

HOW GOD SPEAKS TO OUR CHURCH AND NATION TODAY

Ossie Fountain

“In the past, God spoke to our ancestors many times and in many ways through the prophets, but in these last days He has spoken to us through His Son. He is the one through whom God created the universe, the one whom God has chosen to possess all things at the end. He reflects the brightness of God’s glory and is the exact likeness of God’s own being, sustaining the universe with His powerful word. After achieving forgiveness for the sins of mankind, He sat down in heaven at the right hand side of God, the Supreme Power” (Heb 1:1-3).

I. INTRODUCTION: GOD IS A GOD WHO SPEAKS

Right at the beginning of this EA Annual Meeting, I have read these verses to you. Why? I believe they have some very important meanings for us, which are both central to our evangelical faith and relevant for us today.

1. We Must Believe That God is a God Who Speaks

Even before we begin to think about the theme of the Conference, let us remind ourselves that we meet in the presence of the Living God – the speaking God. In the beginning, He spoke and the worlds came into being (John 1:3); it was God’s Word that was the source of life (John 1:4); our passage tells us that it is the powerful word of God’s Son – the Word – that sustains the universe.

Yes, God’s Word is powerful and God’s Word is present today.

But, even more wonderful to me is the fact that *God has a great desire to speak to us*, human beings – a mere part of His great creation. What did God do to Adam and Eve, our first parents? Immediately He created them, He blessed them in speaking to them – speaking words of guidance and provision (Gen 1:27-30). Then, putting them in the Garden

of Eden, He again spoke to them, guiding and warning them (Gen 2:15-17). Later, when our first parents sinned by revelling against His Word, God did not leave them, but reached out to them in words – though they were words of judgment, but linked to the promise of salvation.

Let us not be tempted by Satan to think that God does not speak today. No, He is always speaking. Whether we are ready to listen or not, still He speaks. I believe that many times God is trying to speak to us, but our eyes are blind and our ears are dull.

I say again, this belief in a living and communicating God is central to our faith. He is not an impersonal power or force, or a distant Baal who sleeps, or a fickle spirit who leaps on the unwary and takes sudden and silent revenge.

2. God Speaks in Many Ways

The second truth our passage affirms is that *God speaks in many ways* through his mouthpieces, the prophets. But God used the varied gifts of these men and women to share His truth in the most impressive ways He could. Think of the many ways He used in the Old Testament (e.g., in the Book of Judges):

1. God spoke directly as the angel of the Lord to the whole nation (2:1-5).
2. God spoke to them by defeat and oppression (2:14-15).
3. God spoke to them through the leaders He chose (Othniel, Ehud, and Shamgar) by giving them victory (2:16).
4. God spoke to them through their enemies (2:20-22).
5. God spoke to them through a prophetess like Deborah encouraging a leader, Barak, to trust God for victory (4:1-24).
6. God spoke to them through Deborah and Barak's song (ch. 5).
7. God spoke through unnamed prophets (6:8-10).

8. God spoke as the angel of the Lord personally to Gideon (6:11-18).
9. God spoke to Gideon in a night vision (6:25).
10. God spoke to Gideon through the sign of the fleece (6:36-40).
11. God spoke to Gideon through another man's dream (7:13-14).

Throughout the Bible we can see that God spoke through His prophets and leaders in many ways. He spoke directly. He used parables. He used songs, drama, dance, and music. He used dreams and visions. He used victories and defeat. He used signs and events. He used natural happenings and miracles.

Indeed, everything He made speaks about Him (Rom 1:20; Psalm 19:1; Job 12:7-9), to those who have "ears to hear": earthquakes, famines, thunder, and floods.

God speaks in many ways. But are we ready to hear? Are our eyes blind, and our ears deaf, and our hearts not tuned to his voice?

3. The Third Truth in this Passage is that God Spoke to Our Ancestors

Now, I realise that Hebrews was written to Jewish Christians whose ancestors had special revelations, and God spoke in a special way in the history of Israel. But I believe the scriptures allow us to believe that God spoke to our Melanesian ancestors. Rom 1:20 says:

Ever since God created the world, His invisible qualities, both His eternal power and His divine nature have been clearly seen; they are perceived in the things that God has made. So these people have no excuse at all.

Did God speak to our Melanesian ancestors through creation? Yes!

This passage makes clear what is found in many other passages in the Bible (e.g., Ps 19:1-4, Is 40:26, Ps 97:1-9) that the world around us speaks of Him to men – that God has placed the knowledge and fear of Him

deep in the heart of all men, including our ancestors. He has made Himself known in the natural world, and the events of the past.

In my first year in Papua New Guinea, an old Sepik man came to me and said, “God was speaking to us before you missionaries came, we were ready to receive this message”.

I believe Don Richardson is right in his book, *Eternity in Their Hearts*, when he explains that many people have a knowledge of God, even though that knowledge has been covered up by another layer of beliefs in the spirits. The missionaries, who brought the gospel in a way that makes the vague God of the ancestors clear, have been blessed by their message being warmly received. As Paul declared to the Athenians, “That which you worship, then, even though you do not know it, is what I proclaim to you” (Acts 17:23).

The Huli people had a knowledge of God. He was *Datagaliwabe*, the Guardian of Morality, and the Watching Judge. Pig sacrifices were never made to Him. But He was revered as “the High God”. I believe the missionaries could have chosen *Datagaliwabe* as the Huli name for God.

In the revival of the mid-1970s in the Koroba area, some men came to Jenny and me and said, “Please tell us how you Europeans received the gospel”. When we had discussed church history for a while, they said, “We asked because we believe our ancestors knew the gospel, too. There are so many parallels between the legends of our ancestors and the Bible, we think they must have known. Maybe they got the details twisted as they passed it down by word of mouth, but we believe they knew.”

Some of our Melanesian ancestors hungered for a greater knowledge of the truth. God will judge them according to the light they had. Let us rejoice in a God who speaks today, and who spoke in the past, and let us remember that the God who “had decided on an even better plan for us” (Heb 11:40) holds us more responsible because we have more light from Him.

4. Fourthly, We Have to Remember that God Speaks to Us in the Most Appropriate Ways: God Speaks to Melanesians in Melanesian Ways

God is a very gracious and understanding God. He wants to speak to us, so He speaks to us in ways that we can hear. God will speak to Melanesians in Melanesian ways. He speaks to us in our own cultural outlook. As we look back at the Bible, we see that He chose ways that were suitable to the person or group concerned; it matched their expectations; it matched their knowledge of God and the level of their faith. It was in words they understood (or could discover). Of course, He always wanted to startle, to impress, to emphasise what He was saying, so sometimes He chose unusual ways, but they were always understandable communications.

How does God speak today to Melanesians? The best communicators of God's message will always be people from within the culture. But the best cross-cultural missionaries will be those who study and discover the true meaning of Paul's words:

I am a free man, nobody's slave, but I make myself everybody's slave in order to win as many people as possible. . . . So I become all things to all men, that I may save some of them by whatever means are possible (1 Cor 9:19-22).

I challenge each one of you to discover the freedom we have in Christ to be meaningful and fruitful communicators of God's message in Melanesia.

II. GOD SPEAKS TO OUR CHURCH AND NATION ABOUT JESUS

If these thoughts then speak of *how* God communicates, now we must think of our central theme: "What is God saying to our church and nation today?"

The passage in Hebrews, we read at the beginning, speaks of the central fact that God speaks to us first and foremost about Jesus. Anything else He says flows out of what God says to us through Jesus Christ.

When God wanted to speak in the most impressive way He possibly could, in the most universal way He could, and about the most important thing in all the world, how did He do it? “. . . but in these last (final) days He has spoken to us through his Son” (Hebrews 1:2).

The amazing fact is that when the Eternal, Almighty God wanted to speak to us as human being, He spoke to us as a human being. He sent His Son, fully God and fully human. It seemed so shocking, so surprising, that God should talk to us men as man to man that many people of His day rejected His claim to be God’s Son.

Let us think again of God’s communication in Jesus:

1. *He entered a human culture.* The Galilean culture was not a special one, it was a despised one. It was regarded as a poor, mixed-race culture, in an underdeveloped area. The people spoke with a strange accent. Hardly anyone was proud of being a Galilean.
2. *He entered a human family.* He came as a baby to an unmarried girl: He suffered from some who sneered at Him because He was thought to be illegitimate (John 9:24, 29). Women were despised, yet He was born of a woman (Gal 4:4). His family were poor; they brought the cheapest offering to the temple when He was born (Luke 2:24, Lev 12:6-8). And, as we often remind ourselves, He was born in the animal house of Bethlehem.
3. *He lived a human life.* From babyhood through boyhood to manhood He lived a truly human life. He learned obedience through the things he suffered (Heb 5:8). He knew tiredness, hunger, temptation, and pain. All the experiences of life were His.
4. *He died a human death.* It was impossible for many to believe that God could die, but so great was God’s identification with us in human existence, so great was His desire to communicate with us and bring us into relationship with Him, Christ died.

How great was God's love! God did the impossible in order to speak with us!

I think that, as evangelicals, we are often afraid to emphasise the humanity of Christ, in case we deny His divinity. But the fact of His humanity is so important. Indeed, His divinity has no relevance unless we believe in his humanity. Hebrews holds before us Christ, both human (Heb 2:14-18, 4:15) and divine (Heb 1:2-3).

If we believe in His humanity, we can go on to believe in His divinity too. Hebrews states seven reasons why we should listen to God speaking in Christ:

- (1) He is the one through whom God created the universe.
- (2) He is the one whom God has chosen to possess all things at the end.
- (3) He reflects the brightness of God's glory.
- (4) He is the exact expression of God's own being.
- (5) He sustains the universe by His powerful word.
- (6) He achieved forgiveness for sins.
- (7) He sat down at God's right hand in heaven.

God wants to speak to us about Jesus Christ today. He wants us to listen to Him (Luke 9:35); He wants us to be devoted to Him, and to be loyal to Him. Nothing is more important in Melanesia today than that God's people be totally true to Jesus Christ the God-Man they say they serve.

The rest of what I want to say to you today flows out of our struggle to be true to Jesus in our day in Melanesia.

III. GOD IS SPEAKING TO US ABOUT THE CHURCH AND ITS MISSIONARY TASK.

If God spoke finally to us in His Son in the way we have outlined, then this is the model for us as His church, and as members of it. If Jesus entered fully into the cultural life of a human community and culture, so must we. As our Lord said, “As the Father sent me, so send I you”. What does this say to us in Melanesia? I believe there are four issues we must face.

1. The Structure of Our Churches

As I look back on the twenty years of my time in Papua New Guinea, several things make me sad. One of these is the continued divisions and divisiveness of our evangelical witness in the country. We have a strong emphasis on our oneness in Christ. We realise the central truths of our evangelical faith should draw us together. We follow the high ideals of those who founded the Evangelical Alliance. But, despite all this, the fact remains, that our differences are precious to us, and the spirit of rivalry motivates much of our service and absorbs much of our energy (Phil 1:15-17).

The weakness of evangelicalism is its failure in allowing the minor differences to become major ones in our proclamation of the gospel. This plagues us even more, perhaps, in the towns and cities than the bush, but it is one of the scars of missionary work in Melanesia.

Alongside our divisions, I believe, by and large, the churches and missions in Melanesia have failed to produce church structures relevant to our Melanesian culture. We have imported foreign, overseas structures, drawn from our denominational traditions, or from our mission bodies. We have not experienced the freedom of the New Testament times in creating church fellowship relevant, flexible, and meaningful to the local cultural setting.

I believe if we look again at the New Testament churches, e.g., Jerusalem, Antioch, Ephesus, Corinth, and Rome, we will see that each of them was different in form, worship, leadership patterns, and ministry.

They were united in fellowship, based on love for loyalty to the Lord Jesus Christ. Hardly anything else united them.

Again, as we read through the New Testament, we see the exciting development from synagogue-type churches within the Jewish culture to household-type churches in the Greek world. This was part of the great missionary thrust and experimental approach of Paul and others.

In Melanesia, sadly, we have done far too little in studying Melanesian forms and patterns of living, and applying the gospel freely to these forms. Church life is too often foreign and formal, not local and alive. Let us take up the task of studying again the scriptures, and applying them freely and fully within Melanesian culture, not importing overseas ways of doing things, and so stifling the beauty of Melanesian ways.

2. The Forms of Our Worship

The revival movements in Melanesia have done much to help us realise that we can worship God in our own way. I have watched church life come alive under the influence of the life-giving Spirit of God. I have also seen formality creep in again when leaders become cold in heart, and worship becomes a ritual we have to go through.

I pray that God will give us Melanesian musicians and hymn-writers, and creative leaders, who will, under God's Spirit, awaken us again to the beauty God wants from Melanesian Christians to worship Him in Melanesian ways in all their variety. This is part of capturing our culture for Christ (2 Cor 10:5).

3. The Mission of the Church

I believe the heavy investment of overseas personnel and funds has been vital for the pioneering and establishing of churches in Melanesia. But I also believe we have very largely failed to produce outreaching, missionary churches.

As the missionary task is being taken up by other third world countries, Papua New Guinea is a long way behind in pushing out and

sending missionaries. Why are we one of the world's most Christian countries, yet so little is being done to share the Good News overseas?

Here is another challenge to be taken up by our EA churches.

4. The Ministry of the Evangelical Alliance

I believe EA has a vital role to play in the life of our churches. Not just as a place of fellowship once a year, but to encourage us to hold the central truths of our faith central so that we don't get side-tracked onto lesser things; to help us discover new ways of meeting the challenges of our changing world and nation; and to prod us into making our message and our church life more relevant within our Melanesian culture.

IV. GOD IS SPEAKING TO US ABOUT FAMILY LIFE

Not only did Christ enter fully a particular culture, so making every culture special, but He also entered a particular family, making family life especially important, too.

In the rapidly-changing social context of Melanesia, big tasks remain to be done in the area of marriage and family life. The evangelical churches seem to be behind in meeting this community need. I can only list some of the area to which we must pay attention.

1. We must continue to study the scriptures, to apply them meaningfully to Melanesian marriage and family life. I believe we cannot afford to leave this task to others. Our evangelical commitment to the scriptures should lead us into seeing how important this is.
2. We must keep the balance between the scriptural teaching on marriage and the special features of Melanesian cultural patterns of family life. It is not enough to apply the scriptures only to the husband-wife relationship or the parent-child relationship. We must emphasise the role of the extended family, the strength of the brother-brother and sister-sister bond, the importance of the bride wealth or sister exchange system, and many other good aspects of our family life.

3. We must develop healthy pastoral and counselling methods for marriage and family. This is urgent. In fact, every EA church should be setting aside at least one couple for full-time ministry in the area of marriage and family.
4. We must develop materials in the areas of training and discipline of children, sex education, and preparation for marriage. These are topics, which are hardly touched with materials relevant for Melanesia, and usable by evangelical Christians.
5. We must be ready to meet the needs of the different groups in our society for help in marriage and family. Help is needed for people in towns as well as people in the bush, for single people, for young-marrieds, for older couples, and for polygamous Christians.
6. We must realise that, in Melanesia, becoming married is a process, not just an event. Our teaching and counselling programmes must be developed to meet this fact.

Finally, may I make a plea for the EA to consider requesting some church group to set aside someone to work full-time among the EA churches in marriage and family life. I believe also, we should be co-operating closely with the Melanesian Institute in Goroka in their Marriage and Family Life Research Programme. What they are doing can be a great help to us if we work with them.

As Jenny and I leave Papua New Guinea, at least for the present, we echo the words of Paul in Acts 20:32:

And now, I commend you to the care of God, and to the message of His grace, which is able to build you up, and give you the blessings God has for all His people.

May God bless you all.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How does God speak to Melanesian Christians today? How can we be sure it is God who is speaking to us?
2. What aspects of teaching about Jesus Christ are especially important to Melanesian Christians? Are there gaps in our teaching about Him that should be filled?
3. How can we make Melanesian church life more Melanesian, and still be true to the calling and mission we have?
4. In what ways can we strengthen the missionary outreach of Melanesian churches?
5. How important is marriage and family life ministry in the life of your church? What aspects need more emphasis?