

EDITORIAL

Contextualising Worship in Melanesia

The recent MATS Study Institute, held in Lae on June 18-29, 1996, focused its discussions on worship and culture in Melanesia. Discussions were centred around the need to make worship relevant to authentic Melanesian forms and styles. This question of relevancy will continue to be an area of ongoing discussion, not only in Melanesia, but in the church worldwide. This is because cultures never remain static, but continue to change from generation to generation. However, in Melanesia, relevancy or enculturation of worship has never been fully realised; rather, worship continues to be practised, with Western styles and forms. Like Melanesian theology, we could also consider Melanesian worship as “coconut worship”, which is not authentically Melanesian.

While the need to make worship in Melanesia relevant exists – and the Study Institute endeavoured to address this issue – the problem we have in many Christian churches today is that the worship of God is often equated with outward rituals and popular styles. Some equate worship with better music, with more modern songs, with different liturgies, etc. Hence, before issues concerning the form and style of worship can be addressed, it is paramount that we understand the nature of true worship of God. Then the issue of Western or Melanesian styles can be placed in its proper context.

What then is worship? The Westminster Confession asks the question: “What is man’s first purpose?”, and gives the answer: “To glorify God and enjoy Him forever”. According to this Confession, worship of God is that for which we are made. It is the Christian’s highest occupation.

This truth rings throughout scripture. We are to worship God, and serve Him, alone (Ex 20:3-5; Matt 4:10; etc.). True worship is knowing this God, and expressing the worth of Him who is our

Maker. This is done through life and word (Rom 12:1-2; cf. Ps 95:6). This involves recognising the worth of our Maker in the past, in the present, and in the future – what God has been and done, what God is doing and being for us today, and what we believe He will be, and do for us, in the future. The essence of real worship then demands the revealed truth of God as its foundation (cf. John 4:19-26).

These are the reasons for gathering together for worship. And, as we gather together, we are to “let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly, as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, with gratitude in your hearts to God” (Col 3:16). That is, we come together in worship to share verbally, by song, prayer, and spoken word, our combined appreciation of God.

With this understanding of worship, one could argue that relevancy, or contextualisation, of worship is immaterial. That is, one could argue that, so long as the worshippers understand what worship really is, the form or style it takes is of secondary importance. This kind of argument is valid, as far as understanding what worship is all about. But there is merit in relevancy. One of the contributors highlights that chorales and styles of worship, that were transported from the West, were often misunderstood by the indigenous people. This is an important issue that could be further examined.

On the other hand, there has been resistance – sometimes from missionaries, and sometimes from indigenous people – to enculturation of worship into local form and style. The concern has been that this would inevitably taint worship with heathen overtones. And, certainly, examples of this syncretistic kind of worship can easily be found.

Does this mean that enculturation of worship should not be attempted? Hardly. But we must be careful how we proceed. And the need for good teaching is very important. As the Wesley brothers performed an important teaching role in England, so a similar thing can occur within Melanesia.

These issues require continued thought and discussion. The papers from the Study Institute represent a contribution to the continuing discussion in this area. Unfortunately, one of the papers presented at the Study Institute is not available at this stage. It was felt that the production of the Journal could not be delayed any further (it is already very late in appearing). Hopefully, this final paper will appear in a subsequent edition of the Journal.

So, instead of the final paper of the Study Institute, part of another document has been included. This is a reflection on some of the problems faced by pastors in rural areas of Papua New Guinea. These problems will not be unique to PNG, although the way in which they arise in this country does have some peculiar emphases.

Mai Ori
Christian Leaders' Training College.