

FEAR AND TRADITIONAL BELIEFS IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA: PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

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INTRODUCTION

Why do Christians fear? This is a question that often lingered in my mind as I studied theology over the years. From childhood to adulthood, there is fear. There is no difference, between non-believers and believers there is fear. In my local church in Anguganak, from congregation members to church elders, there is fear.¹ Fear is one of the weaknesses in Christians across Papua New Guinea. In this article, I will discuss what causes fear, and present three ways in my culture that, I think, fear takes root. I will then respond with what the Bible says about fear.

WHAT CAUSES FEAR?

It is difficult to understand why Christians, especially those who have been in the church for a long time, fear spirits, suffering, and sickness in life. The answers usually revolve around their faith. Are they genuine Christians? Do they know they are saved by the grace of God? Do they know that Jesus Christ defeated fear on the cross?

One of the weaknesses in my church in Anguganak is fear. From the least to the most important in my church, people find it hard to overcome fear in their lives. I will identify three types of fear: fear of spirits; fear of suffering, due to eating culturally inappropriate food; and fear of clotheslines.

¹ Anguganak is located in the West Sepik Province of Papua New Guinea.

FEAR OF SPIRITS: ANCESTORS AND NATURE

Before converting to Christianity, Papua New Guineans were bound up with their cultural beliefs and practices. The people give respect to their ancestors, acknowledging that their ancestors govern their daily lives. The people have a system of beliefs and practices that enable them to understand, explain, and validate the origin and existence of the world, its resources, powers, laws, and techniques. The system can be referred to as “animism”, or “primal religion”.²

Since there was such a strong tie to ancestors in the cultural view of the people of Anguganak, there developed the concept of living a good life to please the ancestors. It is a life lived on moral ethics, including how people relate to one another, and how they do things. The people look at life as not merely “biological existence and survival, but it is abundant life, life in its fullness”.³ The abundant life includes harmony, peace, unity, social justice, wholeness, restoration, freedom, security, plenitude, and release from oppression. This is the desired life – the good life. Papua New Guineans strive for the good life, captured in the Pidgin term *gutpela sindaun*. It is only possible, though, when things are right. Man must be in right relationship with others, nature, and the supernatural.

I recall, when I was a small boy, my parents often told me not to go out at night, because the spirits of my ancestors, *tumbuna*, were walking around, and I must not disturb them. I was also told not to go near the lake, *raun wara*, or else the spirit of the lake would kidnap me. Parents warn their children from a very young age. The fear of these spirits is so embedded in the mind of a child that it can take a long time to overcome the fear, through the power of Christ, during one’s life.

FEAR OF SUFFERING: EATING FOOD FROM A SECOND-BORN BROTHER

Papua New Guineans are diverse in cultures and languages, but all Papua New Guineans are relationship-oriented people. They uphold their identity as a clan and tribal member by strictly adhering to cultural norms. In

² Marilyn Rowsome, “Melanesian Traditional Religion”, in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 17-2 (2001), p. 36.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

Anguganak, this includes respecting blood brothers, by recognising their rank from first-born to last-born in the family. As part of this, the fear of eating food, cooked by the wife of a second-born brother, is a major concern, in both the community and the church. Let me give an example. In my family, I have four sisters and two brothers, and I am the second. If I scraped a coconut for my wife to get coconut juice to cook the food, my older brother will not eat that food. This restriction applies to every area of getting and preparing food, whether it is wild game, coconuts, sago palms, or domestic pigs.

In every case, my elder brother is forbidden to touch, let alone eat, the food. This is because of the belief that he will encounter some physical disability in his body, such as knee or back problems, in addition to lowering his status, and limiting his rights as an elder brother in the family. The status of being an elder brother is very important, especially when it comes to the father passing on the blessings of the tribe and the clan. Elder brothers are not ignorant of such privileges. Even those in the church in Anguganak strongly adhere to this custom. Fear in the church, therefore, is a big issue affecting believers' relationships with Jesus Christ. Fear of losing contact with one another, receiving criticism, and being rejected as an outcast, are all real concerns.

FEAR OF THE CLOTHESLINE: ASTHMA AND DEATH

A few years ago, a pastor and I saw an exhausted old church elder approaching the pastor's house on the road. There was a clothesline between the road and the pastor's house. The church elder called for a cup of water to be brought to him. The pastor's son fetched the water, walked under the clothesline, and brought it to the church elder on the road. The church elder, however, took the cup of water and poured it out on the road. He then walked to the house, but took a different way. Instead of walking under the clothesline, he went around it, jumping over a flowerbed to get to the house. After the elder got a drink, the pastor and I walked over to him and asked him to say sorry to the little boy for not taking the cup of water from him. We asked the church elder to explain his actions. The church elder said that, since the cup of water had passed under the clothesline, he could not drink it. According to his culture, if he were to drink the water,

then he would get asthma and die. I was shocked about the statement. The church elder was living in fear of drinking water from a cup that had passed under the clothesline!

WHAT THE BIBLE TEACHES ABOUT FEAR

It is in the church that the Lordship of Christ is fully realised. The presence of a redeemed community in the world is a visible sign that reconciliation with God, through Christ, means freedom from anything that may bring bondage. As the church displays this freedom, it announces to spirits that they have no power over believers (Eph 3:10).

The Word of God has much to say about fear. It also encourages those who adhere to the Word to hide scripture in their heart, so that they are equipped and ready. That is to say, that, whenever fear comes in, the believers can apply the Word of God to drive the fear away so that the fear does not take control of them.

Christians should not let cultural fear dictate their lives. Rather, they should know that their life is both physically and spiritually in God's hands. The Bible says that God alone is to be feared (Ps 76:7). God alone will deliver His people from all their fears (Ps 34:4). Christians should not pretend that they are freed if they continue to deny the fear that holds them. This will lead to failures in life. They will not grow in their Christian life, rather, they will go down in their faith. As the Apostle John wrote, "the one who fears is not made perfect" (1 John 4:18).

CONCLUSION

In this article, we have looked at three causes of fear. It is very sad to know that Christians, even church elders, still have a fear of culture, which greatly impacts their lives. It is important to understand that God is outside of culture; in fact, He originally instituted it. However, if evil spiritual forces influence culture, then it has become bad. Those spiritual forces promote counterfeit thoughts to create fear in the lives of believers. The believers then shift their trust in Jesus Christ, to whatever one adheres to.

On the other hand, the Bible is the lasting solution to solve the problem of fear. Fear only comes when there is a lack of biblical knowledge, when there is less focus on the cross of Calvary and its effectiveness, when there is not enough doctrinal teaching about God and His work in believers' lives. When one's knowledge of truth is limited, it opens the way for fear to infiltrate the church.

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