

WHAT SHOULD THE MELANESIAN CHURCH OF THE FUTURE BE LIKE?

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INTRODUCTION

The question, "What should the church of the future be like?", prompted the development of this article. In an attempt to answer the question, I have chosen the church in Melanesia, more particularly, Papua New Guinea, as a case of observation. The future time frame anticipated is the "time after the present, or between the present, and before the return of the Lord". This means the church of the future, for this purpose, will still be in the world, and not perfect, because its make up involves imperfect people. Similarly, the frequent use of the word "Melanesia"¹ here refers to Papua New Guinea.

The concept of church in Melanesia will be from a biblical perspective (particularly, the New Testament), and expressed in the following: (1) universal (see Matt 16:18), where the church is referred to as: "all believers in Christ at all times and places"; (2) local where the church "refers to a group of believers in a given geographical

¹ Initially, the word "Melanesia" referred to black islands in the South Pacific, which include Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji, New Caledonia, and West Papua. For the purpose of this article, the word is used with reference to the Independent State of Papua New Guinea.

locality” (see 1 Cor 1:2; 1 Thess 1:1).² The latter can be visibly effected empirically, where all believers come together in a reconciled, and reconciling, fellowship, through the means of denominations.³

The model employed in the paper adopts the wording of both the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed, more particularly, the “four basic features or marks” of the church, the *one, holy, catholic, and apostolic* church. Kung calls these the dimensions of the church.⁴ Further, and in an attempt to anticipate the character of the church, the following analysis will be used: (1) A brief overview of past trends and developments of the church since missionary contact up to the pre-independence period. (2) This will be followed by a review of the church in the post-independence period. On the basis of these

² Millard Erickson, *Introducing Christian Doctrine*, Grand Rapids MI: Baker Book House, 1992, p. 330. Note: the words in *italics* are the actual words stated.

³ H. Snyder, “A living community”, in *The Lion Handbook of Christian Belief*, Tring UK: Lion Publishing, 1988, pp. 382-389. With reference to Melanesia, “the church” refers to the Roman Catholic church and the Protestants churches, currently under the PNG Council of Churches, the Evangelicals, Charismatic, and Pentecostal churches.

⁴ A brief explanation of the four features, according to H. Kung, *The Church*, London UK: Burns & Oates, 1962, pp. 275, 337, 343, 355, 356, 358. **One** – The *unity* and the *oneness* of the church. Christ is the basis of this unity of God in the Holy Spirit, who, through His word and Spirit unites all together in fellowship. Despite the diversity in worship, theology, and church order, there is one God, one Lord, one Spirit, and one Body, one hope, and one faith, one baptism, and one Lord’s Supper. **Holy** – The Church is sinful, and yet holy and set apart. It is in the world, and is made up of imperfect people, but, at the same time, reforms itself, through the grace and mercy of God, from whom it draws the necessary strength, according to the gospel of Jesus Christ. It stands out as the salt and light of the world. **Catholic** – The church is universal. It is the body given to Christ, which God chose to put with Christ at the centre of His plan to reconcile the world to Himself. It is manifested, represented, and realised in the local churches, inasmuch, it is a whole, universal, all-embracing church, and is build up by the gifts of grace, appropriated by the Holy Spirit (Snyder, “A living community”, pp. 386, 387). **Apostolic** – The church is built on the foundation of the apostles, and, therefore, continues the apostolic ministry, laid down by the apostles, which was granted to it by the Spirit of God and Christ. It must be directed towards fulfilling its apostolic mission to the world, where it can glorify God in the world, through the works of the kingdom.

(known) past trends, then (3) a tentative forecast of the church of the future will be proposed.

THE PAST TRENDS AND DEVELOPMENTS OF THE CHURCH EARLY MISSIONARY CONTACT: PREWAR/POSTWAR TO PRE-INDEPENDENCE PERIODS (1870–1970)

The period of the 1870s to the 1940s was the period that saw the arrival of the gospel, and the planting of the church in Melanesia by missionaries from various mission groups. By 1890, most parts of the country were already under the control of various mission groups.⁵ As a result of animosity between the Roman Catholic and Protestant missionaries, an agreement was reached to create divisions, thus allocating territories to various groups.⁶ Each mission group not only brought clans and tribes under their influence, but also contributed to the socio-economic development of the country.⁷

Among other issues, two notable features emerge in the ecclesiological development in Melanesia at this time.

The Church in Its Infant Stage

The church, in this period, was in its infant stage, and predominantly under the control of missionaries. Missionaries, who had complete superiority, employed methods to transplant all they could of Christianity, in its Western forms.⁸ Churches were built in the neo-Gothic architectural styles, similar to those in Europe.⁹ Melanesians were absorbed into church structures and traditions that were foreign

⁵ Such as the LMS (Congregationalists), Methodists, Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and the Anglicans, and the areas were particularly the coasts of Papua New Guinea.

⁶ Garry W. Trompf, ed., *Melanesian Religion and Christianity*, Goroka PNG: Melanesian Institute, 2008, pp. 148, 149 (particularly the coasts of Papua New Guinea).

⁷ They contributed in the areas of education, health, transport services, language translation, printing, plantations, stores, and agriculture, to mention a few.

⁸ This includes music, art, and ways of living.

⁹ Alec R. Vidler, *The Church in an Age of Revolution*, London UK: Hodder & Stoughton, 1961, p. 252.

to them, and were also alienated from their traditional ways, in religious experience and symbols.¹⁰ The teachings handed out to people were from the perspective of the particular mission organisation. In other words, the influence of the missionaries' theologies, and the practice of the church, kept the people separated from one another.

Affiliation and Loyalty to the Church on Ethnic Lines

Since Melanesian societies are constructed around clan and tribal systems, and based primarily on kinship and descent, loyalty and allegiance to one's clan, or tribal obligation, was paramount.¹¹ This was evident when the conversion of a "big man" (elder or clan/tribe leader) to the Christian faith, resulted in the conversion of his whole clan or tribe. Hence, loyalty and allegiance to Christianity was done in a similar fashion to that of their clans or tribes. By 1940 [and onwards], missions had a powerful impact on the lives of the people so that old religious beliefs and practices had either been driven "underground" or modified.¹²

"Denominationalism became a functional substitute to support traditional cleavages in Melanesian society."¹³ Loyalty and allegiance was now on a denominational basis. A faith that was suppose to reconcile all Melanesians to each other, and to the true God, was seen to be dividing them further, when they were already divided by their tribal affiliations. Instead of bringing them into the body of Christ, the universal church in their own context, they were divided denominationally by belief and practice, due to various imported theologies.¹⁴

¹⁰ John Kadiba, "In Search of a Melanesian Theology", in *The Gospel is Not Western*, G. W. Trompf, ed., Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1987, p. 141.

¹¹ D. Whiteman, *Melanesians and Missionaries*, Pasadena CA: William Carey Library, 1983, pp. 58-59.

¹² Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, pp. 148, 149, 155.

¹³ Whiteman, *Melanesians and Missionaries*, p. 174.

¹⁴ Vidler, *The Church in an Age of Revolution*, p. 254. See Kadiba, "In Search of a Melanesian Theology", p. 141.

As the country approached independence, there were talks among Protestant denominations for a possible reunion to establish an indigenous Melanesian church. Although the Anglicans and Lutherans withdrew at the last minute, the union of LMS and Methodists was consummated, thus forming the United church in 1968. On a positive note, there were signs that some churches were now on speaking terms. This eventually led to the formation of two church councils, which aimed at working for a wider Christian unity in Papua New Guinea.¹⁵

In view of the above, the question that remains to be answered is: did the church understand its nature and mandate? *Was the church in Melanesia one, holy, catholic, and apostolic?* Obviously, as an infant, the Melanesian church needed nurturing, and although its early foundations may not look impressive, this was the beginning of her learning and growth.

THE CHURCH TODAY (POST-INDEPENDENCE PERIOD)

The church in Melanesia, after the post-independence period, faced an unfriendly environment that challenged its very existence, and are seen in the following:

EFFECTS ON SOCIETY

The major effect on Melanesians' way of life, after the post-independence period, was secularisation. Essential services, once in the hands of missions, were taken over by the government, where its policies of urbanisation, rural development, technical advance, and monetarisation of economy imposed more pressure on Melanesian societies. People began to question their traditional techniques of agriculture, and traditional values, etc.¹⁶ Economic performance became the criteria for measuring development.

¹⁵ Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, p. 158. Note: two church councils were the Melanesian Council of Churches, which included the Roman Catholics, as well, and the Evangelical Alliance of PNG.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 244, 245.

The economic system was based on the principle of “money is power”.¹⁷ The political system, although designed to be democratic, was seen to be the breeding ground for corruption, while the education system promoted competition, efficiency, accuracy, and advancement. These developments opened doors to more problems.¹⁸ Regardless of Christianity, the traditional beliefs and practices that went underground have emerged. Hence, the fear of sorcery and witchcraft continues to be a phenomenon in Melanesia today.

CHURCH RESPONSE

In the light of these, the church’s response is evaluated in the following ways:

Strengths

The *unity of churches* is one of the strengths seen today, and this is expressed through: (i) the formation of various ecumenical organisations¹⁹ to combat some of the issues affecting the society, which is done through study, research, awareness, dialogue, and theological education; (ii) the laity, more particularly in the urban cities, where denominational loyalties are no longer effective, as a result of personal conversions to Christ. People are now joining churches, where they feel that they would grow in their faith.

¹⁷ Note: the negative result of this was greed, selfishness, prestige, success, materialism, and individualism.

¹⁸ J. Momis, “The Christian Vision of a New Society”, in *The Gospel is Not Western*, G. W. Trompf, ed., Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1987, pp. 158-159. Problems, such as squatter settlements, law and order, prostitution, drugs, etc. Other significant issues are the Bougainville crises, the PNG/Indonesia border problems, major macroeconomic problems, environmental problems, particularly exploitation of forest resources, health crises relating to malaria, AIDS, etc., and natural disasters. More recently, the increase of non-Christian Eastern religions have penetrated PNG.

¹⁹ Melanesian Council of Churches, Evangelical Alliance, Melanesian Association of Theological Schools (MATS), Melanesian Institute for Pastoral and Socio-Economic Research, ministers fraternals of various cities and towns, to mention a few.

The *ministries of evangelistic outreach, literature, Bible translation, and social concern* are also another area of positive development. Through such programs, the urban and rural people are reached. Public schools, institutions, and universities are targeted, through chaplaincy work. On the part of literature and bible translation, efforts to translate the bible into various languages has progressed, while, on the theological front, programs have been designed for people with little formal education. On the part of social action, churches have played a leading role; and in medical services, have reached remote areas, where government services cannot go.²⁰

Revival and renewal programs are another strong area that has enabled the church to respond to the disorders of society. A notable one is the prayer movement initiated by the conservative Evangelicals and Pentecostals, which saw all the churches come together for a National Prayer Assembly in 1993. The national parliament was prayed over, and spiritual warfare waged.²¹ Similarly, Christian soldiers led various teams in military vessels and planes to pray and wage spiritual warfare around the country's borders.²² The prayer movement has continued since then.

Opening of old denominational turf is another development, as a result of such revival. Hitherto, it was only one dominant player, however, new Christian groups, like the Pentecostals, begin to penetrate such communities at the expense of some members (of the community), who were converted by such groups. Hence, the newcomers are facilitated by using the land and property of their recipients. In the process, more members are drawn into the new

²⁰ L. M. Douglas, *World Christianity: Oceania*, Monrovia CA: MARC, 1986, pp. 126-130. Note: The Roman Catholics, more particularly, have done well in bringing relief assistance to natural disaster victims. However, all churches have provided counselling for victims of both natural disasters and social injustices.

²¹ The participants prayed to cast out evil spirits within the national parliament. The conversion of the Governor-General in an ordinary fashion was another development.

²² P. Gibbs, "The Religious Factor in Contemporary Papua New Guinea", Goroka PNG: Melanesian Institute, 2000, unpublished paper, pp. 4-5.

group. As a result of this development, the old denomination opens up to revival and renewal programs among its members.

Weaknesses

Nominalism and syncretism are a result of the emergence of old beliefs and practices that were forced underground by missionaries. This is more common in rural villages, where the early mission groups settled. Today, “people affirm orthodox theologies, but go to witch doctors, shamans, diviners, and healers during the week, and often in secret, for fear of being condemned by the church”.²³ As a result of this, the church, in this part of society, has been nominal.

Discipleship and mission. Although evangelism within the country has been strong among churches, discipleship has been lacking. Churches are making converts, but not disciples. Many, in crusade rallies, seem to respond more than once. Hence, they are easily swayed by cults and sects, when confronted by them. Similarly, overseas missions have been weak in the Melanesian church. The church, although it is starting to break down the barriers of denominationalism, still has a nationalistic outlook.

Lack of Melanesian theology/contextualisation. Theologies and Christian traditions in Melanesia are foreign in character, and expression of them has become abstract, when relating to the Melanesian way of life, and its environment. The failure to address issues such as death, which Melanesians perceived to be related to sorcery, is one reason why Christianity is still seen as foreign.²⁴ Hence, Christianity becomes second-hand knowledge, and the good news of the gospel becomes lukewarm.²⁵

²³ G. Hiebert, R. D. Shaw, and T. Tiénou, *Understanding Folk Religion*, Grand Rapids MI: Baker Book House, 1999, p. 13.

²⁴ Kadiba, “In Search of a Melanesian Theology”, p. 141.

²⁵ Kadiba cites Sione ‘A. Havea, “In Search of a Melanesian Theology”, p. 140.

THE FUTURE CHURCH

In view of the past and the present periods, the trend of the church in Melanesia was first seen as an infant, dominated, and controlled by foreigners, with their theologies. Hence, people's trust and loyalty were given to denominations. In the present period, the churches have moved towards working together. People are beginning to cross denominational boundaries, as a result of revival and renewal experiences, such as the prayer movements. With the trend of the church, from the past and present, observed, the future church in Melanesia will now be proposed, in the following: terms

THE FUTURE CHURCH MUST BE CULTURALLY RELEVANT

In determining the future church in Melanesia, it must first articulate a theology that is relevant to Melanesia, and must be rooted in Melanesian soil, with the Bible as the central point.²⁶ Hence, it will be able to interpret, and redeem, culture and traditions, in the light of the gospel. Critical contextualisation must be applied to help Melanesians see the gospel, not as abstract, but relevant and appropriate within their culture. These help address and deny the growth of syncretism and nominalism.

Existing forms and expressions (for instance, in worship) must be encouraged in Melanesian culture and tradition.²⁷ Roger Hedlund cites Don Richardson as saying, "God has placed within every human culture certain customs or traditions that, when discovered, will serve as 'redemptive analogies'."²⁸

²⁶ Kadiba, "In Search of a Melanesian Theology", p. 140. See also: M. A. Oduyoye, "The Church of the Future: Its Mission and Theology", in *Theology Today* 52 (January 1996), pp. 494-505, 501. See also: M. Maeliau, "Searching for a Melanesian Way of Worship", in *The Gospel is Not Western*, G. W. Trompf, ed., Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1987, p. 122.

²⁷ Existing forms, such as relationships, which is common in Melanesian societies, use of coconut juice replacing wine, and yam or taro in place of bread, etc.

²⁸ R. E. Hedlund, *The Mission of the Church in the World*, Grand Rapids MI: Baker Book House, 1984, p. 139.

THE FUTURE CHURCH WILL NEED TO BE *ONE* (EPH 4:1-6)

The church in Melanesia will need to be one, and united under the Lordship of Christ, who, Himself, is the basis of this unity. Despite having been divided into different denominations, the “church must learn to focus on Christian identity, rather than that of a particular denomination”.²⁹ Similarly, “unless [the church] puts loyalty to the Word of the Lord above, loyalty to . . . denomination, the [unity] of the church [is] denied”.³⁰ Hence, the issue of Lordship demands the church to be a discipleship church that demonstrates its oneness.

As a discipleship church, worship becomes central, and is concentrated on the Lord. In worship, cultural diversity becomes a great gift and blessing, from which the ministry of reconciliation develops the aspect of learning to respect and appreciate each other’s cultures.³¹ God, through His Word and Spirit, unites all together in fellowship. Despite the diversity in culture, worship, theology, and church order, there is one God, one Lord, one Spirit, and one Body, one hope, and one faith, one baptism, and one Lord’s Supper.³²

According to Craig Nelson, “priority, in all . . . [Christian] educational efforts, must be given to Christ’s command to make disciples”.³³ Through theological institutions, pastors and teachers must be trained to instruct people in the Word, in accordance with Paul’s command to Timothy (2 Tim 2:2). Preaching is another means to instruct the church, and, above all, God, through His Spirit, has

²⁹ C. L. Nesson, “What Will the Future Church Look Like?”, at <http://www.elca.org/lp/futchrch.html>, May 6, 2002, p. 4.

³⁰ E. P. Clowney, *The Church*, Leicester UK: IVP, 1995, p. 106.

³¹ G. Fugmann, “The Role of the Church”, in *Point 7* (1985), pp. 1-13, 9. Note: Worship involves confession and forgiveness, the ministry of God’s word, prayer for others’ needs, caring and sharing in faith, and deeds (1 Cor 12:26; Gal 6:2).

³² H. Kung, *The Church*, p. 275.

³³ Nesson, “What Will the Future Church Look Like?”, p. 3.

equipped the church with various gifts for its growth and development, and empowered it for works of service.³⁴

Some other practical ways, in which unity can be expressed, is in the continuous dialogue among liberal and evangelical Christians. They must learn to find a common ground (more particularly, evangelicals), without compromising biblical truth. “Cooperation among Christians gives a common witness to the world, and is faithful stewardship of the resources entrusted to [the church].”³⁵

THE FUTURE CHURCH WILL NEED TO BE *HOLY*

The future church in Melanesia will need to be holy, not by virtue, but by being led and guided by the Holy Spirit, and joined in a vital union with its Head, Jesus Christ.³⁶ It must realise that it has been called, and set apart, by God. It stands out as the salt, which preserves, and the light, as a means of revelation to the world (Matt 5:13, 14).³⁷ It must be in the world, but not of the world. This means it has to be involved, not only in spiritual development, but socio-economic, and political, development. It is made up of imperfect people, but, at the same time, reforms itself, through the grace and mercy of God, from whom it draws the necessary strength, according to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The future church in Melanesia, in this regard, must assert and reestablish its prophetic role. This means condemning unrighteousness, social injustices, and evil, within the fabric of Melanesian society. At the same time, it must show concern, and, where appropriate, take action, wherever is the need, the hurt, or the

³⁴ M. J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd edn, Grand Rapids MI: Baker Books, 2001, pp. 1064, 1065, 1066.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 1151, 1152.

³⁶ For example: the OT prophets spoke against evil, and corruption, of their day. John the Baptist condemned the sin of Herod, and that cost him his life (Luke 3:19-20; Mark 6:17-29).

³⁷ H. A. Snyder, *The Community of the King*, Downers Grove IL: IVP, 1978, p. 106.

wrong.³⁸ In doing so, Melanesians will then be able to look towards the future church, to make clear their willingness to participate in determining the goals of change and development, and where issues of justice, values, and human rights are at stake,³⁹ Gernot Fugmann adds that “risking a conflict with the leadership of the country. Such outspokenness is, however, called for, if churches want to remain faithful to God’s redeeming will for people and for society.”⁴⁰

THE FUTURE CHURCH WILL NEED TO BE *CATHOLIC*

The future church in Melanesia needs to be universal. It needs to understand that it is a part of the body of Christ, of which Christ is the head and Saviour (Eph 1:22-23; 5:23). It is manifested, represented, and realised, in the local churches, inasmuch, it is a whole, universal, all-embracing church, and is build up by the gifts of grace, appropriated by the Holy Spirit.⁴¹ Irrespective of its diversity of cultures, all barriers have been removed, and all are one in Christ Jesus (Gal 4:28).

The church must not only relate to its members from various cultures within Melanesia, but also throughout the world. According to Paul, “though all its parts are many; they form one body” (1 Cor 12:12). Paul further goes on to say that, despite the difference in race, all have been baptised by one Spirit into one body, and have been made to drink of one Spirit (1 Cor 12:13).⁴² This then, prompts the church to stand with the persecuted church in prayer, and to use its freedom to voice religious tolerance by suppressing governments (1 Cor 12:26). “Remember those in prison, as if you yourselves were suffering” (Heb 3:3). It must pray for those in the front line, taking the gospel to frontiers.

³⁸ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, p. 1068.

³⁹ G. Fugmann, “The Role of the Church”, in *Point 7* (1985), p. 13.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁴¹ See also: Snyder, “A living community”, pp. 386, 387.

⁴² Erickson, *Christian Theology*, p. 1048.

THE FUTURE CHURCH WILL NEED TO BE APOSTOLIC

The future church in Melanesia needs to be a mission-minded church. It must have a global vision. It must understand that, as part of the body, it is built on the foundation of the apostles, therefore, it must continue the apostolic ministry laid down by the apostles. It must participate in fulfilling its apostolic mission to the world, where God is glorified through the works of the kingdom.⁴³ The motivating factor is because “the call to evangelise is a command. For [Jesus] . . . said, “If you love Me, you will obey what I command” (John 14:15; see also v. 21a, 15:14; Matt 28:19; Acts 1:8).⁴⁴ This demands the church be obedient to its head, Jesus Christ.

The future church in Melanesia must no longer be a receiving church, but a sending church. It must play its part in “the evangelistic task of proclaiming the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ throughout the world, making disciples, and building the church”.⁴⁵

A local church in Papua New Guinea sums up the following, in its mission statement, which, in part, reads:

God is calling us, as a local church, to play our part in establishing Christ’s kingdom rule in every human life and community, and every nation, by praying, giving, and going. He is calling us to participate in ministries of evangelism, church planting, discipling, mercy and compassion, relief and development, peace and justice.⁴⁶

The above must reflect the future church in Melanesia in missions.

⁴³ H. Kung, *The Church*, p. 358.

⁴⁴ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, pp. 1061, 1062.

⁴⁵ Snyder, *The Community of the King*, p. 101.

⁴⁶ Revd Sione Kami Memorial Church, *Draft Missions Policy Guidelines*, Revd Sione Kami Memorial Church Mission Board: 2000, unpublished policy guidelines, p. 1. Note: The policy guidelines were adopted by the Church Council on March 10, 2000.

CONCLUSION

The future church in Melanesia will be *one, holy, catholic, and apostolic* church. Its oneness demonstrating the unity of all tribes, languages, and cultures, brought under the Lordship of Christ, while its holiness is seen in it being *called out* and *set apart* among Melanesian societies. It is to be the salt that preserves, and the light that brings revelation to men. Similarly, its catholicity is reflected in its membership with the body of Christ worldwide. Hence, it identifies with the suffering and persecuted church. On the other hand, its apostolicity is reflected in its commitment to the Great Commission (Matt 28:18-20).

However the above four features or dimensions are expressed, or even articulated in a theology that is relevant to Melanesia, it all becomes redundant without the work of the Holy Spirit. It is only through the help and guidance of the Holy Spirit that the future church in Melanesia can become a reality. The development of the church, as seen in the past, the present, and into the future, are basically the result of the Holy Spirit at work. According to Stanley Grenz, “the role of the Holy Spirit [is seen] as the completer of the program of the triune God. He constitutes the church as the body of Christ, whose ministry is the continuation of Christ’s ministry.”⁴⁷

In the light of this, the future church in Melanesia will be seen as a global church, with a missionary focus, because the Triune God is, and will continue to be, a missionary God. Secondly, its diversity of cultures and languages is a blessing and gift to prepare the church for the proclamation of the gospel of salvation and hope to a hostile world.

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