

# **Towards a Melanesian Theology of Conversion**

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## **Introduction**

Christian conversion is a new beginning, and means, literally, “to turn”. “Turn” is the characteristic word in the Bible for conversion. The scriptures use this concept in the sense of a radical change of life direction. Thus, there is a turning-from, and a turning-to. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that conversion, in the Bible, is “always firmly grounded in history” (Wallis, 1981, p. 4). This means that conversion must be both culturally appropriate and culture-specific (Kraft, 1981, p. 333). The purpose of this paper is to explore an anthropologically-informed theological perspective on conversion, from a Melanesian point of view. As an Australian, clearly I cannot hope to theologise in a fully Melanesian way, however, my five years as a missionary in Papua New Guinea do enable me to begin to point in the direction in which such theologising ought to go.

Throughout this study, conversion will be considered as if it was a purely human activity. But, both human experience, and the scriptures teach that man does not have the resources within him to make such a radical about-face. This is not to say that man has nothing within him at all to contribute to conversion, but, rather, it is to emphasise that power from the spirit world is always needed for human success. No Melanesian would challenge this. The scriptures teach that God, the Holy Spirit, works both with, and within, man in the conversion process. He it is who opens the eyes of the blind, who calls and woos, who gives new life, who completes what He has begun. This truth is presupposed by all that follows.

Another presupposition of this paper is the concept of conversion as a process rather than a single act. While it may be true that there is a specific point at which a person passes “from death to life” (John 5:24), the scripture can hardly be said to focus on this point in its accounts of the conversion of men and women. What we see, instead, is a focus on the development of their relationship with God, and the way in which that is worked out in their lives. The significance of this, for this paper, is that the various parameters of conversion, which are discussed, should be understood as taking place, as part of the total process of conversion, within the context of a developing relationship with God.

It is also assumed that conversion may take place as a group response to the gospel, when the individuals, who make up the group, decide, together, that they will turn to God as a whole group. Such group conversions are entirely appropriate in a group-oriented culture. Historically, this has been the characteristic form of response in Melanesia.

Christian conversion, as a radical turning, is, firstly, a turning-from; secondly, a turning-to; thirdly, a turning-into; and, finally, a turning-for. The New Testament commonly speaks of these four aspects of a complete conversion-turn in the words “repent”, “believe”, “be baptised”, and “serve”. Considered from the perspective of the imagery of turning, these four concepts refer to a turning from sin, a turning to God, a turning into a new community, and a turning for service. The following paper will make use of these four basic parts of conversion for its structure. It should be noted, that, because culture is an integrated whole, and the four aspects of a complete conversion-turn are intimately related together, it will sometimes be necessary to deal with the issues raised, in a cyclical manner, bringing different facets to the fore in successive sections.

## **1. Conversion: A Turning from Sin – “Repent”**

The Bible speaks clearly concerning what it is an individual, or a people, must turn from, through its use of several different concepts and images. It speaks of turning away from “evil ways” and “wrong doings” (Jer 25:4b-5), from “idols” (1 Thess 1:9), and from “darkness” (Acts 26:18), from the “power of Satan” (Acts 26:18), and, perhaps most commonly, from “sins” (e.g., Mark 1:15). Taken together, these various expressions indicate that mankind is both in bondage to dark powers, which demand his allegiance, and is engaged in actions, which can only be characterised as evil and wrong. The New Testament sometimes uses the word “sin” to include both of these aspects (e.g., Rom 5:12, 1 John 3:4), and so, this word will be used as a cover word to speak of all that the Word of God calls man to turn from.

But sin is rarely used in the abstract in the scriptures. In the Jeremiah passage, quoted above, Jeremiah goes on immediately to specify the people’s “wrong doings”: “Do not go after other gods, to serve and worship them, or provoke Me to anger by making idols” (Jer 25:6). Jesus told the rich Jewish leader to sell all he had, and to give the money to the poor. This man’s first allegiance was to his wealth – this was his idol, this was his sin (Luke 19:18-24). And, if the scriptures focus on sin, and the turning-from of repentance, in the concrete and specific, then so must we.

Our exploration, therefore, must investigate the specifics of the “turning-from” within the Melanesian situation. Content must be given to the “idols”, the “darkness”, the “evil ways”, and the “power of Satan”. The first question, which must be addressed, is that of the primary allegiance of Melanesians, since conversion is, at root, a change of ultimate allegiance. Anthropologists, working in Melanesia, suggest that “cosmic life and renewal” is the Melanesian’s first allegiance (Whiteman, nd, p. 4). By this is meant a drive for abundant life, life with a capital “L”. The Melanesian desires, above all, else to experience, and to go on experiencing, this life, which is a life of right relationships within the community, of high yield harvests, of abundant supplies of food, of plenty of healthy children, of strong, virile men, of many pigs, of success in hunting, of success in warfare, and a good share of modern Western goods and technology. In Melanesia, *kago* (English: “cargo”) has become the catch-word, bringing together all these aspects of this longed-for abundant life. Significantly, the Melanesian cannot even dream of experiencing this life, of enjoying the *kago*, apart from the other members of his clan – his brothers. In other words, his allegiance to *kago* is within the context of his allegiance to his clan. In fact, it is impossible to separate these two allegiances, for they are, in fact, two aspects of but one allegiance. However, for the purposes of this discussion, it will be helpful to deal with them somewhat separately, so as to explore the implications of conversion for each, individually.

Conversion, then, will mean, firstly, a turning away from *kago*, as the ultimate allegiance. God Himself, and His purposes, must take the place of this idol. Biblical faith demands that primary allegiance be given to God. One of the clearest expressions of this truth is found in the book of Job, a book with which the church in Melanesia must come to grips. Job is a man, who clearly enjoys the kind of abundant life, which the Melanesian yearns for. And yet, when he begins to find this life is slipping away from him, and then, later, when he finds that it has gone completely, Job demonstrates that he is truly a converted man. By his reaction to the tragic events, which overtake him, he shows that he had, indeed, at some undisclosed point earlier in his life, turned from the abundant life, as his primary allegiance, and turned to God Himself, and His purposes. Job is presented as a truly faithful man, a man who does not relate to God primarily for the benefits, the power for success, for *kago*, which God may give, but his loyalty to God proceeds from another motivation, a loyalty to God Himself, whom Job knows to be his gracious and just Creator and Redeemer.

Another expression of what it means to turn from sin is seen in the first of the ten commandments: “You shall have no other gods before Me.” Christians are those who have turned from the good life, as their primary allegiance. It is no longer their “god”. Rather, when God is given primary allegiance, they find that, on the one hand, their understanding of what constitutes the abundant life is subtly changed, and on the other, that they are motivated to seek that good life, in the first instance, for others, rather than for their own group. Beyond this, conversion also brings the promise of a real fulfilment of this deep Melanesian yearning for abundant life, not in this present age, and not necessarily in exactly the Melanesian image of that life. Nevertheless, the promise of the Bible of “the age to come” is that it will bring life in all its fullness, a life, which will satisfy the deepest longings of all peoples, whose central allegiance is to the Living God.

The second aspect of the ultimate allegiance of Melanesians, is allegiance to the clan. This is not to imply that clan allegiance is sinful, in and of itself – not at all. At issue, rather, is, again, the question of priority of allegiance. For the Melanesian, the clan, and its welfare, is his central concern, particularly the continuation, the protection, the maintenance of the well-being of the clan. The clan would seem to occupy the place in the heart of Melanesians that, in Westerners, is occupied by what theology and psychology has sometimes called the “self”. If the Westerner can say “I think, therefore, I am”, or even more so today, “I experience, therefore I am”, the Melanesian would say, “I have brothers, therefore I am”. The interests of the community, the clan, are paramount.

This goal of promoting the clan’s interests, and its well-being, can be successfully achieved, in the Melanesian worldview, only with the help of supernatural power, often referred to in the literature as *mana*. For the majority of Melanesian societies, the source of this power is the clans’ ancestors. The ancestors, in Melanesia, are vital members of the community, concerned, too, for its ongoing life. But the ancestors, being now spirits have the power needed for success in life. Melanesians have thus tended to idolise their ancestors – perhaps giving to them the worship, the allegiance, due alone to their Creator. In this process, they have come under “the power of Satan” (Acts 26:20), as he has used this situation to blind men’s eyes to the truth. Conversion, then, means a turning away from the ancestors, as this power source, repentance of this idolatrous allegiance. However, this does not mean, it must be emphasised, a turning away from the respect and honour, which is due to the ancestors, for, indeed, God commands His people to do this (“respect your father and your mother”: Ex 20:12).

A crucial, related issue is the Melanesian assumption, concerning the means by which spirit power becomes available to man. In this worldview, ritual is the key to power. If the Melanesian performs the ritual correctly, he is assured of achieving his goal. The ancestors, or the particular spirit he is relating to, must work on his behalf. Here is a manifestation of the methodology of the realm of darkness. Manipulation is a hallmark of Satan's activity, so man's desire to relate to others (whether to his fellows, or to the spirits) in a manipulative way, demonstrates bondage to Satan. Such bondage is reflected, at this point, in the Melanesian worldview. Melanesian man does not only manipulate the spirits, to achieve good ends, but, equally, to bring evil upon his enemies. Conversion, clearly, must mean a turning away from such a manipulative stance, and the adoption of a stance of submission.

But manipulation and respect, bordering on worship, is not the only thing, which characterises relations between man and the spirit world in Melanesia. At the emotional level, fear is probably the strongest reaction of Melanesians to the spirits. The reason for this is that many of the spirits, which Melanesians know, they characterise as evil, since their only activities, in their relations with man, are harmful. The ancestors, too, are never wholly benevolent; they are just as capable of producing sickness and disaster as they are of granting success and abundance. So, in an environment surrounded by various spirits, fear and insecurity are daily experiences within the community, and freedom from fear belongs to the hope of the abundant life. Conversion deals with fear, though, perhaps, not so much as something, which must be repented of, and turned away from, as something from which conversion liberates man.

Conversion also means, in the Melanesian context, a turning away from the "eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth" form of retributive justice. This attitude can be traced to the worldview assumption that the good life is only available to man, when all relationships are in correct balance. And balance can only be achieved by returning equivalent harm (or equivalent goodwill, when goodwill has been shown). Thus, it would appear that there is no real conception of grace, or forgiveness, in the worldview. In the highlands, either a demand for payment of monetary compensation, or a resort to physical warfare, is the method of retribution, after an offence has been committed against a group. Use of magic is the coastal response to an offence. But both highland and coastal forms of retribution belong to the "darkness", and need the turn of conversion to receive the spirit of forgiveness of the "light".

## 2. Conversion: A Turning to God – “Believe”

“Light” is certainly one of the dominant images in the New Testament, for the turning-to of conversion. Turning to the light is the flip-side of a repentant turning from the darkness. In one sense, the turning-to of conversion is a movement, which can take place only after the turning-from has begun. Yet, in another sense, it is the original sighting of the light, which gives motivation to repentance. The woven walls of conversion have no clear-cut joining points!

In Melanesia, the feature of the light, which attracts most attention, is its intensity, its power. In terms of the biblical story, it is the great power of God, demonstrated in the stories of the Exodus and the conquest of the promised land, the fight against pagan gods during the period of the Israelite monarchy, the battle against demons and sickness in Jesus’ miraculous works, and, above all, the victory of His resurrection over Satan and death, to which Melanesians first turn. However, the biblical stories must be authenticated in Melanesia, in the clan’s, or individual’s, own experience. The superiority of God’s power over all other spirit powers must be shown before conversion can progress, before a believing commitment can grow. In the terminology developed by Alan Tippett, there must be a “power encounter”, a demonstration, in which God’s power is seen to encounter the power of the ancestral, and other, spirits, and God decisively emerges victorious, resulting in a radical turning away from an allegiance to those spirits, and a new allegiance to Him (Tippett, 1973, pp. 88-91).

At this point, it is important to notice that the Melanesian insight into the reality of the unseen world, and its power, and man’s inability to live successfully, without access to that power, conforms closely to the teaching of the scriptures. In regard, then, to the Melanesian focus on power, and the meaning of conversion, for this focus, the turning is not at the point of power itself (as it might be, perhaps, for the conversion of Westerners), but the turning must occur in relation to the source, and means of access to power. Melanesian power, *mana* is a neutral force, which is there to be used for either good or bad purposes. An important aspect of conversion to God, then, means turning to a new understanding, and experience, of power – and understanding of God, as the ultimate source of all power, and of Christ, as the pattern for man’s use, and access to God’s power. The converted person, therefore, will never attempt to use God’s power, for either his own selfish ends, or for the ends of his clan, at the expense of other individuals or groups, or to cause another hurt or harm. He will refuse to do this, on the basis that this kind of use of God’s power belongs to the evil one. The converted person no longer relates to this evil one

as belong to the Evil one. The converted person no longer relates to this evil one as his master (either consciously, or, more usually, unconsciously), but as his enemy.

Further, conversion to God means that the converted individual or group will only seek access to God's power through Jesus Christ, "the one mediator" (1 Tim 2:5 AV). This means, as emphasised already, a turning away from all other mediators, at least in their role as mediators of power. Ancestor, then, will continue to be venerated, or respected, but not related to for power.

In relation to power access, conversion means adopting a new stance towards the means of access (as well as to the mediator for access). In the Melanesian worldview, power is made available to an individual, who both knows the secret ritual, and is able to successfully carry it out. Access is on the basis of what you know.

It is otherwise for the Christian: access to power is on the basis of who you know: God Himself, through Jesus Christ. The truly-converted person is one who no longer acts on the assumption that correct ritual in prayer will guarantee the reception of power. Rather, his confidence lies in the Person, and character, of the One to whom he prays, who has promised to supply all his needs (Matt 6:32-33; Phil 4:19).

This discussion of access to power raises another important issue for conversion, which is that conversion means relating to the source, and mediator, of power, in an attitude of submission rather than from a desire to manipulate. Because the Melanesians' traditional primary allegiance was focused on the achievement of the abundant life, and because, as discussed above, correctly-performed ritual was understood to guarantee the release of power by the spirits, for the good of the clan or individual, the stance of the Melanesian towards the spirit world was essentially manipulative. When the ritual was known, the spirits were at man's disposal. The spirits were never thought to have plans or purposes of their own for man, apart from maintaining the status quo. If the spirits acted, it was either at the instigation of men, or because men had departed from the tradition of the clan in some way. Melanesian man, in the context of his clan, was at the centre of his world. However, conversion must result in a deep change at this point. The scriptures refer to God as the "Living God", which emphasises that He is one who is actively at work in His world, and that He is sovereign. The activity of the Living God is neither focused on the maintenance of the status quo, nor is it instigated by His creatures. Rather, God is the one who initiates His own

activities, activities, which are primarily oriented towards the reconciliation of His whole creation to Himself, and to itself, under Christ as the head (Eph 1:9). As such, God demands our worship and submission. The converted person ceases to think in terms of manipulating God for his own, or his clan's, ends, but now thinks in terms of submitting his own, and his clan's, plans to God for His scrutiny, and of fulfilling God's purposes for Himself and his clan.

Conversion to God, in Melanesia, also means turning to a God, who is transcendent. It is true that many, though apparently not all, Melanesian societies retained the memory of a creator-being, who was responsible for the original creation of at least the local environment, and perhaps also the original tribal ancestor. But, in all cases, this probably transcendent being had removed Himself from the immediate environment, and, hence, was virtually unknown. Here, it seems, we see a remnant of the Melanesian memory and knowledge of the God of the Bible. But Melanesians have given their allegiance to spirit beings, who are not at all transcendent. The spirits they have known, and related to, the ghosts of the recently departed, the spirits of their ancestors, and bush spirits, cannot usually be directly perceived with the senses, yet they exist on this earth, in and around the territory of the clan. Although they have power, or immediate access to power, greater than the living, they are still subject, with the living, to many of the limitations of this earth.

But the God, who has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ, is not one among many immanent spirits. He is not one who is limited to the clan or tribal territory. He is unique. His only limitations are those He imposes on Himself, in line with His character. This does not mean that He has no interest in, or has not power to deal with, those concerns, which belong to the immanent spirits of the Melanesian world. Rather, the point to be made here is that conversion must mean the opening of the horizons to a Spirit, who is so much greater, and, indeed, qualitatively different, from Melanesian spirits. He is both the Creator and Lord of all, whether power, spirits, man, animals, plants, or the ground.

Conversion, in Melanesia, therefore, means turning to a Spirit Being, who does not easily fit into the Melanesian category of Spirit. Of great significance, is the fact that the Christian God is a God of Love, and a God who desires man to relate to Him, not on the basis of fear of the negative effects of His power, but out of a deeply-felt spirit of thankfulness and love for Him, as small children would relate to a good father. So, conversion is fundamentally entering into a loving, obedient, dynamic relationship with the living God, and believing in Him is the trusting commitment of one's life, which issues in lifelong faithfulness, lifelong allegiance to Him.



Conversion also has implications for the converted clan's, or converted person's, view of the world around them. In turning to God, the convert turns towards the creator and ruler of the world, so that the world, though the home of antagonistic bush spirits, for example, becomes a safe place, nevertheless, for those spirits are, in fact, under the authority of their creator, both by virtue of their creation, and, more especially, by virtue of His victory in Christ, over their rebellion. This means that the spirit world needs no longer dominate, and produce fear, within Melanesian man, and he is then able to live as he was originally intended, having dominion over his environment, rather than standing in awe of it. This should not be taken to mean that conversion means turning to a Western, materialistic perspective of the world. Rather, it is to recognise that the converted man and clan now have, as the result of their conversion, a new position in their world, a position of strength *vis-a-vis* the hostile spirits, because the authority and power of Christ is available to them. In this sense, it is appropriate to speak of conversion to the world as an important aspect of conversion to God.

### **3. Conversion: A Turning to Become the People of God – “Be Baptised”**

From a Melanesian perspective, the *notion of peoplehood* has great importance. Personal significance and identity comes from membership of a family, which belongs within a clan, which, in turn, is part of a larger group. For this reason, the Apostle Paul's discussion in Eph 2:11-22 would seem to be a suitable starting point for a consideration of the meaning of the church in the conversion process in Melanesia. In that passage, a contract is drawn between “no people” and “God's people”, that is, between those peoples, who are still living in the darkness, and those, now living in the light, between those, whose allegiance is to the idol of *kago*, and those, whose allegiance is to the living God, revealed in Jesus Christ. Paul characterises the first group as “living without hope and without God”, as “foreigners” and “strangers” (Eph 2:12, 19), and the second group, as the “family of God” (Eph 2:19). In Melanesian terms, conversion means both joining, and becoming, a new clan, turning toward, and into, that people, who repent and believe; it means taking on a new identity: the people of God.

In the New Testament, the outward mark of entrance into the people of God is baptism. This is not to say that this aspect of the conversion-turn exhausts the meaning of baptism, but is to emphasise that baptism is the sacrament of incorporation into the church. In passages, dealing with the unity of the people of God, Paul invariably refers to baptism in this way, as, for

example, in 1 Cor 12:13: “all of us have been baptised into the one body”. Fackre calls baptism the “portal of entry” into “a new household” (1975, p. 95).

If the biblical concept of the people of God has links with the Melanesian understanding of the clan, then *baptism relates to initiation*. Conversion is incomplete without baptism, just as, traditionally, growth to maturity was incomplete without initiation (at least for males). Baptism, as the sacrament of initiation, signifies a new status. The unconverted clan tends to see itself in relation to all other clans and groups as their superior, in all respects. Other clans are commonly perceived in terms of “no people”. In the process of conversion, there must come the recognition that, in the eyes of God, they, themselves, are also “no people”, “strangers” to God, having no special status in comparison with other groups, in His eyes. So, conversion means a change in the clan’s perception of itself. It is a turning from the arrogant pride, which views others with condescension. But, at the same time, conversion also brings with it the realisation and experience of a new status, based, not on any inherent or achieved superiority of the clan, but on their acceptance by God in Christ. Conversion is a turning to accept this new God-given status.

This new status, signified by baptism, results, firstly, in a new relationship with all other clans and persons, who, together, form the people of God. In baptism, the individual and clan affirm that the identity of the people of God extends far beyond the borders of their own group, and that their own identity, as a clan, is now secondary to their identity as the people of God. The apostle’s words, “In the same way, all of us, whether Jews or Gentiles, whether slaves or free, have been baptised into the one body, and we have all been given the one Spirit to drink” (1 Cor 12:13), could be contextualised, “all of us, whether coastals or highlanders, whether Engas or Chimbus, have been baptised into one tribal group or clan”. Such an affirmation must result in reconciliation with any Christian groups with whom the newly-converted has had a fractured relationship.

Conversion to Christ means, secondly, the adoption of a new attitude to those groups and persons, who do not yet belong to God’s clan. Baptism signifies the replacement of the old attitude of superiority by a desire to identify with other groups as equals, a concern to communicate the good news to them, so that they, too, may turn to become the people of God, and a willingness to forgive and be reconciled, where relationships are broken.

Becoming the people of God in conversion in Melanesia means that the maintenance of *right relationships*, so important in clan life, is carried across

into the community of the *clan of God*. Jesus' command that His people should love one another (John 13:34), is, of course, the basis of this, and, indeed, Melanesians have always understood the importance of love between brothers. Conversion, then, means the extension of this ideal to include all within the new clan of God. The term used by the first-century Christians: "brother", is, therefore, a peculiarly appropriate one for Melanesian members of the Christian community to use in the late twentieth century. But, conversion adds a new dimension to the brother relationship, the dimension of forgiveness. Traditionally, relationships could only be kept in balance by the continuing fulfilment of obligations, or the application of retributive justice, when obligations were not met. The behaviour of God, in Christ, is the model for interpersonal and interclan relationships, and this means that Christians must turn to forgive one another, as God has forgiven them through Christ (Eph 5:1).

Turning to become the people of God also brings change to the male-female relationship. The traditional male view of women as inferior beings, who are not to be trusted with the secrets of ritual, is revised by the realisation that God accepts women in exactly the same way, and on exactly the same basis, as men. There are no special secrets for men only in the Christian way.

The biblical call for servant-style leadership is also a call to the conversion of Melanesian leadership styles in the Christian community. *Leadership* in Melanesia was traditionally an achieved, rather than an ascribed, function. Conversion does not change this basic understanding, but it does call for some change in the kind of achievement, which is rewarded by leadership, and the way in which that achieved leadership is exercised. Traditionally, in most societies, achievements leading to leadership were fighting and hunting powers, wealth, oratory, access to power, and the ability to make alliances with the neighbouring groups. Some of these abilities may reflect underlying marks of character and gifts, which the scriptures lay down as desirable in Christian leaders. For example, the ability to forge alliances with other groups may indicate both the ability to manage groups of people (cf. 1 Tim 3:4-5), and a standing of respect within the wider community (1 Tim 3:7). An ability with oratory may be linked with the spiritual gift of teaching (1 Tim 3:2), or preaching, though this would not always be the case. On the other hand, fighting prowess, as the mark of a man suited to leadership, is hardly compatible with the call by Jesus for His followers to "turn the other cheek", nor is the pursuit of wealth fitting for one who aspires to lead the community of Him who made Himself poor for that community's sake, in order to make them rich through His poverty (2 Cor 8:9). The point is that not all of the traditional

forms of achievement are suitable, when it comes to the leadership of God's clan. So, to the concept of achievement, as the path to leadership, conversion adds the biblical concepts of spiritual gift – an ability given by God for the purpose of serving His people in some way, spiritual authority, and the call of God.

Just as importantly, the exercise of leadership must undergo conversion. There must be a turning away from the desire for prestige, position, and power, and a turning towards a stance of servanthood (Mark 10:42-45).

#### **4. Conversion: Turning for Mission in the World: “Serve”**

Biblically, conversion always has a purpose, which is related to the world. The first well-documented example of conversion in the scriptures is that of Abraham, who it is clear, was converted, for the purpose of becoming the progenitor of a new line of people, through whom God planned to bless all the nations (Gen 12:1-3). This pattern continues throughout the biblical story, sometimes the purpose of conversion is highlighted, sometimes it is in the background, but it is always there. A clear example from the New Testament letters would be 1 Peter 2:8-9: “but you are the chosen race . . . chosen to proclaim the wonderful acts of God”.

Mission is the most-comprehensive word to use in discussing the purpose of the conversion-turn. This was the concept used by Jesus to explain to His disciples what He desired them to do upon His ascension: “As the Father sent Me, in the same way, I am sending you” (John 20:21), and, “Go, then, to all peoples everywhere” (Matt 28:19). Related closely to the concept of mission is the idea of service. “Service” was the term used by Jesus to characterise His own mission: “The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve” (Mark 10:45), and, in the same context, He indicated that this was also the pattern for them to follow. Servant-style mission is included in the complete turn of conversion.

But the idea of *mission* beyond the borders of one's own group is *alien* to the Melanesian mind, for two reasons. Firstly, Melanesian religion, by its very nature, is a local kind of religion – since the spirits in view are *immanent and local*, by virtue of family and geographical ties. And, secondly, the power of this religion is bound up with *secrecy*: when the rituals become public knowledge, their power is lost. No Melanesian, in his right mind, would dream of communicating them to anyone outside his group.

Clearly then, there are points of conflict between these assumptions and the Christian concept of mission. Conversion must involve the repudiation of these assumptions, and the acceptance of two new assumptions. The first of these has already been discussed, in relation to the nature of God as a transcendent being. His concern reaches to all the peoples of this earth. The second relates to God's use of secrets. He has revealed His secrets to His people for the very purpose that they should pass them on to other people groups. God's secrets are open secrets (Eph 3:1-13). Far from being the exclusive property of a few men in one clan, they are good news for the whole world. The third new assumption, to which Melanesians must turn, in conversion, is that God relates power and secrecy to each other in a unique way. His power is released especially to enable His people to share His secrets (Acts 1:8). *Power is for proclamation.*

But mission, in the New Testament, is more than proclamation. Mission includes all that Christ sends His church into the world to do (Stott, 1977, p. 30), so it includes acts of compassionate love, directed to those in need. Such acts are not new in Melanesia. In Melanesia, love cannot be expressed, except in concrete action, especially in the reciprocal giving of gifts. Here are deep roots, already established in the Melanesian's worldview, upon which compassionate love can be grafted. Conversion will mean that the concern that the recipient reciprocate will lessen, as Christ's style of loving, a style which gives and serves, even in the face of hostility, develops among the converted clan, and within the mind of the converted individual.

The biblical material, dealing with mission, suggests that mission and service frequently involve suffering (e.g., Matt 10:16-23). It is appropriate, at this point, to discuss what conversion means for the understanding of suffering in Melanesia. Suffering, traditionally, is assumed to indicate, or to reflect, some kind of problem within the community, whether related to the breaking of a taboo, or related to a breakdown in a relationship in the community. The good person, almost by definition, does not suffer. Suffering, therefore, of whatever kind, is regarded only negatively, and, therefore, as something, which must be removed as quickly as possible.

The biblical testimony regarding suffering is admittedly complex, and cannot be adequately dealt with, or even summarised, in a few sentences. On the one hand, suffering is presented as the result of sin, and thus a part of the total complex of opposition, which God will overcome on the last day. Yet, on the other hand, God takes suffering up into His purposes, to the extent of submitting to it Himself, in the person of His Son, in order to ensure its final

defeat. At another level, God frequently gives relief from suffering, and healing from the sickness, which is frequently its immediate cause, in response to the prayers of His people. And yet, in a mysterious way, He also calls His people to share in Christ's sufferings, for the sake of His mission in the world. It is this last aspect of the reality of suffering which conflicts with the Melanesian worldview (and, indeed, with many other worldviews). Conversion to God's mission means turning to an acceptance of suffering, as, actually, an authenticating mark of a genuinely-Christian missionary witness (2 Cor 11:16-33). Suffering and weakness are not necessarily the mark of a life without power. The opposite may, rather, be the truth: God's power is strongest when his witness is weak (2 Cor 12:9-10).

## **Conclusion**

This study has emphasised that conversion in Melanesia is fundamentally a turning, a radical reorientation of life, whether of the group or individual, in the direction of the living God. It is the turning away from a primary allegiance to the complex of the clan: *kago*, and the ancestral spirits; and a turning, in allegiance to the living God, who has revealed Himself as the God of power and love in Jesus Christ. As such, conversion, from an anthropological perspective, is actually a *process of worldview change*. Conversion, in Melanesia is thoroughly community oriented, both from a reading of the Bible, where conversion means becoming the people of God, and from a Melanesian understanding of the nature of man, as one who exists in relationship with his brothers. And conversion has a purpose, best expressed as a servant-style mission in the world, which means a radical turning to other communities, to declare and demonstrate the message of God's power and love.

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