

NOMINALISM IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Kewai Robin Kero

Kewai Kero comes from Erave in the Southern Highlands Province of Papua New Guinea. He is currently working with the Evangelical Church of Papua New Guinea in Port Moresby. The following was presented as a thesis to fulfil the requirements for his Bachelor of Theology from the Christian Leaders' Training College.

Introduction

The Christian faith has been in the country for almost 200 years, tracing back as early as the 18th century. A lot of missionary efforts have been put into the country, in the form of money and human resources. Papua New Guinea can be proud, in the sense that it is listed as one of the nations in the world, which is classified as a Christian nation.

However, despite being classed as a Christian nation, it is sad to note that PNG enjoys a comfortable placing as having one of the highest rates of nominalism in the Christian world. According to a report by L. M. Douglas, PNG has about 96.6% nominals in the church.¹ This is a frightening thing, but it is a bare reality. The questions now are: Why do we have this rate of nominalism? How do we combat it?

Others have written in this area, and have suggested that it is due to people not being converted at the worldview level, while others suggest different reasons. These are equally true, too, but I have presented, in this thesis, the influence that traditional cultures and religions have on our Christian experience.

I have analysed some aspects of both traditional religions and cultural elements, which are hindrances to the Christian faith. I have suggested one of the many possible ways of counteracting nominalism. This must, in no way, be seen as being exhaustive, for there are other

¹ L. M. Douglas, *World Christianity: Oceania*, Monrovia CA: MARC Publications, 1986, p. 117.

possible remedies, which are equally valid. I have presented only one, out of the many possibilities.

1. Some Causes of Nominalism

A. Traditional Religion

Traditional religion can be seen as one of the major causes of nominalism in Papua New Guinea. When a person gets converted to Christianity, he or she does so from a traditional religious background, which has the following elements and experience.

I. Dynamic Religion

Our traditional religion is very dynamic, and it is open to change. In this religion, rituals play an important part, because they are seen as a means to an end. This end was life, i.e., peace, harmony, wealth, children, and a good relationship with the spirits.

Traditionally, trading with one another was a common thing. It was during these events that ideas, beliefs, and rituals were enquired of, and exchanged. If certain rituals would bring life for a person in another area, obviously they would be tried out. In the minds of many people, there is a connection between rituals and life. Rituals bring life. This is why, when certain rituals did not bring about desired results, they were seen as inadequate, and were done away with. Traditional religion is dynamic, as Roderic Lacey comments:

“The historic context, and substance, of religious life, belief, and ritual, in pre-colonial Papua New Guinea, was a situation of change, fluidity, and movement.”²

It is to this background that the Christian message is being proclaimed, and from which Christians are converted. Any rituals, so long as they meet longings and desires, are cherished. Darrell Whiteman makes a very interesting point, when he says:

² Roderic Lacey, “Religious Change in a Precolonial Era: Some Perspectives on Movement and Change in the Precolonial Era”, in James Knight, ed., *Challenges and Possibilities for the Study of Religion in Melanesia, Point 2* (1978), p. 178.

“Undoubtedly, one of the effects of European contact was to lead Melanesians to believe that, if they adopted European religious rituals, Christian rituals, they would also obtain access to European life; a life, scarcely imagined before, with its superior technology of steel tools, luxury goods, such as tobacco, tea, sugar, calico, etc.”³

However, much to their disappointment, the Christian rituals, at most times, did not fulfil their hopes and aspirations. This is further developed in the other elements of traditional religion in this paper, but, in the meantime, this openness to change makes the introduction of other religions rather easy, be it a religion, or a cultic group. Traditional religion is dynamic, and is open to change, for the good of those who adhere to it, in belief and in practice.

How does this affect the Christian, in relation to being an active Christian? Traditional religion, being a dynamic religion, contributes to nominalism in this way. When the Christian faith does not meet the needs and aspirations of a person, he/she is on the look-out for other religious groups that will meet the desired needs.

This makes the Papua New Guinean Christian, with such a religious background, vulnerable to other religions. He/she can easily switch sides or allegiance. For example, this is one of the reasons why, in Port Moresby, the Mormons are becoming very popular. One of their strategies is to make available large funds to their adherents. They are getting a large following, because Papua New Guineans are continuously trying out something that can work for them. Even with the churches in PNG, we have people leaving one denomination for another, every now and then. When one carefully explores why this happens, one will find that the churches that preach a lot on prosperity doctrine, and those that emphasise freedom from trouble, sickness, etc., tend to have a larger following than those churches that don't. A lot of the time, people who follow, because of these types of teaching, get disappointed when they don't experience what they expect.

³ Darrell L. Whiteman, “Melanesian Religions: an Overview”, in Ennio Mantovani, ed., *An Introduction to Melanesian Religions*, Point 6 (1984), p. 95.

For example, in my area, for almost 30 years, the Evangelical Church of PNG (ECPNG) has been the only denomination besides the Catholic church. Recently, in 1989, another denomination, which is a non-Evangelical Alliance member, has made inroads into our area. In order to win converts, it majors on the prosperity doctrine, and has a lot of converts, both Christian and non-Christian, alike. However, after some time, when the desired results did not come about, members of this new group gave up. In most cases, those who still stayed in the new group were, more or less, nominal followers, rather than adherents to true Christianity. One of the things promised to members was that some young people would be sent away for training, either here in the country, or overseas. When this did not take place, members gave up. The people who left the church couldn't come back, because they were ashamed. They are still members, but most are nominal. Others have turned their backs on Christianity.

This abandoning of one set of beliefs for another (in the examples given), because it doesn't work, is consistent with, or, rather, is a characteristic of, underlying traditional religious beliefs, which are more dynamic, as pointed out earlier. This is one reason why we see instability in the religious commitment of PNG church-goers.

II. Pragmatic Religion

Another key element of traditional religion in PNG is that it is a practical religion, which envisages results. These two elements (i.e., pragmatism and dynamic aspects) overlap each other very much, because "pragmatism" is concerned with the expectations of results, and Melanesians are often willing to try out new ideas, to find something that does give results ("dynamic").

I started this paper by saying that Papua New Guineans traditionally, and even today, pursue that life, which is called the "abundant life", which, in Pidgin, is known as *gutpela sindaun*. This life is experienced by gardens producing many crops, there are healthy pigs, the absence of sickness or warfare. These are experienced when relationships with the spirits are maintained. For most times, when there is a decline in *gutpela sindaun*, it is said to be that the spirits are offended, so correct rituals are performed, as a remedy. For us Papua New Guineans, our beliefs are equated with our

experiences. It is a living religious experience in our stomachs, in our livers, and in our mouths. What we feel, smell, taste, and hear, is translated into what we see, i.e., the “abundant life”. This is what Darrell Whiteman says:

“Melanesian religion is pragmatic, and concerned with material results. That is, the performance of rituals bring results that are empirically verified. A large harvest, successful hunting, good fishing, plenty of children, success in warfare, etc., are all results that can be verified empirically. A Melanesian is concerned with empirical, pragmatic proof that his religious system is working.”⁴

Generally speaking, Papua New Guineans expect to see things: proofs. Does it work? If it works, then it must be true. If it is not working, then it is discarded.

It is to people, with these backgrounds, that the gospel is presented. The essential factor in conversion is allegiance. The Papua New Guinea worldview is based on spirits, and allegiance is given to these spirits. The definition for worldview, as given by Hiebert, is:

“The basis for evaluating their experiences, values, ethics, morals, and allegiance, that binds their community life together.”⁵

Our traditional life revolved around the belief in spirits. Intimacy with the spirits resulted in good hunting, health, and material wealth.

When a person is converted, his/her allegiance is switched from the spirits to Christ. He/she does so with the understanding that if there was anything he/she needed, he/she would turn to Christ, rather than the spirits. What happens when a Christian does not experience the “abundant life” that he/she is most often used, to or expecting?

⁴ Ibid., p. 97.

⁵ Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights to Missions*, Grand Rapids MI: Baker Book House, 1982, p. 24.

When this life is not experienced, a Christian is inclined to think that God may be angry. In that case he/she tries to please God through good works. Perhaps he/she will give more offerings, or do other things that will please God. A second thing that a Christian might do is to give up hope in God. This results in nominalism, or worse. He/she does this, because he/she has come into Christianity with a Melanesian presupposition that one's needs are met by the one to whom one gives allegiance. When this happens (i.e., that expectations are not met), they continue their search for any belief system that will bring about results. This results from the deep-seated religious background, which is present.

Here is an example of a person, who turned away from the Lord, after giving his allegiance to the Lord. Iamu was man from a village close to ours. This man, prior to conversion, was a sorcerer.⁶ Being a sorcerer is a prestigious position in traditional PNG, for it means power, resulting in wealth, etc. Iamu was aware of the results of his conversion to Christianity, i.e., he would lose this popularity, and the privileges of a sorcerer. Despite not having these, he seemed to be enjoying his life as a Christian.

A couple of years later, Iamu was appointed a deacon in the church, upon the testimony of his life. However, some years later, testing came, when he had cancer, which would not be healed, despite continuous medical treatment, and consistent prayer by Christians. There was nothing much that medicine could do, and the doctors said that it could not be healed. It appeared that, when healing was not forthcoming from God, he recalled how he helped people as a sorcerer, and resorted to seeking help from sorcery again. However, when he went to the new sorcerer or magician, he was told that, had he gone earlier, he may have been able to help him. But now it was too late to do anything.

Some days later, Iamu died. His death shocked the church, for his search for help from the sorcerer was done in secret, and found out later by the church. His death also brought despair and hopelessness in his family, who were mostly Christians. The family were thinking that, had the father sought help from the medicine man, instead of seeking medical therapy and

⁶ A sorcerer can also be a magician and a medicine man in my society.

prayer, he wouldn't have died. This created doubts, and eventually led to unbelief of the Christian faith within the family.

The point I want to make from this example is that, because Christianity didn't bring about the desired result, it was, therefore, abandoned. As a result, scepticism and despair crept into the minds of the family members, as their adherence to the Christian faith didn't bring about the positive results they expected, i.e., healing. Some members of Iamu's family, today, are Christians, but most are nominal at best. A lot of this is due to Iamu's death.

Melanesian religion is pragmatic, as the people always look for results. We walk into Christianity with this understanding, and this influences our understanding and acceptance of Christianity.

III. Rituals

Rituals have a very important role in PNG, and they are an important element of Melanesian religion. Rituals express the worldview of the people, their values and aspirations. By rituals, I mean celebrations, ceremonies, initiations, or anything, which is done to commemorate an event.

Rituals can be performed privately or publicly, collectively or individually. Rituals are an expression of ideas and key values, and, when performed, they make the ideas long-lasting, honourable, and accepted by those that perform them, and their family members. For example, a particular clan has been at war with another clan, and has realised heavy casualties. They agree to end the fight, and, when this agreement is reached, it is followed by a big feast. During this feast, songs are sung, dances performed, and the "cease-fire" becomes legally binding. The very fact that a ritual has taken place makes the "cease-fire" a reality. Words alone are not enough, they have no value; but the slaughtering of many pigs is very valuable.

An anthropologist, Monica Wilson, analysing the Nyakyusa people in Africa, said the following:

“To exclude the discussion of rituals in talking of Nyakyusa religion is comparable to excluding a reference to the devil in his discussion of Christianity.”⁷

What Wilson says of rituals to the Nyakyusa people, is equally true to us in PNG traditional religion. In the absence of rituals, any ideas, values, or worldview are just illusions. Removal of rituals, or giving less attention to them, results in beliefs, ideas, and even worldview, ceasing to exist. Rituals are the visible expressions of these things. We PNG people, being practical people, require actions, rather than purely intellectual concepts.

Baptism and Eucharist

In baptism, we symbolise a reality that takes place in the life of a person. In PNG, any change of significance is celebrated. In baptism, a person is dying to his/her old self, together with Christ. Together with Christ, he/she rises, and a new life begins. This new life is a big thing, and needs celebrating with a big feast. This is consistent with our understanding of rituals. When no celebration takes place, the event is taken as having less significance.

In the eucharist, we partake of the bread, as a symbol of the Lord's body broken, and of the blood, as the means of salvation. This occasion needs to be celebrated, not only in the form of a drop of water and a piece of bread, but also by adding the Melanesian form of celebration, e.g., a *mumu*, etc. This may seem an excessive exercise, but we are capable of giving big *mumus* every now and then, and I'm sure we can afford it. After all, the Corinthians celebrated with real meals. By celebrating these events in our own style, it indicates, firstly, that something of value is involved, and it is something worth noting. Secondly, our understanding of a ritual is that it is equal to the concept or idea it represents. There is no difference in the concept and the ritual, which expresses this concept.

⁷ M. Wilson, *Rituals of Kinship Among the Nyak*, Oxford UK: Oxford University Press, 1957, p. 3.

These casual approaches (at least in the Melanesian perspective) to Christian rituals make the whole concept they represent as being something of less value. When a person comes to the Lord's supper, or the baptism service, it is not attended with seriousness, in Melanesian thinking. These elements of Melanesian religion cause nominalism. The reality that the ritual represents has not taken a Melanesian form, i.e., celebrating with songs, dancing, and feasting.

IV. Abundant Life is Merited

The concept of reciprocity, basically, means doing one thing in exchange for another. This give and take is an important concept in Melanesia. This concept develops relationships between those who practice it. What is a principle, on the physical level, is equally true on the spiritual plane, says Darrell Whiteman:

“The relationship between human beings and spiritual beings in the universe must also be one of harmony and reciprocity. When there is harmony between human beings and ancestral spirits, there is peace and prosperity.”⁸

When a person doesn't experience the “abundant life”, the first question he/she asks is “What did I do to offend the spirits?” To please the spirits, he/she goes into the performance of rituals, to restore the relationship. This understanding can be wrongly brought into Christianity. When I don't experience good health and good garden produce, it is because I have offended God. So I, therefore, try to do the right things (works) to merit God's favour. When I still don't do better in physical blessings, despite all the good works I do, I give up hope and my trust in God. My commitment to God is, therefore, nominal.

The traditional religious presupposition that, to experience the “abundant life”, one must merit it, is read into Christianity. This attitude makes people think that the ones who are blessed physically and spiritually are ones who are walking right with God. This rules out the grace of God in provision. No one merits God's favours. He gives rain and sunshine to

⁸ Whiteman, p. 110.

the Christian and the non-Christian alike. Traditional PNG religion has trained him to think that God will only bless those who do good, and curse those who do not do good. This is consistent with the principle of reciprocity that is prevalent in our society.

B. Cultural Influences on Christianity

During a soccer tournament some years ago, a goal by one team was disputed by the opposing team. This developed into a heated argument, resulting in the use of abusive words. In no time, spectators invaded the field throwing missiles here and there. The brawl eventually ended up leaving one player dead. Upon seeing the death of the person, another person, who happened to be the brother of the deceased, retaliated, killing another person, who was from the opposing team. The person who took revenge was the pastor of one of the congregations in the area.

After witnessing the event, one is confronted with questions like these: Why would someone, who is the leader of a congregation renounce his faith by his action? Why not leave the fight to his non-Christian relatives? To answer these questions, certain characteristics of PNG culture need analysing, so that the incident can be put into proper perspective.

I. Clan Solidarity

The fundamental basis of organisation in PNG society is that of kinship. Anyone who is not a relative of mine is a potential enemy. In our society, anyone who has the same ancestral father as me is seen as a blood brother. While Westerners could distinguish relationships by the use of words such as uncle, aunty, or cousins, this is not the case in PNG. This importance of kinship relationships is noted by Marie de Lepervance, in her analysis of the social structures of PNG.⁹ A person does not have to be my biological brother or sister to be called a brother. Why must clan solidarity be maintained? The following are some of the reasons:

⁹ M. de Lepervance, "Social Structure", in *Anthropology in Papua New Guinea*, Ian Hogbin, ed., Melbourne Vic: Melbourne University Press, 1977.

a. Warfare

Even today, in some areas, a characteristic of life is warfare. The survival of any clan depends on their solidarity, in the event of an attack by any enemy tribe. There must never, at anytime, be factions with the clan. Any factions that are within the group could be fatal, and taken advantage of, by the enemy clan.

b. Compensation

In the case where a compensation payment is to be made, the contribution of all members of the clan helps in meeting the demands. It is important to note that, when two groups meet together for arbitration, it is the elders that preside over whatever case requires compensation. The principal offender may not even be present, as required by the Western legal system. The uncles (also know as fathers) talk on the offender's behalf. This shows the intimacy that lies between relatives. When some things happen to one member, every other member is in it.¹⁰

c. Feasts

In some PNG societies, the success of a particular clan is seen in the number of pigs killed, and the display of other things of value. It is during these times that the help of other people, who are non-members, is acknowledged, in the form of money, shell kina, pigs, etc. These people may have helped them in fighting, or any other thing requiring outside help.¹¹ Again it requires the cooperative efforts of many, rather than just a few.

d. Funerals

It is important that the dead should be honoured. Many people, who come to attend the funeral, which can take many days, need to be fed. Some may have come from far-off places. This, again, requires the cooperation of the whole group.

These are some of the reasons why clan solidarity is a necessity.

¹⁰ Kenneth McElhanon, and Darrell L. Whiteman, "Kinship: Who is Related to Whom", in Darrell L. Whiteman, ed., *An Introduction to Melanesian Cultures*, Point 5 (1984).

¹¹ It has been a normal thing to hire men for fighting tribal warfare.

II. Reciprocal Society

Most societies in PNG are organised by what anthropologists call the *Principles of Reciprocity*. Reciprocity is the custom: “you help me, I help you”, or “you fight me, I fight you”, or “you destroy my property, I destroy your property”. The following are some examples of this principle at work.

a. Gifts

In our society, nothing is seen as a gift. For example, if a person gives me some money as a gift, the person puts me under an obligation. I will expect to see the person come to me for help, anytime he needs help.

b. Payback (Revenge)

Just as the principle of reciprocity is displayed positively, in giving and taking of gifts, it can equally be displayed negatively.¹² If a person is killed, whether it is by accident, or a premeditated act, there is a need for retaliation. This is underlined by the following statements by anthropologist Paula Brown, in her analysis of the structures of the highlands people of PNG:

“Payback, on principle of reciprocity, is seen as the basic social responsibility in most cultures of Papua New Guinea.”¹³

It is very important culturally, that payback must be carried out. A person, who does not react angrily, is displaying a social weakness, and may be taken advantage of by rival clans. According to Michael Kteng, the infliction of pain, death, and other efforts, don't deserve a positive attitude.¹⁴ This implies that any human act that harms and humiliates another person is to be dealt with in the manner that it was received.

These examples are used to explain the principle of reciprocity in PNG.

¹² Michael Kteng, *Compensation as Reciprocity*, Goroka PNG: Melanesian Institute, 1992.

¹³ P. Brown, *The Highlands People of PNG*, Canberra ACT: Australian National University Press, 1980, p. 179.

¹⁴ Kteng, *Compensation*, p.93.

III. The Values in a Society

There are certain values in PNG societies, of which some are mentioned here briefly:

a. Wealth

This is the most important value, alongside land and kinship relationships in PNG. The accumulation of wealth is very important. According to Don McGregor, who says it very well, wealth has these two messages:

1. Wealth, if used and enjoyed for its immediate benefits, e.g., for consumption, and for the things it can purchase.
2. Wealth is used to obtain social status, authority, prestige, and security.¹⁵

b. Prestige and Pride

The amount of wealth a person has determines his prestige, and this gives him status. If a person can give more things out, then he receives more back. The self-esteem of a person is very important. This also makes a person very proud, and prestige must be maintained. This is because, in our societies, where rivalry is life, the pride of a person, and his self-esteem, are seen as power. To see one's self as lowly, and to seek forgiveness for anything wrong one has done, is a sign of weakness.

c. Abundant Life

When a person is experiencing good health, good harmonious relationships, plenty of wealth, this is the ideal situation for him. This "life" is mentioned in part A of this paper. This "life" is referred to in Pidgin as *gutpela sindaun*. A person tries to maintain this, if he can.

These, basically, are the values of our society.

¹⁵ Don McGregor, *New Guinea Basic Assumptions*, unpublished paper presented to ABMS Conference in 1969.

IV. Influential Elements of the Christian Life

a. Humility and Meekness

The Bible advocates the virtues of humility and meekness. My culture advocates pride and superiority. This pride compels a person to retaliate if he/she feels offended. If I back off, I not only lost my integrity, in the eyes of my people, but I also represent my clan. My backing off will be a point of reference to my rival clansmen, who will think we are weak. This, of course, is not true for some societies in PNG. However, where it is the case, then it is something Christians have to live through.

b. Forgiving and Forgetting

If a person offends me, there is no way I will forgive him, on the cultural level. My immediate response is to retaliate. That is intuitive. I have already mentioned the principle of reciprocity. Not to retaliate is a sign of weakness, and forgiveness is acting like a woman. I may forgive, as a Christian, but the forgiveness may be a deception. For any future offence by the person, or his clan, will be interpreted in the context of the first offence. Forgiveness does not exist in most of our cultures.

c. Love

Traditional Melanesian culture confines love to one from within your clan. Anyone from outside is a potential enemy. Even if you are on good terms with someone other than your clansmen, this relationship must be seen as secondary to your allegiance and loyalty to your clansmen. In an event, where you and your friend's clan clash in warfare, your friend is no longer your friend, but an enemy. Clan solidarity, and the principles of reciprocity, dictate your reaction to your friend.

Our love for others compels us into doing things as Christians. If I can give something to another brother, who is in need, the Bible tells me that I am to help – and not just because I expect a return. However, even in Christian circles, the principles of reciprocity are still evident. Even if the person, in the first place, gives help without expecting a return, the receiver still feels that he/she is obligated to the giver. He/she does this, because culture has conditioned him/her to do so.

d. Tribal Congregations

In some villages throughout PNG, we can see that congregations in villages, or even on mission stations, are predominantly from one particular ethnic group. This church, even though it is a church of Christ, is seen in the context of its culture. If it belongs to the people of the clan, it is seen to be a symbol of prestige, and this connotes competition. That is, it tries to be the best church, in terms of its building, money given to it, and trying to send its workers to the best Bible schools. This is done, not so much in order to give wholeheartedly to God, but with the motive of meeting the culture's demands, i.e., pride, prestige, competition, and rivalry.

e. Church Discipline

Church discipline is another area our culture has influenced. When a person, as head of a fellowship, disciplines a relative, he is thrown into a conflict: that of giving the right discipline, as demanded by the Bible, as opposed to giving a lesser punishment, or none at all. In some cases, the latter is often seen as taking place. When this happens, it results in members not being strong, because of the fact that sin has not been dealt with properly. This often causes nominalism within the church in PNG.

Sometimes, when a person is disciplined, he/she doesn't comply with the discipline given. Instead he/she tries to leave the fellowship, and join another fellowship. For, to be submissive to discipline, is to be showing a sign of weakness, culturally. When a person, out of pride, leaves, in some cases, his/her immediate family members leave also. This sometimes results in the forming of a new fellowship. When this happens, there is competition with the former fellowship, and their motives will be for reasons other than those for which the churches exist. This kind of church meets only in name, but it doesn't reflect the ideals of biblically-based churches.

After the soccer game incident, I asked why the pastor, who was supposed to be living out the Bible in life, didn't do so. He had responded negatively to the incident, because of the culture he was born into. He is born into a culture, which advocates clan solidarity, and a culture, which

operates on the principle of reciprocity. His response was only natural, culturally.

3. Solid Biblical Teaching to Counteract Nominalism

I have identified traditional religion, and culture influences, as two of the many factors influencing the Christians of PNG towards nominalism. In this part of the paper, I will discuss one of the ways, in which nominalism can be minimised.

While I want to emphasise teaching, there is another point I want to touch on, which is related to teaching. This is the problem one faces in regard to teaching. This problem is that of teaching methods: the selection of words and phrases that one uses in teaching. This part of the paper is divided into two parts. They are: A. Communication, and B. Teaching. Firstly, I will talk a little about communication, and then on teaching later.

A. Communication

When we are communicating, including the case of teaching, we need to understand our listeners. This is because the listener interprets our message in terms of his/her own experience of reality, i.e., language, values, and worldview. Marguerite Kraft, in regard to communication, says this:

“Perception plays a central role in the communication process. One reacts, as he has been trained in his culture: he finds what he has been trained to look for, he sees what he has been taught to expect, and in a way that he has been trained to see. He perceives reality, in short, in terms of his worldview.”¹⁶

As Dr Kraft says, the message, intended by the sender, will be understood the way the receiver sees and interprets all that is around him/her. It is important, in this regard, when we are using phrases, words, and concepts, that we use those that convey the intended meaning. Let us consider, for example, the meaning of the baptism ritual.

¹⁶ Margaret Kraft, *Worldview and Communication of the Gospel*, Pasadena CA: William Carey Library, 1978, p. 83.

The meaning behind baptism is that a person is dying to self, identifying with Christ's death and resurrection in the new life. He/she is now united into fellowship with other believers. This new life is not his/hers, but that of Christ. This is the correct meaning, but some people see it the way they have been trained to see rituals, culturally. As mentioned in the earlier section on rituals, there is no separation between the reality and the ritual. So, a PNG person's understanding of baptism is that he/she already has access to this new life in Christ. Whether a person follows the Lord's commands, or not, is not the question. The big thing is that, as long as he/she is baptised, then he/she is okay (i.e., saved).

Therefore, to avoid this misconception, proper biblical teaching on the rituals is important, so that they are seen with the intended meaning, and not in the way that people are trained to see them, by their culture.

Another example is the word *kiss*. In the New Testament, believers are told to greet one another with a "holy kiss". Our understanding of the word connotes an erotic feeling, something reserved for marriage partners. The word used in the New Testament has the meaning of greeting, or farewelling, depending on the context. Rather than taking the meaning literally, words must be found, which translate the idea of greeting one another, etc. When applied literally, it is embarrassing, and the communicator (teacher) will lose his/her audience, or not get the message across properly.

The point here is that the teacher needs to use words, concepts, and phrases that convey the intended meaning to the listener, rather than use words the teacher himself/herself understands, but mean nothing to the audience. There is also another important aspect of teaching that teachers need to note, namely, the methods of teaching. This will be dealt with in the next section.

B. Teaching

To be more effective communicators, the best way of communicating the gospel is to use existing cultural forms of teaching, to get the meaning across. How is this possible? The concept of contextualising is very helpful, and can be used in teaching.

I. Contextualising

a. Teaching Methods

The teachings, sermons, and lectures, received in the church, are nearly always centred on the teacher. The listeners are there for the entire period, to take in what the teacher says. This kind of teaching is good, perhaps in the West, but is not appealing to Melanesian audiences.

Michael Jelliffe, a missionary with the Evangelical Church of PNG, once said the following:

“Therefore, I can only suspect that one reason for the poor results I found in my early Bible classes, for example, was that the Western, conceptual form of presentation used was, in fact, not communicating much at all, at least not holding people’s attention.”¹⁷

This form of teaching (i.e., the classroom setting) poses several problems. One, that Mr Jelliffe later develops in his paper, is that a monologue approach (e.g., the Western-style sermon) was used traditionally at night, when people wanted to sleep. This explained why some people were falling asleep in the sermon, as Jelliffe says. Another problem, this also caused, is that people’s concentration level will drop after the first 20 to 25 minutes. When no allowance is made for interaction, the time factor needs to be taken note of. This kind of teaching can become only an intellectual exercise. That is, it provides knowledge only, and does little or nothing that will stimulate a response.

In PNG societies, learning has to do with everyday living. It is not only accumulation of knowledge. It involved much demonstration and practice. In our country today, a lot of teachers say one thing in the pulpit, or classroom, yet, in daily life, do another thing, which is not consistent with their teaching. When people see this in the lives of the teachers, it means that really they have no message to preach.

In the Bible, we read that the Lord Jesus demonstrated what He taught, lived it, and even died for it. How much different the situation in

¹⁷ Michael Jelliffe, *Contextual Communication*, Asia Pacific Rim Publications, p. 6.

PNG would be if only leaders and teachers lived out what they teach. David Sitton, former missionary in the Sepik area with the Every Tribe Mission, once said this:

“Children learn gardening, as they copy-cat their parents in the sweet potato fields. Young men are exposed to weapon and hunting as they trail their fathers on hunting excursions. Young women acquire cooking expertise by observing, and participating, alongside their mothers and aunties . . . tribal people are not ignorant. In fact, they are gifted with great natural intelligence, but they are not accustomed to learning in classrooms.”¹⁸

The assessments of both Jelliffe and Sitton are valid, and speak well for how teaching and learning are to be done in PNG. They imply that teaching must be contextualised (Jelliffe), and the methods of teaching be culturally relevant (Sitton). The only point, where I don't agree with them, is that they seem to completely disregard any place for classroom teaching, which, to me, does have some advantages.

b. Music, Song, and Instruments

PNG people are lovers of music and songs. This is reflected in the diversity of songs and dances throughout the country. Music in the church today must have some Melanesian beat and rhythm to be really meaningful. According to Ellison Suri (Solomon Islander), God speaks to us, using culture, in songs and dances that are Melanesian in form. Where these are not used, a church is not a true Melanesian church. He says, further, that the use of indigenous music and art in the whole life of a Christian church is bound up with true conversion.¹⁹

I agree with Mr Suri in that a person can only worship God meaningfully using his/her cultural forms. He/she cannot do, so using other forms and expressions foreign to him/her.

¹⁸ D. Sitton, “Searching Together”, in *New Tribes Publications*, 20-4 (1992), p. 96.

¹⁹ E. Suri, *Christ in South Pacific Cultures*, Suva Fiji: Lotu Pasifika Productions, 1990.

c. Rituals

PNG traditional life is full of rituals. Coming from this background, the Christian rituals of baptism, the Lord's supper, and the Christmas and Easter periods, must be celebrated with songs, dances, and feasts, just as we celebrate important events in Melanesia. The Melanesian touch to these events is often missing. There is no celebration, no feasting, no singing, and no dancing. This means that the Melanesian flavour of these important Christian rituals is missing. To the Melanesian mind, anything that is not celebrated is insignificant. If it is to mean something, it must be contextualised, which means giving the same kind of treatment to it that we give to every Melanesian ritual.

Contextualising our teaching and learning methods, our songs and music, and giving a Melanesian touch and flavour to our Christian rituals, makes the church in PNG an authentically Melanesian church. Where these expressions are lacking, it is still a foreign church. Nominalism can be minimised if Christianity really touches the person, using his/her cultural forms and practice, while giving them a Christian meaning.

II. Proper Biblical Teaching

In the previous section, I talked about the concept of contextualising, and how it helps in the life of the church. In this section, I will talk about solid teaching of the word of God to minimise the two main contributing factors to nominalism, i.e., traditional religion and cultural influences.

a. Proper Biblical Training

All those entering ministry as teachers, pastors and preachers must be qualified, as 2 Timothy 2:2 says:

“Take the teachings that you heard me proclaim in the presence of many witnesses, and entrust them to reliable people, who will be able to teach others also” (GNB).

The idea of Paul, here, is that Christian teaching must be passed on from one to another, and so forth. The people involved in teaching must be

reliable people. The NIV translation had “*qualified*” people. By being reliable and qualified, one has the idea that:

1. The person teaching must be experiencing what he is teaching. Dr Howard Hendricks says the following in this regard:

“If I know something thoroughly, I feel it deeply, and am doing it consistently, I have great potential for being an excellent communicator.”²⁰

Mr Hendricks here, basically, is saying that a person, who does what he/she is teaching, can be relied upon, for his/her actions are consistent with his/her teaching, and can be believed.

2. The person teaching must be experiencing what he/she is teaching, and must know his/her area of study. A person, having no knowledge of his/her field, is not qualified to teach.

Bible-school teachers must be qualified people, meeting these two criteria. A poorly equipped person, whose life is a question mark, should not be teaching. A person, who is teaching, must have good theological training, with a corresponding quality of life. An ill-prepared teacher, or an ill-trained one, will give improper teaching, and, therefore, will not prepare his/her people to resist any serious attacks on the church, which may come through trials, temptations, and heresies. Poor preparation can cause nominalism, too.

b. Strong Teaching against Bad Religion and Cultural Values

There needs to be a lot of teaching given, to break through the strongholds of cultural influences, and of the traditional religious presuppositions we bring with us into the Christian faith. The following areas need to be dealt with, through a lot of prayer and fasting.

²⁰ Howard G. Hendricks, *Teaching to Change Lives*, Portland OR: Multnomah Press, 1987, p. 10.

Love

One characteristic of PNG society, as mentioned earlier, is that we operate solidly on the principles of reciprocity. This system sees a person return good for good, and bad for bad. Teaching more on the concept of love helps us to do away with the bad aspects of this principle. For, in God, there is no payback, when one is offended. Our culture expects to payback, but true love produces forgiveness, and forgetting of the offence. The Bible is very strong and clear about the importance of forgiving.

When the apostle Peter asked Christ how many times a person must forgive, Christ's answer was 70 times seven, meaning there is no end to forgiveness (Matt 18:21-22). When we give to others, we must try not to put that brother or sister under an obligation. When we give, we give without expecting a return. True love is giving sacrificially. This is demonstrated by God through the gift of Christ (John 3:16).

Whenever we are hurt by another person, our Melanesian pride would want us to retaliate, but humility and weakness, springboarded by love, must prevail. We must teach our people that, even though we will lose face in the eyes of our people, we would rather serve God than man, as we read in Acts 5:29. The greatest example of humility and meekness is presented to us in the life of Christ Jesus, when He washes the feet of His disciples in John 13. We learn from this that to love another brother covers all the feelings that are negative. Love breeds forgiveness, humility, and meekness, and these are not expressed or taught enough. The most effective method is demonstration. It is a real fact that, how we respond to these cultural pressures, will be a very effective witness to those that are non-believers.

We need to preach and teach more on love, and demonstrate it, as well, in our lives. Christianity must be caught in our lives, more than taught by mere words. The onus is on us, as Christian teachers and pastors.

God's Prerogative to Bring Results

The understanding of our traditional religion has always been that of bringing results. We were taught to believe that, whenever I want to grow

the best crops or pigs, I must make the right rituals. When these things happened, I would believe.

We need to teach our people that, to bring about healing of sickness, and bring prosperity, is something that God has in control. We need to teach that we don't buy favours from God. God is impartial, and He brings healing to the Christian and non-Christian, also. We need not manipulate God, to heal our sickness, bring prosperity, etc. This is in contrast to our traditional religion, which is aimed at manipulation for our benefit.

We need to teach strongly against the idea that God always reacts negatively to those who offend Him. This also is a characteristic of our culture, where the principle of reciprocity is at play. Of course, God, at times, punishes people, to show them their state of sin – like the case of Ananias and Sapphira. However, this is not often the case. This overlooks the love of God, even though God doesn't approve the sin.

Whenever a person is sick, we can ask God for healing, but we also need to go to the hospital as well. If God wants to heal, He will; if not it is His prerogative. If God doesn't heal, it doesn't mean that God is not aware of it. The apostle Paul, in 2 Corinthians 12:8, asks God three times for healing, but God doesn't heal him of what he calls a "thorn in the flesh". He, nevertheless, is happy, because he understands that it is Christ who gives him strength.

A similar case is that of Job, and his experience. Job cries his heart out to God, but God does not heal him immediately. The theology of Job, and the idea of Paul in sickness, is that God is in control.

Jesus, too, begged God to save Him from suffering on the cross. But God had other plans for Christ, and He had to go through the cross. Just as with the cross, God may have some deeper purpose He is working out when He doesn't heal us immediately, or does not heal us at all.

We need to teach our people that, just because God doesn't heal, does not mean that He is not present. Likewise, we need to teach, also, that just because a person is sick doesn't necessarily reflect his level of

spirituality. For sickness comes to the Christian as well as the non-Christian. Being a Christian does not make a person immune from sickness.

Not by Sight, But by Faith

In John 20:19-21, we read of Jesus appearing to His disciples after the resurrection. The disciples tell Thomas later, but he will not believe it unless he sees it himself (v 24). Some days later, Jesus appears to His disciples again. This time Thomas is present. Jesus tells Thomas to touch Him, and feel Him (v 27), which results in Thomas confessing that Jesus is Lord and God (v 28). In verse 29, Christ says “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.”

Traditional religion has moulded us into expecting results, but, in the Bible, we read, through Thomas’ unbelief, that we are to trust God, even though we don’t always see desired results. For such is faith.

Christianity is a practical religion. Our faith in the Lord is transformed into our daily walk, our faith in action. The mentality that to see before believing must be counteracted by proper teaching. Doubting-Thomas’ experience is very clear for us, in that, going by results, and insisting on seeing first then believing, is not faith, but lack of it. Even though, at times, God understands our weakness, and does demonstrate His reality to people who trust Him, this should not be used as an excuse for not believing God’s word.

Who are our Brothers?

Our culture advocates clan solidarity, for the reasons I gave earlier. But who should our real brothers be, or rather, whose company should we mostly be in? In Matthew 12:46-50, it is reported to Christ that His mother and brothers are looking for Him. He replies, saying that those who do the will of God are His relatives. This clearly tells us that, even though we are to love our brothers and sisters, and help them when we can, there are limits, where our help ends – that is when our obligation to them is in conflict with the teaching of Christ.

The more we are in fellowship with our brothers in Christ, the more our relationship will be. In Acts 2, we read of the fellowship, and the sharing of resources, which was one of the bases of a strong and influential church. When Christians are in fellowship regularly, this strengthens them as a group. Church life grows, both in quality and in quantity, i.e., it results in a strong and growing church. When this happens, nominalism is minimised.

Our brothers and sisters are those who love the Lord. We are to love our biological relatives, too, but this has limits – whereas our loving of those who love God is unlimited. When I say limits, I mean there are certain things we can do for them, but not do other things.

III. Teaching the Churches Responsibility

We also experience nominalism, because the church is not really sure of its responsibilities in regard to the use of spiritual gifts. This misunderstanding is both by the pastor and members of the church. I will discuss the failures of the pastor, and later discuss the members' failures.

a. The Ministry of the Pastor

Pastors, for too long, have been trying to run the congregation all on their own, in most churches throughout PNG. The reasons for this are varied. It could be because members think that the pastor is the only spiritual person, and he/she is the only anointed one, so let him/her do everything. To this kind of thinking, Peter Wagner says that it is not only an outmoded view, but is equally unbiblical.²¹

Mr Wagner is correct, because the ministry of the church is a corporate work, each doing his/her part, on the basis of the diversity of spiritual gifts. The idea of leaving everything to the pastor is unbiblical.

Another reason may be that the pastor might purposely want to do everything himself/herself. This would, in turn, mean that the laity could become a threat to his/her job. To this kind of thinking, we must teach

²¹ C. Peter Wagner, *Your Spiritual Gifts Can Help Your Church Grow*, Glendale CA: Regal Books, 1979, p. 141.

strongly that the pastor is only one member of the body of Christ. In Ephesians 4, we read a list of gifts that are mentioned. Not many people in the body of Christ have the same spiritual gifts, and no one person has all the gifts. This is also true of a pastor.

Mr Stedman's comment is valid, in that a pastor cannot do his/her very best if his/her time is divided among the many things he/she must do. Very importantly, the effectiveness of a ministry depends on the area of spiritual gifts. Pastors never have all the gifts. He/she must only spend time on the area of his/her calling.²²

The work of the pastor is to prepare the members of the church for ministry, in and out of the church. This is so as to build up the body of Christ (Eph 4:12-13) into maturity. It is his/her job to identify and develop spiritual gifts in the church. Where we don't see this happening, we see a struggling church, which is cold and nominal. A pastor may not have the gift of hospitality, but a member will have it; he/she may not have the gift of evangelism, but a member will have it.

We must give a lot of teaching in the church that pastors are not the only members in the body of Christ. Therefore, they are not to do everything themselves.

Finally, the pastor will not adequately minister to each member, for each member has different needs, which can only be ministered to by the totality of the gifted members. A pastor, who doesn't encourage ministry by members, will have a weak and nominal church. However, one, who does encourage ministry by members, will have a strong and mature church; one that is not easily blown backwards and forwards, like leaves, by false teaching, and the cares of this world (Eph 4:14).

b. The Ministry of the Laity

The members of the congregation also have a part in the spiritual vitality of the church. In Ephesians 4:3-16, we read the purpose of the spiritual gifts. They are for edifying the body of Christ, so that it may

²² Ray Stedman, *The Church Comes Alive*, Glendale CA: Regal Books, 1972, p. 79.

reach maturity in the faith and the knowledge of Christ. The church exists for the strengthening of fellow believers. For example, if a brother needs counselling, the person, who has the gifts and skills, is called to help out. When a person is discouraged, those that have the gifts of encouragement minister to him/her. When new converts come into the church, those who have the gift of discipling, teaching, and nurturing help out. Most often, the discipling does not take place, and new converts go out of the church as quick as they came in.

These are the jobs of the church members as a whole, and not for the pastor only. This area of ministry (i.e., ministry to each other) is often lacking in the churches of Melanesia. This results in immature, static, and nominal membership. The purpose of these gifts is for the church to be a vibrant and mature church.

The church must also minister to the outside world. If members do what they are supposed to be doing, there will be harmony and unity in the fellowship. This, when seen from the outside, is a very powerful witness for evangelism. This was the case in the early church (Acts 2:42-44). When they met in fellowship, their lives became a powerful testimony, and new converts were added into the fellowship daily.

When new converts come in, it is very important that they be discipled by those that are mature. These people must be nurtured, and basic teaching given. The various members, with their different gifts, must help these new converts.

In teaching and discipling, the apprenticeship model that is used by Christ is appropriate for PNG. This model is one that is culturally relevant, i.e., those I'm discipling, or teaching, catch from me, and from my life and good practices, and try not to follow the bad ones. Our churches' discipling programmes are inadequate, and yet this is the most important aspect of our ministry.

The disciples of Jesus, when they become His followers, stayed under Christ, learnt from His teaching, but, most importantly, learnt from

His life. When there is no nurturing, the church becomes weak, and nominalism is its fruit.

To counteract nominalism, we need to encourage ministry by the laity, and provide a job description for the pastor, based on the scriptures. A strong church is one, which is clear about its role in the church, and in society. We need to teach the leaders of the church what their responsibilities are. When we don't give clear teaching, Christians do not know what is required of them. This becomes the job for those of us, who are given the responsibilities of teaching.

4. Conclusion

Causes of Nominalism

In the first part of the thesis, I have suggested that one thing that contributes to nominalism in PNG is the traditional religious influence. Elements of these traditional religions have been very prominent in my mind.

Melanesian religion, being dynamic, makes provision for changes. A particular ritual is cherished, if it brings about desired results, and discarded, and a new one tried out (where possible), if the desired results do not come. Just because they accept a new set of teachings or beliefs, doesn't necessarily mean they will stick to it. Traditional religions have conditioned them to switching sides, when convenient. This, I said, is one reason why cults have a lot of followers in PNG today.

The religion, being a dynamic one, conditions PNG people into wanting to see results from what they believe. Any set of beliefs is seen concretely, rather than theologically, or philosophically. When results are not experienced now, scepticism creeps into the belief system. The "abundant life" is not a future eschatological hope, but a current reality.

Rituals express the worldview, the values, and the aspirations, of our people. I have said that there is no difference between rituals, and the ideas they express. Any Christian ritual must be given this value, i.e., it is important, and, therefore, is celebrated like any ritual we perform in our society. Christian rituals must receive the value and dignity they deserve,

rather than the casual approach we take now. These casual approaches create doubts as to the seriousness of one's faith.

Melanesians see the "abundant life" as being merited. This is based on the principle of reciprocity that is prevalent in PNG societies. A person, to receive blessings from the spirits, must merit it. If he/she doesn't, he/she won't be blessed. This thinking carries over into Christianity: a person, to receive blessing, even as a Christian, must earn it from Christ. This is presupposed, when he/she comes into Christianity, based on traditional religion. He/she understands that, to be blessed by God, he/she works for it. A person who doesn't get blessed, despite being good, holds onto Christianity loosely. This contributes to nominalism in PNG.

After the soccer game incident, I asked why the pastor, who was supposed to be living out the Bible in life, failed. He had responded negatively to the incident, because of the culture, into which he was born. This culture advocates clan solidarity, and operates on a principal of reciprocity. The culture also teaches (or is intuitive in the life of a person) that clan solidarity, and reciprocity, must take place. I have touched on reasons why this must be so.

This system also sees no place for weakness, as expressed in submissiveness, for, to do so, is against the pride of Melanesians. The dignity of a person is maintained by not submitting at all, and by not making apologies for any action done.

Finally, I wrote about how these values of our society are having their toll in the lives of Christians. They are torn between two worlds: whether to submit to discipline, or to go their own way, thereby reflecting pride and superiority. He/she has to choose between forgiveness, and forgetting, or retaliation. Does he/she give out of love, or does he/she give with expectation of reciprocity? These are the realities of a Christian in PNG, and the choices he/she needs to make. Such are the cultural contributions to nominalism in PNG.

Suggestions to Minimise Nominalism

To minimise nominalism, I have suggested that one of the remedies to it is solid biblical teaching in the church.

As a way of teaching the church, our communicational approaches are not always good. I said that, when we are teaching, preaching, etc., we need to be very selective in the use of our words, phrases, concepts, and refine them to the level of our audience. Many times, this is a major weakness in our attempts at teaching, etc. When people are not clear, the teaching is not good, and people are vulnerable to their own interpretations, and this causes no growth at all in the knowledge of the word.

Further, we need to contextualise our teaching methods, using the methods of teaching and learning used in our societies. This will enable teaching to be of maximum benefit. We also need to contextualise our music, songs, and instruments, giving a Melanesian touch and flavour. Also, our Christian rituals will need to be contextualised, in order to make the church in Melanesia an authentically Melanesian church.

Thus, we need good, qualified, reliable teachers. Criteria they need to meet are: he/she must live out what he/she teaches. I have pointed out the effects of a teacher living a double standard of life. I have also said that strong teaching, after meeting these criteria, above, must be given in the areas of traditional religion and culture. Those traditional values, not helpful for Christians, must be counteracted with biblical material. Where this teaching is not given, we will still face these traditional pressures.

A further area of teaching that must be emphasised is that the roles of the pastor and the member of the church must be defined. In this area, I have spoken strongly on the use of spiritual gifts, for the purpose of building a strong and vibrant church. When each member contributes to the life of the church, as required by the Bible, the church will stand very strong, and grow, both in quality and in quantity. For too long, churches have been static and weak, because pastors seem to run the church all on their own, rather than having a shared ministry, based on the collective gifts, as given by the Holy Spirit.

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