

THE DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION: THE REMEDY TO THE ILLS OF THE MELANESIAN CHURCH

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INTRODUCTION

Over 100 years have passed since the arrival of the first missionaries on Melanesian shores. Over this period of time, the Melanesian church has grown, and advanced into what it is today. The church has progressed spiritually, and is still progressing. However, the presence of various issues within the church have occasionally hindered growth toward spiritual maturity, on the part of many believers.

This article will investigate the misunderstanding of one doctrine that may be partly responsible for the lack of spiritual maturity within the Melanesian church: the doctrine of justification.

To achieve this aim, this article will show that the misunderstanding of this crucial doctrine links to a number of issues responsible for stunting the spiritual maturity of the Melanesian church. Firstly, the doctrine of justification is defined from a biblical perspective, as the foundation, on which this paper is based. This is followed by a discussion of various issues within the church today, which can be identified as factors that stunt spiritual maturity, with the aim of highlighting possible causes behind them. The paper closes with a discussion on how a corrected understanding of justification will influence, and potentially correct, these issues.

JUSTIFICATION DEFINED

JUSTIFICATION IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

a. *The Root of the Term*

In Old Testament literature, the Hebrew term $\text{קָדַשׁ} = tsādaq$ ($\delta\iota\kappa\alpha\iota\acute{o}\omega = dikaioō$) can be translated as either “to be righteous” or “to justify”, depending on the context of the passage in which the term appears (see White, 2001, p. 75). Both terms come from the same word family,¹ thus, carry the same meaning. The Hebrew word ($\text{קָדַשׁ} = tsādaq$) is usually translated as “to justify”. “If the true meaning of the root is lost, scholars generally agree that the basic idea [of $\text{קָדַשׁ} = tsādaq$] is conformity to a norm.” (Ladd, 1976, p. 6)

b. *The Use of the Term*

In secular² use, the term ($\text{קָדַשׁ} = tsādaq$) was ascribed to one who was virtuous. A righteous person was one who conformed to the accepted norms or behaviours of society. In the Old Testament, the term “righteous” takes on a legal meaning. Righteousness primarily found its basis in a legal declaration that was based on law-keeping, and not on an inherent human moral quality. Righteousness, in the Old Testament, can be approached from two main perspectives, the righteousness of God, and the righteousness of man. In both perspectives, the defining factor is that God’s divine standards are the accepted norm, on which righteousness has its basis.

An important aspect of righteousness, of which we should take note, is that of relationship. According to the Old Testament, righteousness finds its form in relationships. “A man is righteous when he meets certain claims,

¹ “There is only one term, or, perhaps better, one family of terms, $\delta\iota\kappa\alpha\iota\acute{o}\varsigma = dikaios$ (the adjective), $\delta\iota\kappa\alpha\iota\sigma\acute{\upsilon}\nu\eta = dikaiosunē$ (the noun), $\delta\iota\kappa\alpha\iota\acute{o}\omega = dikaioō$ (the verb), (White, 2001, p. 75).

² In secular and general use, this term was generally used to refer to the virtue of observance of law, and fulfilment of duty, on the part of man. In the legal sense, it generally bore the same meaning in that righteousness or right legal standing was pronounced on the basis of the individual’s conduct. (See Kittel, 1964, pp. 192-193.)

which another has on him in virtue of relationship. Even the righteousness of God is primarily His covenantal rule, in fellowship with His people” (Kittel, 1964, p. 195).

The implication here, in relation to God’s righteousness, is not that God is made righteous in relationship, but that His righteousness is revealed to us through relationship.³ The righteousness of God demands justice, justice demands judgment, and judgment equates to condemnation for us, because of our sin and inability to reach the standards that God sets for us. In terms of His covenantal rule, the demand for justice was met through adherence to the decrees of the covenant, as prescribed by Moses. God’s righteousness was thus revealed through His faithfulness to the covenant, likewise, adherence to the covenantal conditions became the standard of measure for human righteousness.

In the light of this definition, we see that, in Old Testament Jewish thought, righteousness was viewed as conformity to the divine will or standard.⁴ “The righteousness of man is the observance of the will of God, which is well pleasing to Him” (Kittel, 1964, p. 196).⁵

The New Testament authors understood that there was a relationship between faith and righteousness. For example, Paul says that Abraham was justified by faith (Rom 4:3; 4:20-24; Gal 3:6; et al). The basis for righteousness in the Old Testament, according to these references, is faith. It was Abraham’s faith that made him righteous before God. “And when

³ “Righteousness is the execution of covenant faithfulness, and the covenant promises. God’s righteousness, as His judicial reign, means that, in covenant faithfulness to His people, He vindicates and saves them” (Kittel, 1964, p. 195).

⁴ “In Judaism, righteousness came to be defined largely in terms of conformation to the Torah – to the Law of Moses, as it was expounded in the oral scribal tradition. The Rabbis recognised two impulses in a person, an impulse towards good (יֵצֶר הַטוֹב = *yētzet hātōv*) and impulse towards evil (יֵצֶר הָרָע = *yētzet hārā’*). The righteous man was he who nurtured the good impulses and restrained the evil impulses, so that, in the end, his good deeds outweighed his evil deeds” (Ladd, 1964, p. 7). Justification is achieved at the Day of Judgment, based on one’s own merit.

⁵ See, for example, Is 5:7.

He [God] heard Abraham say, ‘I believe’, God, in grace credited perfect righteousness to the man’s account” (Swindoll, 1990, p. 240). Through faith, Abraham was brought into right standing and relationship with God. This clearly shows us that, even in the Old Testament, the basis for righteousness was a faith relationship to God.

JUSTIFICATION IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The legal aspect of the term *δικαίωσις* = *dikaioō* (ἁγιάζω = *tsādaq*) becomes clearer when approached with the understanding that, “The righteous man is He, who, in God’s judgment, meets the divine standard, and, thus, is declared to stand in right relationship with God” (Ladd, 1976, p. 6).

In the New Testament, the term “justify” is used in different ways. In one sense, it is used to imply the exercise of righteousness (Rev 2:11). It is also used when referring to divine vindication (Luke 7:29; Matt 11:19). It is also used in this sense by Paul in Rom 3:4 and 1 Tim 3:16, but in a more legal sense than in the previously-mentioned verses. In these verses, God is represented as one of the parties in a dispute, who has authenticated His claims through His actions (Kittel, 1964, p. 215). It is also used in terms of self-justification (Luke 10:29; 16:15), and, finally, it is used in terms of saving righteousness, which is the focus of this article.

a. Justification and Salvation

So far, we have seen, from a biblical perspective, that the term *δικαίωσις* = *dikaioō* is a “legal declaration of righteousness”, on the basis of one’s conformity to the divine norm or expectation. The question that we must now ask is: how does one achieve conformity to the divine expectation? To answer the question, we must first understand the contrast that exists between the nature of God and that of man.

To start with, the Bible declares that God is a righteous and holy God, who detests sin so much that He will not hesitate to deal severely and swiftly to eradicate it. Biblical history clearly portrays this truth to us, from the point of creation up to the eschatological teachings on the culmination of the ages. The Bible brings us face to face with a God, who will not tolerate sin. God is perfect, and so, only those who are perfect,

can stand in His presence. Anything less than perfect will cease to exist in His presence, because His perfection demands it.

God's perfection places all of humanity in a serious predicament, simply because the Bible declares that all have sinned and fallen short of God's standards. Therefore, there is none righteous before God (Rom 3:23, 6:23). All humanity stands guilty before God. Ever since the fall in the garden (Gen 3), humanity has inherited a fallen status,⁶ and has been unable to remedy the situation. "Having fallen short of the divine standard, man stands convicted and guilty before God. As such, he is liable to be condemned, and punished, by a righteous and holy God" (Tano, 1992, p. 63). Having drawn these comparisons, we will now focus on the means, the ground and the source of justification, as it is laid out in the New Testament.

b. How is Man Justified Before a Holy God?

Before defining the different elements of justification, we must note two important aspects, concerning the legal nature of justification. As has been highlighted, an aspect of justification is justification as a legal declaration by God. Grudem defines it like this, "Justification is an instantaneous legal act of God in which He: (1) thinks of our sins as forgiven, and Christ's righteousness as belonging to us; and (2) declares us to be righteous in His sight" (1994, p. 723). This definition highlights the second important aspect for us – imputation. The forensic nature of justification carries with it the idea of imputation. "In justification, righteousness is not infused; rather, it is imputed, or credited, to the believer (Tano, 1992, p. 67). It is important to understand here that it is a "declaration of righteousness", and not an "infusion of righteousness" (see footnote 8). Ladd highlights two important claims made by Paul that verify this truth:

⁶ The first book of the Old Testament reveals how human beings were created by God without sin, but chose to act contrary to His revealed will, thereby causing sin to become a characteristic feature of human existence (Gen 3; Ps 51:4-6) (Toon, 1987, p. 946).

The first is that righteousness – justification is used interchangeably with imputation. “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness” (Rom 4:3). Justification stands in contrast to good works. “And to one who does not work, but trusts Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness” (Rom 4:5). It was when they were “ungodly”, in deed and character, that they were acquitted of guilt, declared by the heavenly judge to be righteous. “God reckons righteousness, apart from works (Rom 4:6). Abraham believed God; that is why his faith was reckoned to him as righteousness (Rom 4:22)” (1976, p. 9).

Ladd clearly shows here that Abraham’s righteousness was not credited to him, based on a righteous character, or on righteous deeds, but on his belief and trust in God.

The second claim by Paul, which Ladd uses to highlight this truth, is the way in which Paul contrasts justification and condemnation in certain verses (Rom 5:16, 8:33).⁷ The scenario Paul uses is that of legal proceedings, in which the accused is declared to be righteous, not because of personal righteousness, but solely on the judge’s decision or declaration.⁸ It is the judge, who deemed the accused not guilty, and, thus, declared the guilty to be righteous. The basis for this legal declaration of righteousness will be discussed below.

This again raises the question for us, how is sinful man justified before a Holy God?

⁷ “Condemnation is not sinfulness of character or of deeds; it is the decree of the judge that a man is guilty, and, therefore, stands under the divine condemnation” (Ladd, 1964, p. 9). See also, Grudem, 1994, p. 724.

⁸ Some have approached the forensic element in justification as a fiction (a person remains ungodly/a sinner, but is accounted, or treated, as righteous, by virtue of faith). This has led to some scholars adopting the erroneous view that, in justification, there is some element of infused righteousness. Such a view contradicts the teaching of scripture that salvation, from beginning to end, is dependent on God alone (see Ladd, p. 9).

The source of our salvation is divine grace. God's grace simply means His unmerited favour. Paul explained this in the following statements, "and are justified freely by His grace" (Rom 3:24), "it is by grace you have been saved" (Eph 2:5). Each passage clearly shows that justification originates in grace. "Because we are completely unable to earn favour with God, the only way we could be declared righteous is if God freely provides salvation for us by grace, totally apart from our works" (Grudem, 1994, p. 729).

The ground of our justification is the redemptive work of Christ.⁹ "If justification originates in God's free and abundant grace, its objective ground is the atoning sacrifice of Christ on the cross" (Tano, 1992, p. 69). Christ has paid the price for us (John 3:16; 1 Cor 15:3; Rom 5:6, 9), by the work He accomplished through the shedding of His blood. "The shedding of Christ's blood, i.e., His sacrificial death, provides the means of propitiation, on the ground of which, acquittal or justification can be bestowed upon man, as a free gift" (Ladd, 1976, p. 13). Our justification is availed to us through the work of Christ alone. There are no other grounds of justification, apart from the atoning work of Christ.¹⁰

How is justification appropriated to us? We have seen that justification has its source in the divine grace of God, and that it is availed to us, based on Christ's atoning work. According to scripture, justification can only be appropriated through saving faith. In Gal 2:16; Rom 5:1; and Eph 2:8-9, Paul highlights that faith precedes justification. Faith, in the biblical context, is considered a gift in itself (Eph 2:8-9); furthermore it is only a means, and not the grounds, of our justification.

⁹ The redemptive work of Christ involves His incarnation, ministry, death, and resurrection, for it is in all that He is, and in all that He accomplished, that salvation has become ours.

¹⁰ It is essential to the heart of the gospel to insist that God declares us to be just or righteous, not on the basis of our actual condition of righteousness or holiness, but, rather, on the basis of Christ's perfect righteousness, which God thinks of as belonging to us (Grudem, 1994, p. 727).

“Scripture never says that we are justified, because of the inherent goodness of our faith, as if our faith has merit before God. It never allows us to think that our faith, in itself, earns favour with God. Rather, scripture says that we are justified by ‘means of’ our faith, understanding faith to be the instrument, through which justification is given to us, but not at all an activity that earns us merit or favour with God. Rather, we are justified, solely because of the merits of Christ’s work (Rom 5:17-19)” (Grudem, 1994, p. 730).

Faith is only an open, empty hand with nothing to offer, but the need to receive that which is offered. “Faith, in itself, is nothing. It is self-abandonment. By faith, we entrust ourselves to the keeping of Christ. We rely exclusively on Him, and eschew all dependence on ourselves” (Letham, 1990, p. 183).

THE IMPACT OF JUSTIFICATION

Justification means that we are considered righteous before God, in terms of the past, the present, and the future (Rom 5:1; 8:24-25). Through Christ, our sins are atoned for (past, present, and future). It is a one-time act, which occurs at the point of conversion, thus, several important points can be highlighted.

a. Justification Means We are Righteous Before God

Justification brings a number of significant and permanent changes, in terms of our relationship to God, one of the most significant being that it gives us righteous standing before God. As we have already seen, above, in justification, Christ’s righteousness is imputed to us. Through faith, God considers Christ’s righteousness as ours. This, therefore, gives us a new status before God, in that we are no longer considered unrighteous sinners. Instead, we now take on the status of righteous believers.¹¹

¹¹ “Thus, whereas we were, by nature, guilty before God, and deserving of condemnation and death, Christ’s obedience secures for us acquittal of our guilt, and, additionally, gives us a right status in the sight of God” (Letham, 1990, p. 180).

b. Justification Means We Have Peace With God and are No Longer Under Condemnation

Justification also brings us into a relationship of permanent peace with God (Rom 5:1). Formerly, we were enemies of God, because of sin, which brought us under God's judgment and wrath (Rom 1:18). Through justification, we are placed in new standing with God, thus we are transferred from being the objects of His wrath into the position of being recipients of His grace and blessings. There is no longer any enmity between God and us, for, through justification, God makes everlasting peace with us.

Because we are now at peace with God, the Apostle Paul can write, "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those, who are in Christ Jesus". This statement signifies, for us, an important aspect of justification. "No condemnation means this: no rejection at the day of judgment, no having to answer for our sins [past, present, and future], no hell, and no outer darkness. It means God will not take issue with us then, for Christ has made peace, by the blood of His cross" (Horne, 1976, p. 54). We are completely freed from condemnation by Him, who alone has the power to judge and condemn (Luke 12:5).

c. Justification Means We are Free From the Burden of Guilt

Because our sins are atoned for through the saving work of Christ, we no longer carry the burden of guilt for the sins of the past, present, and future. Yes, we feel the remorse involved in straying from God's standards, but it does not, and should not, move us away from God. Instead, it moves us towards Him, in genuine repentance. There is no space for guilt, because there is no need for it. Christ has atoned for us, completely and thoroughly, and, therefore, guilt no longer has a hold on us. Guilt has its roots in condemnation, and, because justification delivers us from condemnation (Rom 8:1), we no longer need to feel guilty.

A believer no longer feels condemned or inferior, because of shortcomings, and, although there exists a sense of guilt and remorse, when the believer falls short, it is not the guilt of condemnation that drives the believer away from God. It is, instead, the guilt of conviction from the Holy Spirit that

drives the believer towards God, in repentance and confidence of restoration (Padrick, 1996, p. 37).

d. Justification Frees Us From the Bondage of Law-keeping, and Motivates Us Towards Spiritual Growth

According to the Old Testament covenant, the only way to be right with God was to keep the law perfectly. Failure to comply with the covenant standards, on any point, equalled unrighteousness. This placed the Jews in a serious predicament, because, due to the inherent sinful nature of man, no one could keep the law perfectly, a fact the Jews understood very clearly. This is a fact that God also understood, that is why He provided the means of justification for us. Justification accounts for our inability to keep God's law perfectly. Right standing before God is no longer established on our ability to keep the law, but on Christ's perfect submission and obedience to the law. This does not mean that we do not live according to the standards set by God. Our obedience to the law is no longer out of obligation, but out of love, we obey, because we love God, it is an expression of gratitude for what God has done for us, through Christ. Justification brings with it freedom from the law.

The law is no longer seen as a means to gain right standing with God, instead, it becomes a means, through which devotion and love for God can be expressed. The appropriation of grace, in the life of the believer, accounts for the shortcomings of human nature, and, thus, motivates the believer onward, in spiritual growth. The believer recognises that his/her standing before God does not hinge on human actions, and, as a result, develops a confidence to strive on, in faith, despite weaknesses that may be evident. A believer no longer feels condemned, or inferior, because of shortcomings, though there may exist a sense of guilt and remorse, when the believer falls short. Grace becomes the motivational factor behind spiritual growth, and, through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, the believer is urged on towards the ultimate goal of salvation.

e. Justification Means There is No Longer Separation Between God and Us, For We Have Become His Children

Another wonderful aspect of justification is that of our relationship to God. Through justification, we are brought into a permanent union with God (Rom 8:35), a union that can never be severed. God holds us firmly in His hands, and neither “trouble, or hardship, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword . . . neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:35, 38, 39). Nothing we do, or nothing, anyone or anything does, can ever separate us from our union with God. We are totally and permanently secure.

Through justification, we become members of God’s universal family of believers. Because we are joined to God, through Christ, we become part of God’s family¹² (adoption). We become children, not born of natural descent, but of faith, we become partakers in the inheritance of Christ, recipients of the promises of God. Our place in the family of God is secure and permanent, and nothing can ever change this fact.

f. Justification Frees Us From the Fear of Satan and Death

Justification frees us from the fear of death, and of the fear of the devil. Because of the assurance that is ours, through justification, death loses its sting and hold over us. There is a consciousness that our lives are in God’s hands, in the present, as well as in the future. The uncertainty of life beyond death is removed, thus the fear, which is generated by this uncertainty, no longer has any hold on our lives. There is confidence to face the moment of death, and there is confidence to face the devil. Justification places us in the hands and in the care of the Almighty. This understanding impacts our worldview, and challenges us to break out of the system of bondage that the devil has implanted in us, through our

¹² Though adoption stands apart from justification in the process of salvation, it is activated at the point of justification. “Justification sets up the basis for this marvellous Father-child relationship” (Horne, 1976, p. 58).

culture. We are motivated to trust in God, and not in cultural elements (charms, rituals, fetishes, etc.) for protection, healing, etc. In our newfound freedom, we have freedom from guilt and fear, we are released from the snare of the enemy.

g. Justification Corrects Our View of God

Justification brings us face to face with a holy and perfect God, who chooses to love instead of hate, who chooses to show mercy and grace, instead of judgment and punishment. We are brought face to face with the different aspects of God's nature, and, through this encounter; our view of God is impacted and righted. Our theology of God is impacted, and we see Him as a just God, whose holiness demands that sin be punished and destroyed. We see a God, who, out of grace, personally pays the price for our sin, in return for our total allegiance to Him. Through justification, the different aspects of God's nature are revealed to us. As a result, we gain a fuller and more-complete understanding of God, which impacts our view of Him. Justification fully reveals the depth of God's love for us, for while His justice demanded condemnation, His grace provided the solution.

JUSTIFICATION AND THE THEOLOGY OF GOD IN THE MELANESIAN CHURCH

ISSUES FACING THE MELANESIAN CHURCH TODAY

a. Nominalism

Nominalism is a major problem in the Melanesian church. Many Christians in PNG fall into this category.¹³ A nominal Christian is one, who professes faith and membership to a particular denomination, but fails to live according to his/her profession of faith. The defining mark of a nominal Christian is the absence of genuine Christian living and growth in

¹³ Defining nominalism is easier than quantifying it, because identifying a nominal Christian is a very subjective judgment. Some authors claim that 96 percent of Christians in the Melanesian church are nominal (see Kero, 1986, p. 57). Kero makes this claim, citing Douglas (Douglas, 1986, pp. 111-117), however Kero's citation of Douglas is inaccurate, and falsely supports Kero's thesis. The highly subjective nature of measuring nominalism ought to caution all authors from being too bold in making claims about its prevalence in the church, as Kero has.

everyday life.¹⁴ For the nominal, Christianity tends to be restricted to church schedules and programs; beyond these, Christianity largely ceases to exist, or be practised. Though there is an appearance of Christianity, evidenced by involvement in various church activities (mainly Sunday services), it is, in essence, only an outward show of religion.

Daimoi cites the following factors, as causes of the problem: “the lack of conversion experience at the worldview level, ineffective follow-up teaching, an unclear understanding process, a lack of dynamic equivalence in church life, an unclear understanding of Christian discipleship, and a lack of preparation to face new influences” (Daimoi, 1987, p. 8). Others see the influence of traditional culture and religion¹⁵ as another factor contributing to this issue, as well as modernisation, and the influence of Western culture. This issue has, and is having, a significant impact on the church, particularly in relation to the Christian witness of the church, and the spiritual vitality of the church.

b. Syncretism

Another common issue existing in the church today is the problem of divided allegiances. Many Christians (not only nominals) struggle with the problem of syncretism in their lives. Syncretism involves the dividing of one’s allegiance between God and some other entity (money, cultural spirits/expectations, person/s, etc.). Syncretism exists in various forms. For example, it can be seen in the adherence to cultural standards, at the cost of God’s will or standards. In Melanesia, it is most often the result of the believer’s failure to sever ties with some of the cultural elements of animism.

Syncretism is the union of opposite beliefs and systems, so that differences are either reconciled, or held in tension, creating a new religious form. The syncretistic worldview places God alongside other entities, common in the Melanesian worldview. God is seen as another spirit being, who can

¹⁴ Everyday life here extends to every aspect (mental, emotional, spiritual, social, etc.) and moment of one’s personal life.

¹⁵ See Kero, 1986, pp. 57-87.

be manipulated, through the means of animistic religious practices, to achieve a desired end. This erroneous view of God, which is thus fostered, is probably the biggest impact that this problem has had on the church in Melanesia.

Various factors contribute to this issue, one of the most significant being that, for many professing Christians, “the inclusion into the church, as members, is only through adaptation, and not genuine faith” (Edoni, 2000, p. 14).¹⁶ In other words, for many Melanesians, church membership is not necessarily the result of genuine conversion. Many are simply drafted into membership, through family or community influence, or out of a sense of obligation to their family or society, etc. Fear can also be seen as another major cause for syncretism. The fear maybe of rejection and persecution from one’s people, due to a refusal to adhere to various cultural expectations, which conflict with Christian beliefs and principles. There may also be a fear of retaliation from the cultural spirits or gods, because allegiance is no longer given to them, but to God. In essence, it is a fear of missing out on the good life, or salvation.

c. Legalism

Laws play a big part in many churches in Melanesia, today. They play an important role, in terms of guiding the operation and conduct of the church body. Unfortunately, their purpose in the church can often be misunderstood, and, instead of being viewed as guides, showing us the right way to walk with God, they become means, by which people try to gain merit and right standing with God.

All Christians are required to live by the law, or by the standards that God has set. Through faith, a Christian willingly submits to these standards. Christianity cannot be practised, or experienced, outside of these divinely-set boundaries, any divergence from them is false Christianity. Adherence to God’s standards or laws is supposed to be a response of gratitude and love, on the part of the believer for the salvation that God has made

¹⁶ See notes and diagrams in “Syncretism in the Milne Bay Province of Papua New Guinea”, in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 16-2 (2000), p. 15.

available to them. It is at this point that legalists falter, for, instead of adhering to divine standards, through appreciation of salvation, adherence is, instead, borne out of a desire to seek merit, or right standing, with God. Legalism is a futile attempt to acquire a right standing, which is freely available through divine grace.

Various factors contribute to this issue. Most significant would be a lack of conversion at the worldview level, and a misunderstanding of biblical truth. An individual's upbringing would also be a significant cause.¹⁷ Experience could also play a significant role in building a works-oriented mentality.

The most significant impact that this issue has had on the church has been on the aspect of service. The misconception of the role of the law leads people to undertake acts of service, out of obligation, instead of undertaking these activities with a deep desire to give the best one can offer back to God, as worship pleasing to Him. The focus of Christianity becomes oneself, instead of God. A subsequent misunderstanding of the nature of God develops, in which God is seen as an implacable ogre, who is never satisfied with what the believer has to offer. The Christian is drawn into a vortex of feelings of inadequacy, in which one's conscience is plagued by ever-increasing feelings of guilt and inferiority, which drives the believer further into a works-based theology.

d. Oscillating Spirituality

Yo-yo Christianity is probably a term that best describes this problem: known in Christian circles as seasonal Christianity. In other words, Christianity that is experienced seasonally. In some sense, these seasonal Christians can also be classified as nominals, in that, like nominals, there appears, on the surface, to be no real commitment to God. This issue is addressed separately, because, in the life of these so-called Christians, various traits and trends exist, which distinguishes them from the "average" nominal.

¹⁷ The experience of growing up under harsh and demanding parents will obviously build a works-oriented mentality in an individual.

Unlike the nominal, who maintains regular attendance at church activities, the seasonal Christian seems to be genuinely committed, and active in church activities for a time, but falls away, perhaps to return again later. A seasonal Christian gets involved in various aspects of church ministry, and serves in various ministries, very actively and faithfully, but, unfortunately, it is only for a season. After a season, and often quite suddenly, the particular person is literally gone, and is not seen again in the church for some time.¹⁸

Various reasons can be cited as causes for this issue. One obvious factor would be the absence of a genuine conversion experience. In such instances, conversion is experienced more at an emotional and mental level only. Through various interviews, conducted at the Christian Leaders' Training College (CLTC) among various members of the community, the following factors were suggested as causes for this issue.¹⁹

- An inadequate understanding of the gospel, due to a lack of sound teaching.
- The absence of discipleship training.
- An unconverted worldview.
- Negative peer pressure.
- Marital and family pressures.

This issue has greatly influenced the Christian witness and testimony of the church, and it is partly responsible for oscillation in church attendance and membership. This issue is becoming increasingly evident in many churches today.

¹⁸ In some instances, this particular person goes back into drinking, drugs, etc., in other instances, this particular person just stays away from church activity for some reason or another.

¹⁹ It must be mentioned that the various members mentioned here represent various regions within PNG, and other areas within the Pacific. Many have had plenty of ministry experience within and outside of their respective regions and countries, and have witnessed the issue in concern.

e. Nepotism

Nepotism is an issue that is present within the church today. Nepotism involves the extension of partiality, or favouritism, to a person, based on status (wealth, leadership, nationality, qualifications, etc.), or on common relational bonds (blood-ties, village, regional, or national ties, etc.). Within the church, it is most commonly practised in terms of leadership selection. It is also evident, in subtle ways, in the allocation of certain responsibilities (preaching, service leading, jobs, ministry responsibilities, etc.).

The practice of nepotism in the church is responsible for weak leadership, which has impacted the health and testimony of the church. It has also had a significant impact on the unity of the church, in that members tend to view each other in relation to cultural, regional, and national identities. Instead of seeing each other as one body, the church is segregated into regions, nationalities, denominations, etc. Instead of experiencing unity in diversity, as should be the case, diversity and disunity exists.

WHAT ISSUES ARE THE ROOT CAUSES FOR THE PROBLEMS DESCRIBED ABOVE?

a. Lack of Assurance

Due to the strong impact and influence that the Melanesian worldview has on each individual, many Melanesian Christians possess a strong works-based mentality. This mentality conditions the individual to view every outcome as the result of a process, in which works play a big part. It is at this point that the works-based mentality clashes with the Christian doctrine of salvation by faith. This clash between the Melanesian worldview and Christianity leaves the individual in a dilemma, which causes confusion and uncertainty, and can result in a lack of assurance, in terms of salvation.

Christianity demands that a standard, in terms of ethics, morality, and behaviour, be met. At the same, there is grace, which accounts for failure. Because of the absence of the concept of grace in the Melanesian worldview, the individual, who strives to meet the demands of Christianity,

and fails, develops a sense of failure over a period. Coupled with an improper understanding of gospel truth, the individual develops a sense of inferiority, which causes him/her to become unproductive, and uncommitted, in terms of Christian life and service. Thus, the individual becomes nominal, and, although maintaining membership with the church, there is a lack of real commitment and zeal in the person's life.²⁰

Lack of assurance also opens the door for legalism. The individual develops a Christian lifestyle, directed at securing merit, through the zealous adherence to works of service. The whole Christian experience is fallaciously understood to be based upon works and merit. Underlying this understanding is the principle that strict adherence to the law affects the believer's standing before God in a positive way, thus, the legalist seeks a sense of assurance, by keeping the law. Syncretism also develops out of the lack of assurance. The Melanesian worldview promotes works, as a means to achieve the good life. When the individual experiences uncomfortable circumstances, the conclusion drawn is that such an outcome is the result of error, or failure to strictly adhere to the law. The individual feels threatened, and steps are taken to remedy the situation. If the circumstance continues, the individual's sense of assurance is threatened. Trust in God declines, and other proven means (animistic religious practices) are sought as solutions.

A person seeks the solutions that will remedy the situation, for it is in the continuity of the good life that he or she feels secure and assured. In essence, the process of securing the good life involves having right relationships, especially to one's immediate fellow man and environment. As the individual strives to seek assurance, through the maintaining of right relationships, he or she is, at times, placed in a position, in which biased decisions are made, for example, electing church leaders on the basis of favouritism, rather than on the basis of genuine leadership quality.

²⁰ The fear factor is probably the most significant reason for maintaining church membership: fear of rejection by kinsman and fellow Christians – broken relationships, fear of losing salvation completely, the fear of losing status and identity, etc.

The drive for a sense of assurance becomes an avenue, through which nepotism rears its head.

b. An Unconverted Worldview

The influence of an unconverted worldview can be seen as a major contributing factor to many issues faced by the church. The traditional Melanesian worldview dictates that individuals meet a particular standard of morality, ethics, and behaviour, in virtually every aspect of life. The standards are met by living according to a strict regime of cultural expectations – essentially, following the rules set down by the society, to which the individual belongs. Failure to adhere to these rules results in a failure to appropriate the blessings, sometimes spoken of as *gutpela sindaun* (the good life), or, in terms of cultural understanding, salvation.

The problem of nominalism, syncretism, nepotism, and legalism, and, to some extent, oscillating spirituality, can be partly attributed to the application of this worldview to the Christian experience. The scriptures teach that God's standard is perfection. The Melanesian worldview demands that a standard be met, by keeping regulations and laws. Underlying this demand is that the laws should be kept perfectly, for, any deviation from this, creates disharmony in the community. Christianity teaches there is nothing we can do to achieve righteousness. In contrast, the traditional Melanesian worldview teaches that we have to do everything to achieve righteousness. Failure to adhere to standards is viewed as unrighteousness.

Legalism develops, because individuals come into the church with a strong works-based mentality. Nominalism develops, because people recognise that they cannot live up to the standards that are set. People, who fail, feel inferior. The rest of the community condemns those who fail, because they, too, operate with a paradigm that demands perfection through works. Christians oscillate in their faith, because they hunger spiritually, seek satisfaction, by drawing near to God, fail to achieve what they believe are acceptable standards, draw back, but still have an unquenched spiritual thirst. Others, who appear to have a genuine conversion experience, and are zealous in their faith, are sometimes discouraged, because some in the

Christian community are threatened by their zeal, and oppose them, through negativity and criticism – perhaps because zealous behaviour exposes their own weaknesses or failures.

Syncretism develops when the cultural worldview, which teaches that strict adherence to rules brings blessing (*gutpela sindaun*), is challenged, when this formula fails to produce desired results. The individual naturally attributes the failure to a divergence of the law, and tries to remedy the situation. For the Christian, this will involve seeking counsel and prayer, intense self-reflection, with the purpose of identifying sin, an increase in pious conduct and activity (prayer, Bible reading, service, etc.). When there is still little or no improvement, despite the steps taken above, God is seen as incapable of remedying the situation, thus the individual turns to other proven means for help. In most cases, this involves one turning back to animistic religious practices for protection, healing, and blessing.

Nepotism is the outworking of the Melanesian worldview, which demands strict loyalty to one's fellow man (family, clan members, etc.). The principle underlying this aspect of the Melanesian worldview is that proper relationship with one's relatives contributes towards harmony, and the good life. Unfortunately, when imported into the church, it hinders unity in the body of Christ. Instead, it promotes segregation at the clan, regional, and racial levels.

c. Unbalanced Theological Emphasis

The problem here is not that of a failure on the part of the church to propagate the gospel, rather it has to do with a failure to propagate the gospel, in its totality. This imbalance in theological emphasis has created a deficit in theological understanding within the church, which has resulted in an incomplete understanding of foundational gospel truths.

From a survey conducted within CLTC, among individuals, who represent various regions and denominations within PNG, and other parts of the Pacific, it was shown that much of the church's theological focus today

has been anthropocentric in nature.²¹ The survey showed that doctrines, like holiness (Christian living), giving, Christian service, etc., are emphasised, while other crucial doctrines, like grace, the nature and character of God, salvation, etc., are given very little, or no, emphasis at all.

Two factors can be seen as the primary causes for this issue, the lack of theologically-trained pastors and laymen, and the unconverted worldview. The lack of adequate theological training among pastors and laymen results in an inadequate understanding of crucial biblical doctrines concerning salvation, the person and nature of God, etc. Coupled with an insufficient grasp of the English language, which restricts many Christians from grasping key biblical doctrines sufficiently, many lack the knowledge base to be able to communicate such foundational doctrines clearly and effectively, in either Tok Pisin, or the vernacular. Consequently, emphasis is placed on propagating that which is easily understood and communicable, while other crucial doctrines are neglected, resulting in an imbalance in theological emphasis.

The cultural worldview also plays a significant role in this issue. In fact, the anthropocentric theological emphasis in the church today can be traced back to it. The cultural worldview is, in essence, anthropocentric. When imported into Christianity, a works-based and focused understanding of Christianity develops. Doctrines, which comply with this works-based mentality (holiness, giving, service, etc.), become the primary focus of emphasis. Unintentionally, many pastors, laymen, lay preachers, etc., zealously propagate a gospel based on works. Likewise, many church members live a works-based Christianity.

²¹ There is an over emphasis on the role of man, in terms of Christianity, the primary focus has been on what man must do, or how man must live, etc. This is seen in the preaching and teaching that primarily focuses on holiness, in which the focus is on the “doing” aspect of holy living (Christian service, giving, ministry, etc.). Whilst such a focus is generally not unbiblical or wrong, the issue in question here is that the fullness of the gospel is not being propagated in the church.

The deficit in theological understanding, and the influence of an unconverted worldview, has resulted in an incomplete understanding of many important doctrines. One such doctrine concerns the person and nature of God. Many Christians possess an incomplete understanding of God, which fails to integrate the different aspects of His nature (holiness, love, justice, grace, etc.). Thus, God is seen, on one hand, as a harsh, unrelenting taskmaster, whilst, on the other hand, He is seen as a gracious, compliant Father, who only needs to be appeased, when there is a digression from His standards. This faulty view robs God of His sovereignty, and relegates Him to the level of other cultural spirits and deities.

HOW CAN A CORRECTED VIEW OF JUSTIFICATION ADDRESS THE ABOVE ISSUES?

a. Justification and the Theology of God

The doctrine of justification draws together distinctive aspects of God's nature, which are, otherwise, possibly misunderstood, or held in unnecessary opposition to other distinctives. For example, the doctrine of justification enables a tension to be held between the theology of justice, and a theology of love. Justification holds in balance the justice of God, which involves His wrath and judgment, and His love, which involves grace, mercy, and forgiveness. Holding these seemingly opposite theological realities in tension, one with the other, not only gives a biblically-balanced understanding of the character of God, but also enables one to more-fully explore other doctrines, such as eschatology, or eternal security, with greater confidence, because there will not be an unbalanced emphasis on love, at the expense of justice, or vice-versa.

b. Justification and the Misunderstanding of Sin

A proper understanding of justification allows a full recognition of the depth of human depravity, and the implications this depravity has in relation to man's standing before a holy and perfect God. With the corrected understanding, sin is no longer seen as a mere violation of cultural or ethical standards, but as an all-encompassing condition that thoroughly affects all humanity (body, soul, and spirit), regardless of one's

moral or ethical standing. Sin is seen as the conditional norm of all humanity, just as the senses and the emotions are a natural part of human nature (Eph 4:18; Jer 17:9; Gen 6:5; Titus 1:15; Rom 7:18; 3:23). The worldview that upholds cultural and ethical standards or laws as the primary gauge for that which is right or wrong, acceptable or unacceptable, is challenged, and completely reformed. Sin is no longer seen as a mere transgression, for which a remedy can be sought, through human means. It is now seen as a serious violation of divine standards, for which no human effort can remedy. The extent of human depravity, and the repulsiveness of our condition before a holy and sin-abhorring God, serve as a rude awakening to our true status and standing before God.

The understanding of God's nature, and attitude towards sin, awakens us to the hopelessness of our situation, and the stark reality that, no matter how stringently or piously we adhere to cultural, ethical, or religious rules, our position before God remains the same – that of sinners. With this, comes the understanding that sin is not, and cannot, be truly defined by a sinful and depraved humanity, but only by a perfect and holy God, who knows no sin. Consequently, one is awakened to the fact that the only remedy for our sinful condition can only come from God. Justification impacts our worldview, and brings home to us the futility of mere adherence to cultural, ethical, or religious standards, or, in more general terms, the futility of our human endeavours, as a means to secure a right standing before God. A renewed understanding of sin eliminates the belief that salvation is attainable through human effort. Salvation is solely an act of God's grace.

c. Justification and Works-based Mentality

Through justification, the believer is brought face to face with the stark reality of our human depravity. This understanding enables the believer to see that the appropriation of the good life or salvation is only achievable by divine means. Our humanity, or human effort, has no salvific effect, because the stain of sin renders our works ineffective. "Our best works remain tainted, or soiled, by the vestigial remnants of sin. Our hearts are never really perfectly pure, and this impurity adds dross to the 'gold' of our virtues" (Sproul, 1995, p. 128).

The realisation of this fact challenges the cultural worldview that propagates a works-based salvation, and enables a corrected understanding of the place of works in the Christian experience. A corrected understanding challenges the potent sense of obligation that drives the works-based mentality, consequently freeing the believer from the bondage to ritualism and law-keeping. No longer is Christianity seen and practised as mere ritual, instead, one is potentially brought into a more-intimate relationship of faith with God. Works are no longer viewed as a means to manipulate God, for the purpose of obtaining salvation, instead, they are seen as means, through which devotion and gratitude can be expressed to God, for the free gift of salvation.

d. Justification and Eschatology

A corrected view of justification also deals with the question of life after death, and the element of mystery and uncertainty that lies behind it. In practical terms, justification secures the future of the believer, and, because of this, the individual has a deep sense of assurance concerning the future, and life after death. With this assurance, comes the knowledge that the believer's salvation is secure, in terms of the present, and of the future. Fear, generated by the uncertainty and mystery concerning the future, is expelled with this newfound truth.

The cultural worldview is impacted and transformed at certain levels. For example, the belief that the deceased interact, and coexist, with the living, which originated from ignorance concerning life after death, loses its viability. The truth of God's word, and the understanding of justification, bring the knowledge that, at the point of death, one passes on to be with God, or to be separated from God. Death is a passing into a different dimension, or existence, in which there can be no contact with the world, from which one has departed. Despite the fact that an understanding of justification, or, in broader terms, salvation does not give all the details concerning the future, what it gives is more than sufficient to enable the believer to know that his or her salvation is secure, in terms of the present, and of the future.

As a result of a corrected understanding of justification, eschatological concerns no longer pose a big threat, because of the knowledge that, regardless of what happens, it is God who has the final say. The assurance that the life and future of the justified is in God's hands brings a comforting sense of assurance into the life of the believer. This truth is further enhanced by the fact that, at the point of justification, the indwelling work of the Holy Spirit is initiated in the life of the believer (Eph 1:13-14). Through the conviction and enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, the believer is enabled to grasp and believe that, regardless of what the future holds, one can be rest assured that God is in ultimate control.

e. Justification and Eternal Security

A proper understanding of justification brings with it a deep sense of security, concerning salvation. The word of God teaches that salvation is a permanent experience (John 3:16; 5:24; 6:37-39; 10:29; Rom 8:29-39; Heb 7:25; Jude 24), and, because of this, the recipient of salvation is assured that his/her salvation cannot be lost. This truth is further established, and verified, through the presence and ministry of the Holy Spirit, in the life of the believer. The knowledge that the Holy Spirit is a guarantee, signifying the permanency of the salvation experience, in the present, and the future (Eph 1:13-14), inspires confidence within the believer, who has been justified.

Justification rests, in grace, upon the work of Christ alone, and so, the believer is freed from having to fulfil the demands of the law (Rom 2:12-13), as a means of securing salvation. The understanding of what Christ has accomplished, on behalf of the believer, through His life, death, and resurrection, dispels the notion that man has a part to play in salvation. The realisation of the fact that salvation is totally dependent upon the divine initiative, and working alone, and not upon the believer's own efforts, impacts the works-based mentality, thus revealing the futility of human works, as a means to achieve salvation. The knowledge that, since the believer has been once justified, the believer also stands forever justified. This signifies the permanency of the salvation experience, and builds confidence and trust in the believer towards God. Coupled with a proper understanding of God's nature (justice, love, and sovereignty), and

the indwelling presence and work of the Holy Spirit within the believer, the permanency of salvation becomes an established fact, within the heart and mind of the believer.

f. Justification and Freedom From Fear

With justification, comes a sense of assurance and security concerning the present and the future, which affects the way the believer views, and relates, to his or her environment. One significant area, within the life of the believer that is impacted, relates to the potent sense of fear that Melanesians possess. The cultural worldview conditions, or builds, within the individual, a strong sense of fear towards certain factors, for example, the spirit world, the loss of the good life (salvation), sorcery, death, etc. The fears that the Melanesian holds can be classified under two main headings: the fear of spiritual beings, and the fear of life after death. Underlying these fears, is the fear of the loss of *gutpela sindaun*, in the here and now, and in life after death.²² An understanding of justification impacts these fears, and dispels much of the confusion and mystery that fuels these fears, through the knowledge it brings, concerning God's sovereignty, His eschatological plans, and eternal security.

We have seen, above, that justification brings into clearer perspective the nature and sovereignty of God over all things. The knowledge of God's omnipresence, omniscience, and omnipotence liberates the believer from bondage and fear to evil spirits (ancestral spirits, nature spirits, spirits of the dead, Satan, etc.). The knowledge of God's sovereignty enables the believer to know that, because his/her allegiance now lies with God, there is nothing that Satan or the spirits can and will do to harm the believer.²³ This, in turn, enables the believer to break free from animistic cultural beliefs and practices, and it also enables him/her to stand up under the

²² Melanesian worldview dictates that proper relationships be kept with both the spiritual and physical world if the experience of *gutpela sindaun* is to become a reality in the life of the individual and community.

²³ The spiritual realm, for the Melanesian, is an ever-present reality, with which there is daily interaction. Thus, the Melanesian's fear of the spirits is grounded in real life experiences of spiritual manifestations that have the primary purpose of keeping the person in bondage to his/her cultural and animistic beliefs.

rejection and opposition (spiritual and human) that will accompany such a move. An understanding of justification brings liberty from the fear of the spirits at the mental, emotional, and spiritual level. At the same time, it strengthens the believer's allegiance to God.

An understanding of justification also affects the fear of failure, and the consequences that result from failure. In the cultural context, this would relate more to divergence from cultural standards and regulations and the repercussions (human and spiritual) that would normally follow such action. In Christianity, the truth that the believer's right standing (or salvation) is achieved through the divine initiative, independent of human effort, dispels the fear of failure. The permanency of the salvation experience, for the justified, highlights, for the believer, that salvation rests solely in what God has done, and not on what the believer does, or has done. Because of this, the believer is freed from the works-based mentality that, in essence, is responsible for the sense of fear within the individual. Works are no longer seen as a means to achieve salvation, but as a means to express gratitude and love for God. The sense of fear and obligation, which drove the works-based mentality, is dispelled, with the knowledge that the believer has nothing to prove in terms of salvation, because of grace, and Christ. The knowledge that one is secure also dispels the fear of life after death. The confusion and mystery that surrounded death is lifted, when the believer understands that, because of justification, life is now lived in God's presence, and life after death is in God's hands. The believer no longer feels compelled to adhere to works, because of the fear of the loss of salvation after death, instead, he or she is liberated, and enabled to move from fear into trust.

g. Justification and the Theology of the Church

An understanding of justification brings with it the knowledge that one is a part of a bigger community of believers, who, together, form the family of God. This knowledge influences the way the believer perceives his/her relationship to fellow believers within the church.

Racial, cultural, and denominational barriers are torn away, when one truly understands that all who belong to the family of God have one

common unifying principle – all are sinners, saved by grace – which unites them together as one body. Along with this understanding, comes the knowledge that, regardless of the external differences, every member of the church works towards a common goal – the salvation of mankind, the exaltation of Christ, and the glorification of God.

A new attitude is born within the individual, which transforms the believer's relationships. Faulkner says, "The new attitude toward God, constituted by justification, impels to an unending movement towards God and man" (1996, p. 4). The movement towards God and man impacts the relationships of the believer towards fellow believers. No longer are fellow believers viewed in terms of cultural, regional, or national identities, rather, the believer is enabled to look beyond these differences, to view them as part of the body of Christ, as members of God's international family. Borne out of this understanding, is a sense of unity, and common purpose, the experience of unity amidst diversity becomes a reality, as believers strive to fulfil their God-given mandate. Contention over leadership positions, and the exercise of spiritual gifts in service, should no longer fuel division, competition, and infighting, because of the unity that exists in diversity. Through the presence and the work of the Holy Spirit within the church, the body is built up in unity, and is enabled to fulfil the work that God has ordained.

h. Justification and Sanctification

Although justification stands apart from sanctification, in terms of the salvation experience, it does, to a certain degree, have some impact on sanctification, at the point of conversion, and throughout the life of the believer.

At the point of justification, a status of righteousness is conferred upon the believer that is otherwise known as *positional sanctification*. The legal declaration of righteousness, which is imputed to the believer, at the point of justification, gives the believer a new status, in terms of his/her standing before God. The believer is no longer considered an unrighteous sinner, because of the imputed righteousness of Christ, which now becomes the

believer's righteousness, thus, in terms of sanctification, the believer is now considered holy or sanctified.

Justification also plays an important role, in terms of progressive sanctification. Firstly, it acts as a motivator for the sanctified. The understanding that justification has achieved permanent right standing with God brings with it assurance concerning the permanency of salvation. This knowledge motivates the believer to move forward in the Christian life, with confidence, especially when the believer is faced with opposition and failure.²⁴

The second important role that justification plays, in relation to sanctification, concerns the indwelling work and presence of the Holy Spirit. At the point of justification, the Holy Spirit indwells the believer. Through the enabling of the Holy Spirit, the believer is able to move forward in sanctification, towards spiritual maturity.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this article was to investigate the potential misunderstanding of justification within the Melanesian church. This article has examined a number of factors that have historically led to spiritual immaturity in the Melanesian church. This article has explored how a misunderstanding of the biblical doctrine of justification may contribute to them. If the Melanesian church could properly grasp the doctrine of justification, there would be a reduction in the number of problems that have historically caused spiritual immaturity in the church (as identified in this article). As a result, the Melanesian church would be better placed to grow toward maturity.

²⁴ An understanding of justification enables the believer to see that salvation depends totally on what God has done, and will do, not on what the believer does. This understanding helps the believer deal with the sense of condemnation and guilt that arises from within (personal failure and sin) and outside the believer (other people and the enemy). Thus, instead of becoming discouraged, the believer is encouraged and motivated to move forward in the grace of God.

The purpose of this paper has been to examine the theological links between spiritual immaturity in the Melanesian church and the misunderstanding of justification. It is my prayer and hope that, through the awareness, created by this article, other servants of God will take up the challenge of suggesting relevant ways and means that a proper understanding of justification can become a reality in the contemporary Melanesian church.

Finally, a misunderstanding of justification may not be the primary factor behind all of the issues discussed within this article. However, if teachers and leaders of the Melanesian church properly addressed misunderstandings of justification, the corrections in theology and doctrine would have a significant impact on many of the factors that have brought about immaturity in the church.

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