CHRIST MY BROTHER:
SHIFTING PRIMARY IDENTITY IN MELANESIA FROM CLAN TO CHRIST

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INTRODUCTION

Within any given social system, people invariably participate as members of numerous in-groups. Membership in the group distinguishes a person as one of "us", as opposed to one of "them", and implies that certain requirements or expectations exist for group members that do not exist for those outside the group. These requirements serve, in effect, as boundaries that define the group, or, more specifically, define who is identified as part of the group, and who is not.

Traditionally, within the Melanesian context, group affiliation was largely clan based, with one's identity being found primarily within the clan.[1] In the present, the Melanesian situation has changed dramatically. A host of factors (i.e., increased education and employment opportunities, urbanisation, and the

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[1] In the Melanesian context, clan can be defined as that group of individuals, who claim descent from a common, known ancestor. Key to this definition is the word "claim". In the end, it is not the reality of a common ancestry that is important; it is the perception that counts. In Melanesia, it is commonplace to find numerous people associated with the clan "who, in fact, cannot demonstrate their biological or genealogical relationship to other members of the descent group", McElhanon and Whiteman, 1984, p. 114.

rise of new political, social, economic, and religious ties) have contributed towards broadening the scope of Melanesian relationships well beyond the clan. The result has been that, today, many Melanesians find their identity, not simply within the clan, but within the complex web of relationships that now characterises Melanesia.

That a multiplicity of relationships exists, and that an individual may belong to a vast array of in-groups, highlights the fact that one may possess more than a single identity. But all identities are not created equal. To get at the heart of one's identity, to get at the core of one's being, we must look to matters of primary identity. The question that needs to be asked is not "Who am I?", but, rather, "Who am I, primarily?"

In the Melanesian context, it can be argued that the increased measure of in-group membership, which has grown out of the extensive network of present-day relationships, has had very little impact on the answer to this question. Barth has argued that "ethnic identity is superordinate to most other statuses" (1998, p. 17). For the Melanesian, this is certainly the case. One may identify with many different groups. But one's primary identity still resides with the clan. Here, as always, is one's primary sense of being and belonging ; and here, as always, is one's primary sense of allegiance.

This fact poses a serious problem for the church. For Christians, the lordship of Christ implies allegiance, first and foremost, to Christ. For Melanesians, this necessitates a shift of allegiance from clan to Christ, and, by implication, from clan to the Christian community, which makes up the "body of Christ". This does not lessen the importance of clan, or mean that clan loyalties, for the Christian, have been totally displaced. Rather, it highlights the fact that clan identity must now be superseded by one's identity in Christ, and, as Ramachandra has suggested, that clan loyalties must be "set within a wider and more demanding loyalty to the global family of Christ" (1999, p. 136). In this light, the question is no longer "Who am I?", in relation to the clan, but, rather, "Who am I in Christ, and what bearing does this have on my understanding of clan?" In other words, what are the implications of

allegiance to Christ, in terms of one's identity, and how must this affect one's relationship to others?

While the church in Melanesia has made great strides towards the ideal of a Christ-centred allegiance, clan-centred loyalties continue to guide both thought and behaviour patterns for many Melanesian Christians. This paper, therefore, intends to examine the issue of Melanesian clan identity, and what lies at the root of that identity, namely, the concept, or ideal, of brotherhood, and to show how this ideal, for the Christian, must now be transferred to one's new identity in Christ.

MELANESIAN CLAN IDENTITY

Fugmann has pointed out that "Human identity is intimately defined by the relationships, in which people perceive and experience life" (1985, p. 83). This being the case, it is not surprising that Melanesian identity is deeply rooted in the clan. To be sure, relationships have always existed outside the clan environment, most notably in the alliances and trading partnerships that were often formed with neighbouring ethnic groups. But, in the day-to-day relationships, that made up traditional Melanesian life, the overwhelming majority of time was spent relating to one's fellow clan members. Relationships outside the clan could serve a specific purpose, or could be used as a means to a specific end. They could exist over an extended period, or could be limited to a single point in time. Clan relationships, on the other hand, have always been more comprehensive in nature. They are perpetually binding, and serve to meet all of life's needs. Within the clan, the support, security, and well-being of each member is provided for, with the ensuing effect being that, not only the individual prospers, but the group prospers as well (Seeland 2004, 92-93).

THE PRINCIPLE OF RECIPROCITY

Prosperity, for the individual, as well as the clan, is safeguarded through the principle of reciprocity. McElhanon and Whiteman have noted that "An underlying kinship morality states that all kinsmen should be loyal and helpful to one another" (p. 109). Within the clan, members are expected to assist

each other in a wide range of activities, from the labour-intensive tasks of house building and gardening, to the more capital-intensive endeavours of paying out bride price and compensation claims. Each clan member participates in the life of the clan, as one who gives, and as one who receives; as one who is under obligation, and as one who, in turn, places others under obligation. Indeed, the kinship terms that are used among clan members are not mere labels, but, instead, imply the level of reciprocity and obligation that exists in the various relationships (McElhanon and Whiteman, p. 109; Shaw, 1974, p. 226). Any failure, by clan members, to either enter into, or maintain, this pattern of reciprocity would be viewed as a rejection of the clan itself. This, however, would be an unlikely occurrence, for any failure to uphold the reciprocal relationships of the clan would be tantamount to cutting off one's own life-support system.

THE CENTRALITY OF BROTHERHOOD

The kinship ties of the clan are many and varied. This is compounded by the fact that kinship relationships are often built upon perceived ties, rather than those that are biological or genealogical in nature. Amidst the array of relationships that exists within the clan, however, the brother-brother relationship is typically viewed as most important (Shaw, 1981, p. 192; Mantovani, 1984, p. 203).

The brother-brother relationship is highly significant for a number of reasons. Firstly, it represents the closest of biological and genealogical links. But this is not all that forges the bond between brothers. As noted, within the clan, each member is responsible to provide for fellow clan members, and to ensure the overall well-being of the clan; the closer the kinship ties, however, the greater the degree of reciprocity that is expected. In the brother-brother relationship, this plays out as follows: "Brothers are expected to help each other, to be generous with each other, to be loyal to each other. The ideal is to act generously, leaving the responsibility for returning such generosity to the brother" (MacDonald, 1984, p. 217). This endless cycle of giving and receiving serves to perpetuate the relationship, and further highlights its significance. Brothers always remain close; they always remain loyal,

because they are constantly aware of the debt and obligation that exists among them.

AN EXTENDED NOTION OF BROTHERHOOD

For Melanesians, both common ancestral descent, and a close biological link, are important indicators of clan membership. But the central idea of brotherhood can be extended beyond "true" brothers to all who act in a manner consistent with the pattern of brotherhood (McElhanon and Whiteman, p. 114). Upholding the brother-brother ideal of reciprocity and obligation is the key. It is noteworthy that all males of a common generation within the clan typically refer to each other as "brother", rather than by given name. This implies that the ideal of brotherhood is being upheld, regardless of whether the individuals concerned are "true brothers", or not. This same principle applies to extra-clan relationships as well. Those outside the clan can be referred to as "brother", if the expectations of brotherhood are consistently met.

SUMMARY

MacDonald has stated that, in the Melanesian context, "brotherhood . . . is an ideology, which dominates all considerations of social life" (p. 217). It is also "the basis of clan solidarity" (MacDonald, p. 217), directing the clan, and holding the clan together, through good times and bad. Melanesian clan identity is, thus, inseparably linked to the notion of brotherhood. But, who is my brother, in the Melanesian context? The answer, quite plainly, is the one who acts as my brother. Behaviour, not blood, seems to be the key.

IDENTITY IN CHRIST

God's intent, according to the book of Romans, is that Jesus Christ be the "firstborn among many brothers" (Rom 8:29). Of course, the Jesus of scripture is revealed to us as the Son of God (Matt 16:16; Mark 5:7; 15:39; Luke 22:70). At the same time, the scriptures also point out that those who are "in Christ" are sons of God as well (Gal 3:26). The implication of these texts, and, in fact, one of the key themes of the entire New Testament, is that those, who are "in Christ" through faith, are part of a new family; they have

been adopted into the family of God, and now relate to God as Father, and to Christ as first among brothers. This new status for those who are "in Christ" necessitates a major shift in identity.

CHRISTIAN BROTHERHOOD

Those who belong to God through Christ do not relate to God in a solitary relationship. On the contrary, there are many sons, and, by implication, many brothers. The Apostle Paul states, in his letter to the Galatian churches, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28 NASB). In Christ, all believers have become part of one "body", or one family. Each Christian, therefore, has many brothers; not brothers, based on a biological or genealogical connection, but brothers, based on the common ground of being "in Christ" through faith. Being "in Christ", thus, becomes a key indicator of one's new identity, as part of the people of God.

TRANSFERRING ALLEGIANCE

Christ said that those who would become His disciples must be prepared to hate father and mother, sister and brother (Luke 14:26). Obviously, taken at face value, this statement would be odious in the eyes of any Melanesian. How can one hate those who define one's very existence? How can one detest those who have been the support structure of one's entire life? How can one abhor the close-knit community, where the "fullness of life" ideal has been provided for? These are important questions. Properly understood, however, Jesus' call to discipleship is not a call to love the clan less. It is a call to love Christ more.

Christ's words to Peter, in John 21:15, illustrate this point well. Jesus asks, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" The essence of Jesus' question, or the point He is driving at, is that Peter must love Jesus, first and foremost (Morris, 1995, p. 768; Köstenberger, 2004, p. 596). Peter's primary allegiance must be to Jesus. The threefold repetition of the question, found in 21:15-17, was obviously meant to reassure Peter, whose faith had

been severely shaken during the arrest, trial, and crucifixion of Jesus, of where his true loyalty resided.

Christ's question to Peter can and should be asked of all who profess faith in Christ. Only those, whose primary allegiance is to Christ, can truthfully answer "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You" (John 21:15 NASB). But, to confess Christ as Lord, does not mean allegiance to Christ alone. It also implies allegiance to those, who are from "every nation, and *all* tribes, and peoples, and tongues" (Rev 7:9 NASB), who are part of the "body of Christ". Christ cannot be separated from His "body". Neither can any Christian be separated from the host of other believers, who are also "in Christ" and part of that same "body." There is a common identity for the Christian that transcends time and place as well as all other notions of identity whether geographic, political, or ethnic. In the Melanesian context, this does not imply that one no longer identifies with the clan. One cannot be separated entirely from one's roots and indeed it should be argued that this is not God's intent. For the Christian, however, the clan can no longer function as the primary source of one's identity or stand as the primary object of one's allegiance.

COMPLICATIONS IN TRANSFERRING PRIMARY IDENTITY FROM CLAN TO CHRIST

Certainly, it is true that, with the coming of Christianity, the Melanesian view of brotherhood has been broadened to include those beyond the traditional clan. As Whiteman states, "one of the most significant social contributions of Christianity in Melanesia has been to expand Melanesians' definition of 'who is my brother?' " (1984, p. 94). Local church bodies cut across clan boundaries. In addition, church denominations, with a national presence, ensure that local church members relate to other Christians, not only outside one's own clan, but, outside one's ethnic group as well. Interdenominational fellowships and Bible schools also aid in the extension of the idea of brotherhood beyond the close confines of the traditional clan.

While Melanesians have made strides in this regard, it can still be asked, "Where does the Melanesian find his primary identity? Where is his primary allegiance today?" A number of generations ago, Christian Keyser asked, "Are there, in New Guinea, any individuals at all, who could stand up against their clan?" (1980, p. 28). Keyser's intent was not to criticise the Melanesian clan relationship, but, rather, to highlight the certainty of behaviour of those to whom he was ministering in New Guinea. Keyser understood that, in Melanesia, the individual always sided with the clan, because one's primary sense of allegiance was not to self, but to the group that one was most closely identified with. Has this changed today?

The primary allegiance issue raises two important questions for Melanesians. Firstly, when push comes to shove, when the difficult decisions arise, which pit clan against Christ, who will the Melanesian side with? Hofstede and Hofstede have pointed out that, in collectivist societies, "The 'we' group (or in-group) is the major source of one's identity, and the only secure protection one has against the hardships of life. Therefore, one owes lifelong loyalty to one's in-group, and breaking this loyalty is one of the worst things a person can do" (2005, p. 75). Most Melanesian Christians can attest to the truth of this claim, and to the difficulty of siding with Christ, in the face of clan pressure.

A second question, arising from this issue, is, "Can Melanesian Christians find their primary identity in what may, rightly, be called the "clan" of Christ?" If, indeed, the "body of Christ" is a single unity, then the "body", within the Melanesian context, is not to be divided along clan lines. Can the church in Melanesia be unified, so that all Melanesian Christians will find their identity within a single "body", and show an allegiance to one another that transcends the ties of the traditional clan?

It would, indeed, be presumptuous to expect all Melanesian Christians to live in perfect unity. The church has not succeeded in doing this, in any context. But, Narokobi has argued that one of the major disservices of the church in Papua New Guinea has been its emphasis on division and disunity, with villages and even families "divided between one brand of Christian faith and another" (1983, pp. 138-139). While others have argued that the Christian notion of an extended brotherhood has helped to unite Melanesians beyond clan lines (Whiteman, p. 94; MacDonald, pp. 219-220), Narokobi's point is well taken. Traditional Melanesian group loyalty, coupled with church relations that are sometimes openly hostile, has led to factionalism within the "body". One's identity and allegiance are often most strongly linked to one's denomination, rather than to Christ, and the greater family of God. Inasmuch as this is true, church denominations have usurped the role of both the traditional clan and the biblical model of the "body of Christ."

OVERCOMING THE PROBLEM

How can the church in Melanesia challenge Christians to find their primary identity in Christ, and to give their full allegiance to Him? A focus on three areas is suggested: (1) an emphasis on the cost of discipleship; (2) promoting the idea of Christian community; and (3) a concentrated effort towards interdenominational unity.

THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP

When considering Christ, it is essential that the cost of discipleship be clearly understood. As Luke 14:26-33 makes clear, this is true for all who would follow Christ. But, in the Melanesian context, the question must be asked, "What does it mean for a Melanesian to confess Jesus as Lord?" In addition, "How should this confession shape one's view of clan, and how must it influence one's behaviour?" Any call to follow Christ, which does not deal with issues of primary allegiance, is only a partial proclamation of the gospel.

There are numerous implications for the church's approach to evangelism, here. Among these, is whether it is right to encourage quick professions of faith, at the expense of a more-comprehensive understanding of the demands

of the gospel. Should Melanesians be urged to profess Christ before there is a clear understanding of the allegiance that is demanded by Him? It is likely that the Melanesian problem of "skin Christianity" could largely be avoided if the allegiance issue was dealt with more fully prior to conversion.

CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

The book of Acts declares that, in the early days of the church, "those who believed were of one heart and soul; and not one *of them* claimed that anything, belonging to him, was his own; but all things were common property to them" (Acts 4:32 NASB). The early church was a fellowship, characterised by the concept of brotherhood. Within the community, each member looked after the interests of fellow members, ensuring that the community, as a whole, was provided for. Most Melanesians can readily identify with this.

But, for Melanesians to truly grasp the idea of the "body of Christ" as a community that transcends clan and culture, increased opportunities must be given for brotherly interaction, beyond the clan, and beyond the denomination. How can Melanesian Christians be expected to accept one another as brothers, if there is no participation with others at the brother-brother level? Brotherhood and fellowship, outside the clan context, can only become a reality for the church in Melanesia when the extra-clan church "body" consistently interacts with one another, and where the traditional model of Melanesian brotherhood is seen to take place. Reciprocity and obligation within the "body" should be encouraged, utilising the positive aspects of these Melanesian traits, and reinterpreting them, where necessary, to keep them in line with the teachings of Christ.[2]

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[2] What I mean here is that the principle of reciprocity is a valuable cultural trait that can be built upon as one communicates the gospel, and seeks to grow true Christ-centred communities. Reinterpretation is necessary, to the extent that Melanesian reciprocity can be ultimately self-serving (Seeland, 2004, p. 96). The emphasis must be placed upon a reciprocity and obligation, which is not centred on self, but seeks to put other's interests ahead of our own (Phil 2:4).

INTERDENOMINATIONAL UNITY

While Narokobi has criticised the church for its role in producing division and disunity within the Melanesian context, he, at the same time, holds that cooperation among the churches of Papua New Guinea is better than in most countries. Considering the call to Christian unity, he states:

> It is, indeed, a noble calling on us to build unity, on Christian values of brotherly love, mutual help, common faith in God, and in the Lord Jesus, and in His second coming.

> In the past, we Melanesians have been small in our outlook. We have confined our loyalties, love, and mutual support within our own small village and clan groups. We have kept our view of God within our own tribe and linguistic groups.

> But, with Christianity, we extend our loyalties, affections, love, and understanding beyond our clan, village, and racial communities. This is real unity (p. 140).

He goes on to affirm that the unity, practised by the churches of Melanesia, "is not, in any way, contradictory to our Melanesian customs, rather, it is the extension of our customs, and the perfection and fulfilment of our customs and values" (p. 140).

Narokobi is right to emphasise that Melanesian Christians have extended the ideal of brotherhood well beyond the clan. But Narokobi's words were written some 20 years ago. While the church in Melanesia has matured in many areas since that time, it is also true that, in some sense, there is a greater degree of factionalism within the church today than there ever has been. New churches, church break-offs and splits, and a vast array of conflicting teachings, have led many Melanesian Christians to withdraw within their own unique Christian sub-culture, and to identify primarily with their own particular group. Needless to say, those who withdraw, in such manner, will limit their loyalties to their own particular group as well.

To combat this, it is essential that the churches of Melanesia emphasise the common ground of the Christian faith. A reiteration of what it means to be "in Christ" (as well as the implications of that status) is a constant necessity. Realistically, there will always be a diversity of views within the church. Historically, this has been the norm. But, if a Christ-centred allegiance is the goal, and the notion of Christian brotherhood is to be extended to all who are of the faith, then Christian commonalities must be stressed. Only then, will Melanesians feel free to relate to the entire "body", in a brotherly manner.

CONCLUSION

It is impossible to understand Melanesian identity without some reference to the clan. Matters of allegiance, and the practice of the brotherhood ideal, both grow out of the clan concept. As shown, both issues have wide-ranging implications for the church.

This paper has but touched on clan issues. In light of the vast significance of the clan for Melanesians, the church must seriously consider how to address clan loyalties, and matters of allegiance, within the context of the church. In addition, while the clan, and Melanesian kinship structures, have been extensively researched, from an anthropological and sociological perspective, issues pertaining to reciprocity and obligation, adoption, and the effects of modernisation, and the changing Melanesian context, upon the clan, all require further research, from a missiological point of view.

Undoubtedly, to understand the clan is to understand, in large part, what it means to be Melanesian. It also is to understand a large part of what it means to be a Christian, in the Melanesian context. Both the church and mission must strive to more fully understand the clan, in all its aspects, if the gospel, and its implications, are to be clearly understood, and if the church in Melanesia is to grow to true maturity.

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