

Christian Worship in Melanesian Churches

by Ako Arua

In Melanesian countries, such as Papua New Guinea today, there are lots of different Christian churches, with varying doctrines. Most of these churches are brought from foreign countries. Some of them have been localised, many years after the foreign missionaries first arrived. Yet, in all the churches, most of the members are Melanesians, and, in a few, there are hardly any expatriates at all.

Even though these churches are filled with Melanesian people, the worship in them is “Westernised”. The Melanesian churches have been left with a Western version of Christian worship. Melanesians don’t have their own version of Christian worship in their own churches.

One important thing that I don’t see in our churches today is Melanesian culture. It is mission in all the Melanesian churches. My question goes to all these Melanesian churches: Where is our culture? Where do we place Melanesian culture, in our Christian worship, in our churches? Many Christian churches are doing away with local culture. We must realise that culture is important, and God made culture for you and for me. Others have lied to us by saying: “Culture is evil, do away with it.” It is like throwing away the bones and holding the flesh of man. Melanesian culture is our bones, and our life.

God wants us to really worship Him in our own cultural ways. We need to use our cultural forms to worship Him. We think that Western forms and ways are the best ingredients for worshipping God. I believe God will be greatly honoured and pleased if we worship Him in the Melanesian style. I believe we have the best, and can do the best for God.

The following are some ideas as to how we can help to contextualise Christian worship in our Melanesian churches.

Melanesian Pastors

First of all, I want to talk about our Melanesian pastors. Nearly all of our national pastors have gone through some kind of study or training on how to deliver God’s message, how to care for the congregation, how to run the church, and how to pastor the church. We thank God for our national

pastors, who are called by God to help bring light to the people. These pastors are taught by foreign missionaries in foreign ways, methods, and ideas. That is fine. But the pastors do not go on, then, to put what they have learnt into their own Melanesian forms, and show the people how to worship in Melanesian forms and ways.

Some pastors are too Westernised. They do things from a Western point of view. They lead their people with Western ideas. They preach their sermons with Western skills and patterns. We must realise that everything we do for God is “worship”. We worship God when we sing praises. We worship God when we pray to Him. We worship God when we take part in Bible studies. We worship God when we talk to people about God.

Some pastors don't emphasise Melanesian Christian worship. This is particularly so in the town churches. They fear that people might say bad things about them. Remember that the Melanesian people want Melanesian pastors to help encourage the Melanesian church to worship God in a Melanesian way.

Christian Institutions in Melanesia

Secondly, let's look at the Christian institutions, such as Bible colleges, seminaries, theological colleges, and Schools. Some institutions have neglected our Melanesians cultures. They don't teach any cultural subjects in their institutions. On the other hand, other institutions do teach about some cultural subjects, and make culture become part of the institution.

I know some students and pastors, who have come out from their institutions, without knowing anything about their own culture. Their minds are full of Western ideas, and they know nothing of Melanesia. These pastors have influenced a lot of their Melanesian brothers and sisters with Western ideas. I know some of our older people in the villages and towns are being misled by some of these pastors. Some leaders are even confused. They think that Western ideas and ways are the only things to use in churches. Many of them are throwing away their own culture.

Institutions must help promote and retain culture in their schools and colleges. They must help the Melanesians to create their own forms and ways in Christian worship. Institutions like the Nazarene Bible College, in Mount Hagen, and the Christian Leaders' Training College, in Banz, are doing their best to help their students change the Westernised version of

worship into their own Melanesian version, with its own forms and ideas. There are other institutions that are also doing their best, and those which are not, should start doing so.

Possibilities of Contextualising Christian Worship

A lot of people say that it is too late to contextualise Christian worship in our Melanesian churches. People have seen that our Melanesian churches have rapidly changed into Western churches. They think it is very hard to change these churches.

I personally do not believe that it is too late. I can give some reasons why some think it is too late for change. They fear that foreign missionaries might go against the idea of contextualising. They also fear that those, who have gone through higher education, might talk against them. But we must not base our actions on fear of what other people might think.

It is possible for us to try it, and when we do, we will find that our Christian worship will become active and more alive. People sometimes don't feel active and alive in their own churches, because they worship with somebody else's ideas, ways, and forms. Our Melanesian people are becoming "photocopiers" of the Western world. We hide our real selves, and want to be like Western people.

Sometimes, we make our own people suffer by worshipping in Western styles. Sometimes, our people find it hard to follow the Western styles. We must let them have a say in our worship services.

If our leaders and pastors emphasise more about changing the Western Christian worship into Melanesian Christian worship, it will be possible to make some significant change. It is not too late. We can help change it, bring life to our churches, and make our Melanesian churches more active and interesting. We must do something now. Let's work together, and bring about new changes.

I am beginning to have big burden for our Melanesian churches. In order to have a strong Melanesian church, we have to put it in the Melanesian way, not the Western way. We can have active and powerful worship services, if we use our own worship forms.

We must make our churches to be true Melanesian churches, which worship God in the true Melanesian way.