provided for, ensuring that life, in its fullest sense, is realised.

The interdependency, which is made manifest in the reciprocal clan relationship, is largely due to necessity, and stems from the fact that, in the Melanesian context, the traditional day-to-day burdens of life were too great for man to bear alone. Many of the common tasks, faced by the Melanesian, are extremely labour intensive. Building a house, clearing a garden area, the construction of a canoe – these all require immense amounts of physical labour. By the same token, while gathering a bride price, or paying out a compensation claim, may not

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<sup>10</sup> MacDonald, “Melanesian Communities”, p. 216.

<sup>11</sup> Ennio Mantovani, “Traditional Values and Ethics”, in *Point 5* (1984), p. 204.

require large amounts of physical labour, they are, at the same time, capital-intensive endeavours. Either way, physically or materially, a man would be hard pressed to meet these needs on his own.

What was insurmountable to the individual, however, was quite possible for the clan. Within the clan environment, clan members help and assist each other, giving to one another, and receiving from one another, with the end result being that all are provided for. The reciprocal clan relationship is, thus, vital to the support and provision of the individual. This has historically been the case, and remains no less so today.<sup>12</sup> In fact, so crucial are these relationships, within the Melanesian context, that it has been said, without them, survival and existence are impossible.<sup>13</sup>

### **THE OBLIGATORY NATURE OF THE CLAN RELATIONSHIP**

While the reciprocity of Melanesian clan relationships is everywhere agreed upon, more important to our purpose here, is the obligatory nature of these relationships. “Melanesian life”, it has been noted, “is centred around obligations”.<sup>14</sup> To exist within the clan, means to exist, as one under obligation. In fact, the kinship terms, by which fellow clan members refer to one another, imply that certain obligations exist, and must be met.<sup>15</sup> Beyond doubt, within the clan context, one is under obligation to help, support, and provide for fellow clan members. But,

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<sup>12</sup> It should be pointed out that, while Melanesians have seen huge technological advances in recent decades, resulting in some of the more-common day-to-day tasks becoming less labour intensive, at the same time, Western materialism has led to inflationary bride prices and compensation claims that are now more capital intensive than ever. As a result of this development, the Melanesian remains just as dependent on fellow clan members as ever. It can be further noted that today, with increased exposure and increased opportunities, Melanesians will often look outside the clan for many types of help. Governments, non-government organisations, companies, churches, and missions are all eagerly sought out. Yet, in the end, if these attempts fail, the clan still exists to meet the needs of the individual. Come what may, the clan remains the backbone of Melanesian society.

<sup>13</sup> See Gernot Fugmann, “Fundamental Issues for a Theology in Melanesia”, in *Point* 7 (1985), p. 88.

<sup>14</sup> Bernard Narokobi, “Family Law in Melanesia,” *Catalyst* 18-1 (1988), p. 34.

<sup>15</sup> See McElhanon and Whiteman, “Kinship”, p. 112.

because relationships are reciprocal, to exist within the clan, means not only to exist, as one who is under obligation, but also to exist, as one who places others under obligation.

This fact became evident to me shortly after my arrival in the Bogaia area of the Southern Highlands. A major oil company had moved into the area to do some preliminary survey work. While most of the local men secured employment for a short period, cutting survey lines through the bush, one young man managed to stay on with the company for a number of months. When he finally returned home, he was, by local standards, a wealthy man. Upon his return, however, his wages were quickly doled out to fellow clan members. He, himself, was left with little to show for his efforts. When asked how he could part so quickly with the fruit of his labours, his response was, “If I do not look after my clan now, later, when I am in need, they will not look after me.” Here the principle of reciprocity was indeed being upheld. But, more significantly, the obligatory nature of the clan relationship was seen to come into play. By giving today, the one clan member had placed others under obligation to him, and had, in effect, made provision for his future well-being and security.

Countless other examples could be related here: a pig is given to help pay a bride price, placing the groom under obligation to return the favour at a future point in time; one clan member helps another to pay a child’s school fees, thus placing the recipient under obligation to provide future aid to the donor, in his time of need; or a garden fails, causing one clan member to provide food for his fellow clansman, and, once again, the beneficiary of the assistance is placed under obligation to his benefactor. While gifts are not necessarily paid back in kind, what these examples clearly show is that reciprocity breeds obligation, for, when one gives, the expectation is that the one who receives will one day return the favour in some shape or form.

Barry Irwin, working among the Salt-Yui of the Chimbu in the 1960s, hit upon this same fact. Irwin discovered that, among the Salt-Yui, “nothing was given for nothing”. When a gift was given, or some assistance rendered, the recipient had a liability, until the obligation to return the

favour had been fulfilled. Once repayment was made, the individual concerned was released from his obligation. If the repayment was of greater value than the original liability, then the cycle continued, with the new recipient being under obligation to the one who had formerly been his debtor. Irwin called this phenomenon, “the liability complex”.<sup>16</sup>

Irwin observed that, among the Salt-Yui, there were no free gifts. Others have noted this same principle operating in other Melanesian cultures. It has been stated, elsewhere, that, in the reciprocal relationship that exists among brothers, “the ideal is to act generously, leaving the responsibility for returning such generosity to the brother”.<sup>17</sup> The responsibility to return the favour is not left to chance, however. The one who gives is fully aware of the obligation that now exists, and “keeps an eye on the returns”.<sup>18</sup> What all this clearly shows is that, within the clan context, when one gives, either materially, or through some other assistance, there is always the expectation of future benefit. Obligation always exists. Reciprocity is, indeed, central to the Melanesian clan relationship, but it is obligation which keeps the relationship operating in a reciprocal manner.

## **RELATIONS TO BOTH THE LIVING AND THE DEAD**

Within the Melanesian context, relationships not only exist between living clan members, but also between the living and the dead.<sup>19</sup> The traditional Melanesian view holds that the spirits of the dead continue to dwell among the living. As such, “the ancestors are as much a part of the community as the living members”<sup>20</sup> and “are naturally concerned to

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<sup>16</sup> See Barry Irwin, “The Liability Complex among the Chimbu Peoples of New Guinea”, in *Practical Anthropology* 19-6 (1972), pp. 280-285.

<sup>17</sup> MacDonald, “Melanesian Communities”, p. 217.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Within the kinship system of relationships, Hiebert and Menses refer to the ancestors as the “living dead”. This highlights the fact that, within the clan context, the deceased are still viewed as part of the community. They are alive, and continue to participate in the life of the clan. See Hiebert and Menses, *Incarnational Ministry*, p. 92.

<sup>20</sup> Mantovani, “Traditional Values”, p. 202.



safeguard the strength, prosperity, and continuity of the group”.<sup>21</sup> Of course, it is in their best interest to do so. A concern for their own well-being necessitates a concern for the clan as a whole.

### ***Reciprocity in the Living/Ancestral Relationship***

Traditionally, ancestral spirits were believed to have certain powers at their disposal, by which they could aid their living counterparts.<sup>22</sup> As for the living, they not only understood this to be true, but also expected it to transpire. Just as living clan members expected help and assistance from one another so, too, did the living expect help and assistance from their deceased relations. But, while the expectation of ancestral goodwill always existed, the living also understood that the ancestors were retributive. The living might experience reward and good fortune, but there was no guarantee; the ancestors were just as likely to mete out punishment if some taboo had been broken, which caused disharmony within the clan. In order to attain prosperity, then, the living had to ensure that the laws of their society were constantly adhered to, and that good relationships were always maintained, not only among themselves, but also with the dead.

While the living stood to benefit greatly from the assistance and goodwill of the ancestors, it needs to be emphasised that the relationship was not

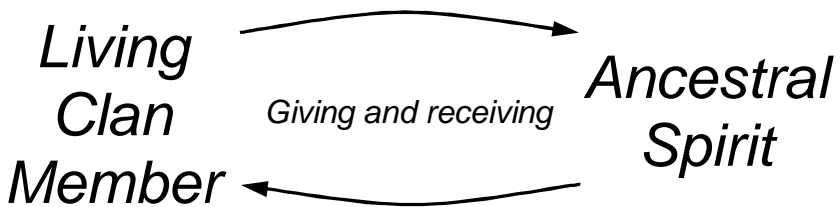
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<sup>21</sup> Fugmann, “Fundamental Issues”, p. 91.

<sup>22</sup> Recent decades have seen drastic changes in Melanesian culture. With that in mind, I have purposefully chosen to speak of the relationship between man and his ancestors, and between man and other spirits, according to the traditional point of view. Throughout the sections: “Reciprocity in the Living/Clan Relationship”, “Obligation Among the Living and the Dead”, and “Relationship to Other Spirits”, I have largely used past-tense verbs. The use of the past tense does not imply, however, that the things spoken of here were only true then and not now. External factors have certainly changed. Ritual and sacrifice, as referred to in these sections, may no longer be in evidence (although this is truer in some areas than others). But the internal beliefs, assumptions, and convictions, which stood at the root of these practices, are still a very real part of the Melanesian way of thinking. Worldviews do not change quickly. It is, therefore, crucial to understand that, even in the absence of external evidence, the traditional Melanesian view of the relationship between man and the spirits continues to influence Melanesian thought and behaviour. Further sections of this article will be built on this assumption.

one-sided. The benefits received did not simply flow in one direction. Darrell Whiteman has stated that the relationship between man and his ancestors was “a relationship of mutual help and interdependence, a relationship of reciprocity, a giving and taking between human beings and the spirit world”.<sup>23</sup> Man may have been dependent on the ancestors for prosperity, but, as the ancestors remained inseparably linked to the clan, their welfare was tied up with that of their human counterparts. When the clan prospered, all prospered, both the living and the dead. When the clan suffered, all suffered as well.

Given the above, it can be clearly seen that the living/ancestral relationship was markedly similar to the relationship that exists between living clan members. The assistance and help may have taken on different outward forms, but, ultimately, the relationship was governed by the same principle – that of reciprocity. As before, the relationship can be simply illustrated. Figure 2 shows two parties involved – a living clan member and an ancestral spirit. As before, the arrows point in both directions. As before, there is a continuous flow of giving and receiving that is taking place. And, as before, reciprocity is clearly indicated.



**Figure 2. The Reciprocal Relationship with Ancestors**

### ***Obligation Among the Living and the Dead***

It is plain that reciprocity has always existed between man and his ancestors, but, what about obligation? Was obligation the key that kept the living/ancestral relationship operating in a reciprocal manner? That Melanesians viewed the ancestors as retributive would indicate that it was. The ancestors were the guardians of society. They were the ones, who established the acceptable behavioural patterns for the clan. They

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<sup>23</sup> Whiteman, “Melanesian Religions”, p. 110.

were the ones, who were endowed with special powers. And they were the ones, who would use those powers to either bring blessing or calamity to the clan. In order for man to experience the “fullness-of-life” ideal, then, it was essential that he live in accordance with the prescribed guidelines, as set forth by the ancestors. He was under obligation to do so. To live according to the prescribed guidelines ensured harmony – a harmony, from which both living and ancestral clan members would benefit. Failure to do so, brought disharmony, and would invite the wrath and indignation of the ancestors.

Clan members were under obligation to live in a harmonious manner. They were also under obligation to make things right, if that harmony had, in some way, been upset. When the ancestors were offended, certain rituals had to be performed, or sacrifices made, in order to placate them. This was the prescribed means of making amends, and restoring balance to the clan environment. Until the ritual act had been performed, or the sacrifice made, the disharmony, and the ruinous effects associated with it, would continue.

Clan members were, thus, under a two-fold obligation to the ancestors. Firstly, to walk according to the prescribed patterns of the society, and secondly, if the guidelines had been broken, to make amends. The ancestors, for their part, were also under obligation. If the laws of the society were faithfully adhered to, the ancestors were under obligation to use the powers at their disposal to bring prosperity to the clan. Likewise, if a breakdown occurred in the clan, which caused disharmony, when the proper ritual was executed, or the proper sacrifice made, the ancestors were under obligation to restore the prosperity, which had been forfeited. Faithfulness to the laws of the society, ritual, and sacrifice were, thus, all effective means of placing the ancestors under obligation to their living clan relations. When the prescribed patterns were followed, the ancestors had to reciprocate, by bringing blessing and prosperity. This was man’s understanding of the relationship.

### ***Relationship to Other Spirits***

Within the clan, there was a continuing relationship between the living and the spirits of the dead. Man's relationship to the spirit world, however, extended far beyond his relationship to the ancestors. Relationships were also maintained with a multitude of other spirits – spirits, who were believed to inhabit, or be associated with, particular places or objects (e.g., trees, mountains, rivers, or lakes). While not considered part of the clan, *per se*, these relationships still occurred within the clan environment. In a sense, these spirits belonged to the clan. As such, it is essential to understand how the relationship to these other spirits was perceived.

To begin with, as with the ancestors, man saw these spirits as possessing power – a power far greater than man himself possessed. Within the clan belief system or worldview, these spirits were seen to have a great deal of control over man and his circumstances. In addition, these spirits were seen as retributive. If one could live in such a way as to not cause offence, then prosperity could be expected. However, to offend one of these spirits was to ensure calamity. Finally, these spirits could be manipulated, through the observance of certain rules, and through the use of ritual and sacrifice.

By and large, man related to these spirits in the same way that he related to the spirits of his ancestors. In all cases, the spirits were seen as powerful. But man's ability to manipulate the spirits cannot be overstated. It has been said that "animism is based on manipulation", and, further, that the animist "seeks to manipulate spiritual beings to do his will".<sup>24</sup> In relation to the spirits, referred to here, this was undoubtedly true. Rule keeping, ritual, and sacrifice were the appointed means of manipulating the spirits. Yet, it must be understood, as well, that the appointed means were useless, unless obligation was seen to exist. There is power in rule-keeping; there is power in ritual, and there

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<sup>24</sup> Gailyn Van Rheenen, *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts*, Pasadena CA: William Carey Library, 1991, p. 22.

is power in sacrifice, only because of the obligatory nature of the human/spirit relationship.

Viewed in the above light, each relationship that exists within the clan environment can be seen to operate on the same basic principle. Man's support, provision, protection – in fact, all that the “fullness-of-life” concept entails – is only possible, within the framework of relationships, where obligation is seen to exist. Whether the relationship is among men, or between man and spirit, does not matter. Without obligation, the system disintegrates.

### **THE EFFECT OF OBLIGATION ON THE UNDERSTANDING OF THE GOSPEL OF GRACE**

The biblical concept of grace can be equated with, in general, God's unmerited favour toward man, and, more specifically, in terms of the gospel, man's salvation being based on no merit of his own, but solely on the basis of God's good pleasure, bestowed on man in Christ.<sup>25</sup> It is my contention that the Melanesian concept of obligation, which operates in the clan environment, is diametrically opposed to this biblical concept. Obligation, and the reciprocal relationships that it perpetuates, have a diverse effect, both on how a man understands his relationship to God, and how he understands his salvation.

### **MAN'S RELATIONSHIP TO GOD**

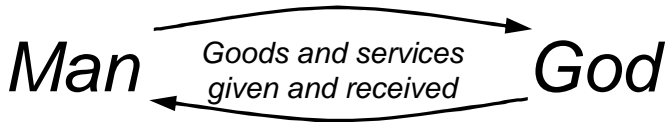
Given the original premise of this article – that one's culture influences both the way a man acts, and the way a man thinks – it should come as no surprise that, within the Melanesian context, many will view their relationship to God as one based on reciprocity and obligation. The clan environment has conditioned the Melanesian to view true and meaningful relationships in this way.<sup>26</sup> As Figure 3 illustrates, man is perceived to

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<sup>25</sup> See Allen C. Meyers, ed., “Grace”, in *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary*, Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1987, pp. 437-438.

<sup>26</sup> As kinship terms imply certain rights and obligations in the Melanesian context, which the God of Christianity is referred to as Father is highly significant. It implies that obligation exists in the relationship between God and man. Also, the fact that Christ is called the “firstborn among many brothers” (Rom 8:29 NIV) cannot go

relate to God, in the same way he relates to fellow clan members, or to the ancestors, and other spirits. The perception is that there is mutual obligation to give and receive between God and man.



**Figure 3. The Perceived Relationship between God and Man**

Based on the above understanding, man is led to enter into relationship with God, through gift-giving, or the rendering of various types of service. Once performed, the expectation then exists that God is under obligation to repay the favour. Or, conversely, if the understanding is that God, Himself, has initiated the relationship, then man is now under obligation to reciprocate. Irwin observed that, among the Chimbu, new converts would work diligently to pay back Christ by attending church services, and providing assistance to the church or mission with which they were affiliated. Once the clan considered repayment to be of sufficient value to fulfil their obligation, however, church attendance would drop off, and clan members would go back to their “own lives”. If the repayment was considered of greater worth than the grace of God, which had been extended to them, then God was viewed as in debt to the clan.<sup>27</sup>

What Irwin noticed among the Chimbu can only be understood in light of the traditional relationship between man and spirit, within the clan context. We have noted that, while the ancestors and other spirit beings were viewed as retributive, at the same time, it was possible to manipulate them, through ritual and sacrifice. Gernot Fugmann has

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unnoticed. Perhaps the most important relationship within the clan is that between brothers. Here, more than anywhere else, reciprocity and obligation rule. Within the Christian gospel, then, references to God as Father, and Christ as brother, only lend further credence to the Melanesian assumption that man must relate to God on the basis of reciprocity and obligation. Culture influencing, as it does, can it be understood in any other way?

<sup>27</sup> See Irwin, “The Liability Complex”, pp. 282-283.

argued that, within the Melanesian context, God is viewed in this same way. He is “principally retributive, reacting according to a fairly-predesigned pattern of reward and punishment”, and “is, furthermore, open to ritual influence, and prompting”.<sup>28</sup> Viewed according to the cultural model of obligation, then, God can be manipulated, to provide for the welfare of men. If man acts according to God’s prescribed pattern, or if he gives to God, or renders some type of service, then, God is bound by obligation to return the favour. In this system, God is simply a means to an end. He becomes just one more relation, albeit a very powerful one, to provide for the support and well-being of the individual. Relationship to God is not sought out for who He is but, rather, for what He can do. The influence of obligation, in the clan context, thus causes man to look at God from a very humanistic perspective. His interest in relating to God will be self-serving, and concerned with the earthly needs of the here and now – those same earthly needs that have always been the concern of the “fullness-of-life” ideal.

### **MAN’S UNDERSTANDING OF SALVATION**

If man views his relationship to God as one of reciprocity, bound by mutual obligation, then salvation must be viewed as a right, not as the free gift that scripture indicates (cf. Rom 6:23; Eph 2:8-9). It cannot be by grace, but must be according to man’s own merit. When man acts, God must return the favour. When man acts in a way deemed worthy of salvation, then God must respond by providing that salvation.

If we consider the “fullness-of-life” ideal to be that concept, which most closely relates to salvation, in the Melanesian context, then, truly, within the clan, man has always worked toward his own salvation. By entering into a system of reciprocal relationships, either with living relations, ancestors, or other spirit beings, man could place others under obligation to himself, thus providing for his own welfare and security. Salvation has always been there for the taking. If man simply fulfils his obligations, then others must fulfil theirs.

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<sup>28</sup> Fugmann, “Fundamental Issues”, p. 92.

Within the clan, the fulfilment of obligations has, at all times, been the key. Man does not expect to freely receive. He fully understands that, in the receiving, he is placed under obligation. At the same time, he does not expect to freely give, either. In the giving, he places others under obligation. He fully expects the favour to be returned. “Nothing is given for nothing”, within the clan. This mentality is so strongly engrained that it cannot help but carry over into man’s understanding of salvation.

The “no-free-gift” mentality is in complete contradiction, however, to the grace of God in salvation. Grace says nothing of obligation. God is not obligated to save man. If God were to repay man, based on the merit of his own actions, then man could only expect the wrath of God. No act of man can ever be considered good enough to merit God’s favour. No act can ever be considered as measuring up to God’s standard of righteousness (cf. Is 64:6; Rom 3:10-12). Yet, due to the influence of culture, many will go on believing that their relationship to God is one of reciprocity and obligation, and that, because of this, humans are given “a method and a means to claim a right to salvation”.<sup>29</sup> Many will go through life trying to build up enough merit to place God under obligation. Or, having become conscious of the grace of God in their salvation, many will seek to pay back that grace. Either way, whether man seeks to earn the grace of God, or whether he diligently strives to repay it, the end result is that grace is no longer grace. The grace of God has become highly insignificant, if man thinks he can earn it, or, in some way, pay it back. As a result, God’s entire work of salvation becomes completely undervalued.

### **THE IMPLICATIONS OF UNDERSTANDING SALVATION FROM AN OBLIGATORY POINT OF VIEW**

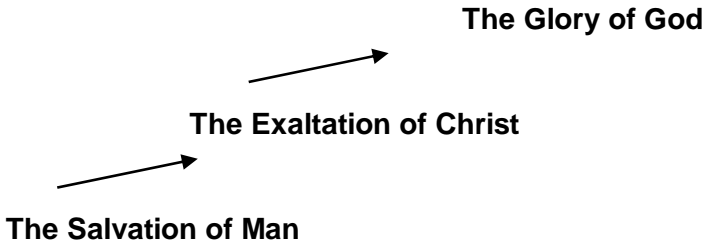
It can be argued that there are three things at stake in the gospel: the salvation of man; the exaltation of Christ; and the glory of God. For many, the gospel is viewed as primarily concerned with man’s salvation. Yet, while the salvation of man is certainly at stake, more important to the purpose of the gospel are the exaltation of Christ, and the glory of

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<sup>29</sup> Gernot Fugmann, “Salvation in Melanesian Religions”, in *Point* 6 (1984), p. 291.



God. Here, one concern builds upon another: in man's salvation, Christ is exalted, and, in both the salvation of man, and the exaltation of Christ, God is glorified. When placed in order of significance, then, the hierarchy of issues at stake in the gospel appears as in Figure 4. Ultimately, it is seen, it is the glory of God which is of primary concern.



**Figure 4. Hierarchy of Issues at Stake in the Gospel**

When salvation is looked at from an obligatory point of view, there are major implications for all three of the above-listed concerns. There are implications for the salvation of man; there are implications for the exaltation of Christ; and there are implications for the glory of God. Each of these will now be considered.

### **THE SALVATION OF MAN**

The scriptures make it clear that man's salvation is on the basis of faith alone (cf. Rom 3:28; 5:1; Gal 2:16; Eph 2:8-9). Faith is the means by which the benefits of the saving work of Christ are appropriated to us. Key to saving faith is the element of trust. In order to determine the true object of faith, then, we can ask the question "In the end, what is man actually trusting in to gain salvation?"

If man is led to believe that he relates to God in a reciprocal manner, where both parties are bound by obligation, and, if he believes that salvation is somehow gained by performing certain acts that place God under obligation to save, then it can be clearly seen that what man is trusting in is not the graciousness of God, bestowed on man in Christ, but, rather, in his own work and effort. By performing the proper ritual or act (e.g., the giving of a tithe, or offering, prayer, a work of service to

the church, or more generally, living according to God's moral standard), God can be manipulated into a position of obligation.

As stated already, it was traditionally held that the spirits of the ancestors possessed power, by which they could aid their living counterparts. Other spirit beings were also viewed in this way. Certainly, within the clan context, men trusted in the power of these spirits, and believed that they could, in fact, assist them. But, it can be argued that, in the final analysis, true power did not reside in the spirits. Instead, true power rested in man, through the rituals at his command. Man's trust, finally, was not in the spirits, who were seen as the source of provision, but, rather, in the efficacy of the ritual, by which the spirits could be manipulated. In the end, man was left trusting in his own ability to control his circumstances, and, ultimately, his own fate.

This understanding, when carried over to man's view of salvation, presents a hopeless situation. In the end, the implication of trusting in one's own efforts to gain salvation is that salvation is forfeited. The power of salvation is not found in man, or in any ritual or act at man's command, but is found, instead, in the atoning work of Christ (cf. Rom 5:9; Eph 1:7; Col 1:20). Only the work of Christ is acceptable in the eyes of God. Only the work of Christ could achieve the salvation of men.<sup>30</sup> For man to trust in anything else, ensures that the very thing which is sought, is actually lost. Man may strive diligently to find salvation, but, if he seeks it in his own effort, rather than in the effort of Christ, on man's behalf, he will never find it. Salvation is only found in Christ.

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<sup>30</sup> The best acts of men always remain tainted by sin. As such, any offering, given by man to God, is always lacking in perfect righteousness, and is by no means sufficient to affect man's salvation. The offering of Christ alone, as a lamb unblemished (1 Peter 1:19), was sufficient to atone for the sins of men, and accomplish our salvation.

## **THE EXALTATION OF CHRIST**

It is no mistake that salvation is found in Christ alone. This has always been the Father's intent.<sup>31</sup> As the agent of salvation, Christ is exalted as the Saviour of the world. In addition, as a result of Christ's humbling of Himself, becoming obedient to the point of death – the very death by which He accomplishes our salvation – God has exalted Him and given Him a name above every name (cf. Phil 2:9). The Father's intent is, therefore, not simply that Christ is exalted as Saviour, but also that He is exalted as Lord.

But, if salvation is viewed as the outcome of a reciprocal relationship with God that is bound by obligation, then Christ must, necessarily, be robbed of His exalted position. When salvation is viewed as an obligatory response by God to the actions of men, then the work of Christ is devalued, implying that Christ died needlessly (cf. Gal 2:21). Why is there a need for a Saviour, or why is there a need for the saving work of Christ, if man, in effect, can achieve his own salvation? Salvation, seen from the standpoint of obligation, then, has numerous implications for the exaltation of Christ: firstly, an emphasis on obligation prevents Christ from being fully, or finally, embraced as Saviour; secondly, not being grasped as Saviour, men will, by no means, exalt Him as Saviour; and thirdly, if Christ is not exalted as Saviour, neither will men exalt Him as Lord. We may ask the question, "Would anyone readily submit to the Lordship of Christ, when they fail to fathom the necessity, extent, grandeur, and achievement of His saving work?"

In the end, Christ will duly be exalted. Every knee will bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (cf. Phil 2:10-11). The intent of God, the Father, to exalt the Son will, by no means, be thwarted. But, in the meantime, it is certain that, if salvation is primarily viewed as an obligatory response by God to the actions of men, then Christ cannot be exalted. Even viewing salvation as partly of man and partly of Christ

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<sup>31</sup> The saving work of Christ was according to the predetermined plan of God (Acts 2:23). What's more, the apostle Paul makes plain that this plan existed from all eternity. God's intent that salvation be found in Christ existed before the foundation of the world (Eph 1:4).

fails to see the will and purpose of God in man's redemption. Truly, the gospel is about the salvation of men. But, more importantly, it is about the exaltation of Christ. Salvation must be understood as based on the work of Christ alone, for only in this way, can Christ be truly exalted in salvation.

### **THE GLORY OF GOD**

"Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation" (Rom 4:4 NIV). This statement shows that, if salvation is achieved by works, then it is simply a payment for services rendered. But the Bible plainly teaches that salvation is an act of God, which flows from His grace (cf. Acts 15:11; Eph 2:5; 8-9; 2 Tim 1:9). It does not grow out of the work of man, but, rather, out of the work of God, on man's behalf. It is God who has initiated the divine plan of salvation (cf. John 8:42); He is the one who sent the Son into the world, providing the one and only sacrifice that could achieve the forgiveness of sins (cf. Heb 10:11-12); He is the one who has accepted that sacrifice on our behalf, resulting both in our redemption and reconciliation (cf. Rom 5:10-11; Eph 1:7; Col 1:14, 20-22); and He is the one who credits the righteousness of Christ to us, so that we are declared just in His sight (cf. Rom 5:18-19). This is pure grace. God was not obligated to save man. What man deserves is the wrath of God, not the blessings of salvation. God, therefore, deserves all the credit in salvation, and, as such, all the glory belongs to God as well.

It is further evident from scripture that, not only is God glorified in man's salvation, He is also glorified in the exaltation of Christ (cf. Phil 2:11). The exaltation of Christ "fulfils the purpose of the Father, and so, brings glory to God".<sup>32</sup> God's grace acts to save man. In that salvation, Christ is exalted. In both acts, God's perfect plan and purpose are being carried out. Both acts work together to bring glory to God.

Indeed, God is to be praised for His glorious grace (cf. Eph 1:6). He is to be glorified in all of salvation. But, if grace is abandoned, and God is

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<sup>32</sup> Homer A. Kent Jr, "Philippians", in *The Expositors Bible Commentary*, vol 11, Frank E. Gaebelin, ed., Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1978, p. 125.

seen as obligated to save, based on the merit of man's own actions, then, truly, man can boast in himself (cf. Rom 4:2). Praise and thanksgiving will be withheld from God, and given to man instead. Of the implications, which stem from understanding salvation from an obligatory point of view, this is the most serious of all. As long as man looks at salvation as his right – as repayment for fulfilling certain obligations – then man will be guilty of holding back from God the glory, which is due only to Him. Man sets himself up as worthy of honour, and belittles the glory of God.

### **CONCLUSION**

To be found guilty of belittling the glory of God is no small thing. The consequences of this act are, indeed, grave. The danger of viewing salvation from an obligatory point of view is compounded, however, by the fact that one may not even be aware that one is doing so. People do not readily think about their worldview. They do not normally think about how their culture has affected their thought patterns and behaviour. It is simply the way things are. If, within the Melanesian context, one sincerely believes that salvation is gained through a reciprocal relationship to God, which is bound by obligation, this can only be expected. This is the normal pattern of relationship within the clan, and, in fact, within many other areas of Melanesian society.

The fact that this understanding can be expected, within the Melanesian context, begs the church to address this issue. It is well and good to talk about the importance of contextualisation, and the development of a Melanesian theology, but the grace of God cannot be sacrificed on the altar of culture. Reciprocity and obligation cannot be substituted for the unmerited favour of God. God's grace in salvation is a biblical absolute, which must be applied, and understood, in every context.

This article has emphasised the vital role, which the clan plays within Melanesian society. The relationships that are found therein serve as the basis for community. In a day when many Melanesian communities are disintegrating, the importance of the clan relationship, and the ties that serve to bind clan members together, cannot be overstated. At the same

time, though, the church needs to emphasise that man relates to God in a completely different way. The relationship between God and man is not one that, as in the clan, tends towards equivalence through giving and receiving. Man is dependent on God in all things. God, on the other hand, depends on man for nothing. That God chooses to relate to man at all is purely an act of grace. He is not bound by obligation to do so. Neither is He bound by obligation to pay back the perceived good works of men. The goodwill of God, in its entirety, is all of grace.

It must be emphasised, as well, that man, as the recipient of the grace of God, can, by no means, pay back that grace. God does not ask man to repay it. He calls upon men to freely receive it.<sup>33</sup> There may be no free gifts, within the clan context, but God does not operate by this principle. Any act of man, directed toward God, then, must be viewed, not as repayment for what God has done, but, rather, as an act, which flows from love for God, and gratitude toward Him.

Grace, properly understood, is essential to the message of the gospel. It is non-negotiable. Only in grace, can salvation truly be found. Only in grace, can Christ be exalted. And, only in grace, can the God of salvation be glorified. Ultimately, this is the will and purpose of God. May the churches of Melanesia strive toward this end.

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<sup>33</sup> This does not imply that man is devoid of responsibility to live a moral life. On the contrary, God clearly calls on man to walk in righteousness (see Rom 6:15-18). The point, which is emphasised here, is that no work of righteousness can ever pay back the grace of God. Reciprocity and obligation cannot be the motivation for holy living.

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