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A Melanesian Lord's Prayer

MICHAEL SWEENEY

When I first went to Papua New Guinea in 1991, it was with the purpose of helping some of the people of that island nation to have access to the Bible in their heart language and to give them more in-depth biblical teaching. The nation is linguistically the most diverse in the world (865 languages), but remains one of the less developed nations, with only a small percentage of the population getting more than a sixth grade education.

But, as many missionaries have found, the things I was prepared to teach did not seem to answer the questions that were most pressing to the people. In Bible studies or translation checking sessions, we often found that we were talking at cross-purposes. Frequently I could not make sense of their questions, and when I thought I did and gave a credible answer, they merely looked puzzled. It was not a language problem; it was more basic than that—we simply did not see the world in the same way.

It was during my second term that I noticed Bruce Malina's *The New Testament World*¹ on the shelf and decided to review it as a part of some translation research in the Gospels. As I read Malina's anthropological description of the culture of Jesus and the apostles, it dawned on me that I might as well be reading about the people in our own village. As was the case in first-century Palestine, most Melanesian people are collectivistic, honor and shame driven, and take it for granted that there are spirits and invisible forces at work around us at all times. And while such views conflicted with my own Western perspective, I realized that in many cases the people of Papua New Guinea had fewer adjustments to make in understanding the cultural and social dynamics at work in the biblical text than I did. Indeed, I came to see that they had as much to teach me as I had to teach them.

Charles Kraft has suggested that the church is missing out on important insights that will help it to develop a truly biblical theology if we neglect listening to the perspectives of Christians from other cultures that approach the text from entirely different worldviews. No single worldview is adequate to explain all that scripture has for us. It is only through our sharing and listening to one another that we can come to see "transculturally valid expressions of the revealed truths of God."²

Unfortunately most of the people who write and teach in the areas of biblical studies and theology either come from or have been educated from a Western perspective. And while there are books on specific "ethnic theologies" available, they tend to be found mainly on the shelves of "contextualization" specialists. We have yet to come to a place where we all are able to be informed by our non-Western brothers and sisters as we try to come to terms with what the Bible says to us.

With that in mind, I have taken upon myself the rather presumptuous task of looking at the Lord's Prayer from a Melanesian perspective. I say "presumptuous" for two reasons. First, even though I lived and worked with Melanesians for fifteen years, I remain a westerner. My worldview shifted considerably during that period, but I can hardly claim to see the Bible purely through Melanesian eyes. The insights that I offer

1. Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981).

2. Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture*, revised 25th anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005), 230.

have come mainly through my conversations with people in Papua New Guinea as I checked translations of Matthew's Gospel in a number of different languages.

Second, it is undoubtedly misleading to even speak of "a" Melanesian perspective. In anthropological studies, we are forced to group people together on the basis of shared cultural traits, speaking of common tendencies among people from similar backgrounds. But it is naive to believe that all Melanesians view reality exactly the same, just as it would be simplistic to regard all westerners as having a strictly materialistic worldview. Even in collectivistic societies, people are individuals with individual perspectives.³

But even with these caveats, there is value in the exercise, especially with a text as frequently, and sometimes mindlessly, repeated as the Lord's Prayer. We tend to supply default meanings to words and phrases, never questioning whether those meanings would have been what Jesus had in mind when he first taught his disciples to pray. A different cultural outlook can serve to shock us into paying attention. It is not that a Melanesian's view is necessarily going to be more "accurate"—they have their own culture-bound shortsightedness—but it will frequently give us a glimpse at a previously unviewed facet of the reality that God has made for us; and that alone should cause us to take notice when we hear strange and foreign meanings being applied to this familiar prayer. Consider this, then, a foray into the world of cross-cultural hermeneutics.

"OUR FATHER"

The phrase "our father" is decidedly foreign-sounding to a non-churched westerner. I can think of no setting, outside of prayer, where we hear it being used in the normal course of life, unless, of course, we consider those church traditions that refer to clergy as "father." My own children would never consider addressing me in this way. It conveys a sense of Asian formality, or perhaps a special liturgical language. It is probably accurate to say that many of us begin our prayers in this way for the simple reason that Jesus began his prayer in this way.

What does it mean for a non-nuclear family group to think of any one person as their father? Faced with such a question, someone from North America might find him or herself groping for an answer—something deep and theological: "God is the source of all life," we might say, "in that way he serves as our 'metaphorical' father." Such an answer has its merits—but the important thing to note is that our cultural framework does not provide us with an immediate answer. Groups of non-biologically related people do not share a common father in Western culture.

For most Melanesians, the phrase "our father" is commonplace. In the village where we lived, every man of an older generation was regarded as a father, especially within the same clan. Men might be introduced to others as "my little father" or "my big father" depending on their relative age. Calling someone "father" was a sign of veneration and respect as well as expressing a special organic connection. Even in public meetings, the younger men typically addressed an elder as "our father."

For a Melanesian, then, there is an automatic meaning to the opening phrase of the Lord's Prayer. It is primarily a respectful way of addressing a social superior who stands in some sort of mutually acknowledged relationship to the speaker. Notions about God as "source" and "creator" might possibly enter in if they were pressed to come up with something beyond that. But for most Melanesians there would be no need to go deeper, since the natural meaning of the phrase fits the context perfectly. The challenge for a Melanesian might be to understand God as our only father (Matt 23.1) in a context where they naturally think of each person having many fathers.

3. See Bruce J. Malina, *Christian Origins and Cultural Anthropology: Practical Models for Biblical Interpretation* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1986), 17-20, where he explains Mary Douglas's concepts of "grid," and "group." In many cases where there is high "group" mentality, as in a collectivistic society, there may still be a conflict between societal interpretations and an individual's experience, leading to less confidence in the generally accepted explanations of reality.

“WHO ART IN HEAVEN”

The entire notion of “heaven” was always a challenge in translating the Bible in Papua New Guinea. The people had no traditional notion of a supreme God or an afterlife. They did, however, have a keen sense of living in the midst of spiritual beings. Many of those spirits had specific abodes, such as a volcano, a stream or a tree. In general, their translations of “heaven” typically run along the lines of “God’s village” or “high up.” Frequently people have come to think of heaven as a village located above the clouds, a city where Christians go after they have died.

Their idea of heaven has been informed through connections with the Western church, as well as statements throughout the Bible that speak of heaven as being “in the sky” (e.g., Gen 1.8; Matt 3.17; 24.30). The main problem with this concept, as it may also be among Western Christians, is that it can promote the notion of a remote God who dwells at a distance. The phrase “kingdom of heaven” may point to a community located elsewhere instead of God’s active rule among us.

I once asked the participants in a translation checking session how God could hear our prayers if he lived so far away. One man responded, “He is God. He has very big ears.”

“HALLOWED BE THY NAME”

In Papua New Guinea, the most sacred of all relationships are those shared with one’s in-laws. In Melanesian Pidgin, the major trade language, an in-law is called one’s *tambu*, a cognate of “taboo,” keeping in mind that at its root, a taboo is not something that is forbidden, it is something that is holy or sacred. Historically the sacred nature of this relationship is tied to their social structure, particularly their notion of marriage as a covenant relationship, not just between two individuals, but between two entire clans. In the region where we worked, it was a marriage that guaranteed peaceful relationships between clans. There was no greater sin than to harm one’s in-law, that is, any member of a clan that had a marriage covenant with your clan.

This relationship is elevated to the point that a person is not allowed to so much as pronounce the birth name of his or her in-law. This prohibition even extends to one’s spouse in some areas. Since you still had to interact with your in-laws on a regular basis, but you could not say their names aloud, people would resort to other means to address their *tambus*, often giving them a new name, which they called a “*tambu* name,” or using their birth-order name⁴ or their conferred Christian name as a substitute.

It is difficult for a westerner to come to terms with the sacredness of a name. I recall an incident in our village where a young man slipped and mentioned the name of someone who had recently married a woman from his clan. His own sense of shock and humiliation at his faux pas, as well as the obvious discomfort of the other people present, opened up new meaning for me as I later contemplated the ramifications of the commandment never to take the name of the Lord in vain. Westerners could learn a great deal about the hallowedness of God’s name from Melanesians.

“THY KINGDOM COME, THY WILL BE DONE, ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN”

It is fair to say that both people from the United States and people from Papua New Guinea have a difficult time understanding the concept of the “kingdom of God.” We in the West tend to regard a “kingdom” as a political entity, with boundaries, defenses, laws and, of course, a king. The people of Papua New Guinea, in spite of being a part of the British Commonwealth, have virtually no conception of a national “kingdom.”

So it helps both groups to come to see the second part of this verse as providing definition and explanation for the first. God’s kingdom is, in essence, his effective will. In places it is regarded in scripture as a future event, when all of creation will bow to that will. But in Christ we can also see it as a present development, where all of us who call upon him as Lord have placed ourselves under his will and seek to grow in our adherence to it. So while the languages of Papua New Guinea will fall short of political terms to

4. In the area where we worked it was common to call someone by a name that indicated the position of their birth in relation to their siblings. Thus I was often called *Yanguv*, a name that meant “second-born son.”

express the idea of a “nation ruled by a king,” every language on earth is capable of expressing the concepts of allegiance and loyalty that lie behind this “kingdom.” Given that conceptual universe, this part of Jesus’ prayer goes beyond asking God to do something. It is an injunction for all who would be his disciples to live their lives in keeping with this desire to see God’s will carried out everywhere and always.

“GIVE US THIS DAY OUR DAILY BREAD”

If any part of the Lord’s Prayer strikes a special chord with the Melanesian mind, this is it. Granted, no one knows for certain what the word we have translated as “daily” actually meant. The first instances of it in all of Greek literature appear to be in Matthew and Luke, and only in the Lord’s Prayer in those Gospels. Suggestions seem to fall along the lines of “what is needful for each day,” “what is necessary for existence” or “what is needed for tomorrow.”⁵ In the mind of a Melanesian, these are essentially the same.

We in the West are normally uncomfortable in situations where we do not know how our basic needs will be filled in the future, especially the immediate future. We value stocking up, saving and being prepared for whatever eventualities arise.

In Papua New Guinea, a land where moth, rust and a host of uncharitable climatic conditions destroy, there is little thought toward saving up or preparing for future shortages. With their “limited good” mentality, they believe that there is only so much to go around. People who have excess have it at the expense of others, who must go without. So when they see someone who has extra, be it food, clothing or money, they will ask for it with the expectation that it will be given.

People’s lives are immersed in providing for their needs for that day. Even their gardens are unreliable as “savings accounts.” Rains may wash their entire crop away, or pigs may break through the fence and finish everything off. They have learned not to expect anything beyond what they now have. And they realize how little they are able to control what that might be. If God will provide enough to get them through the day, they can expect no more. Perhaps our current financial crisis will lead us to this same realization.

“AND FORGIVE US OUR DEBTS, AS WE FORGIVE OUR DEBTORS”

The idea of “debts” and “debtors” is far more at home in Papua New Guinea than is the idea of forgiveness. Debts and obligations are the impetus behind most social relationships. If someone lends you money or helps you in some other way, you are indebted to them; and you can expect them to ask you to take care of that debt at some later date. And when you do, you will probably either overpay or slightly underpay your debt in order to keep that sense of social obligation in place. To finish a debt and do no more might, in some cases, be equivalent to shutting off all reasons for any future relationship, especially in the case of someone outside of your clan. To refuse to do anything about a social debt would result, at least, in ostracism.

“Forgiveness” therefore, can be a difficult concept for the Melanesian mind. In our translation work, it took us several months to come up with a suitable term for it. Most Melanesians end up using language that refers to letting go of something, but to let go of a debt might leave a relationship in a nebulous state. Part of the lesson of the Lord’s Prayer to a Melanesian, therefore, is that there is a possibility of relationship with people based on something other than social indebtedness, just as a person finds within his or her own clan, where relationships are based on kinship instead of obligation.

“AND LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION”

In many areas of the Pacific, temptation is looked upon as an almost overwhelming force that robs us of our will to resist. It is always expressed as a verb—often in the sense of drawing or pulling someone in to follow a course of action. In some areas they look upon it as a form of *mana*, or spiritual power. For this reason, it is not unheard of for a woman to be blamed when she is the victim of a sexual assault. Her evil *mana* overcame

5. Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament based on Semantic Domains*, vol. 1 (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988), 652.

the resistance of her attacker and he was unable to stop himself. The people we worked with had no problems understanding Paul's words to the Romans, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate" (Rom 7.15).

The words "lead us not into temptation" are welcome good news to people with this mindset. With God's help, we need not worry about any other power forcing us to act against our will. No spirit, no person, dead or alive, can overcome the power of God and make us a slave to unwanted impulses if God is there to protect us.

"BUT DELIVER US FROM EVIL"

You will note in the footnotes of many English translations, and in the actual text of some (NRSV, NIV, REB, NET, GW, TEV, NLB, NDV) a variant interpretation that seems to account for the Greek article more accurately: "But deliver us from *the Evil One*." It is readily apparent that there is a significant difference between speaking of the abstract concept of "evil" and a specific evil being. Indeed, it may be difficult to say exactly what it means to be "delivered from evil." Are we asking God to help us avoid evil influences in our lives? Are we afraid of suffering at the hands of people who do evil things to us?

Melanesian languages seldom provide us with rich, abstract terms, such as what we might find in Greek or English. In most of them, "evil" remains an adjective that requires a noun. It was impossible for us to translate a sentence listing evil as an actor. "Evil" only made sense as a characteristic of some person. Elsewhere in Matthew we find these very words attributed to the devil (13.19, 38).

Malevolent spirits are a part of everyday life for most Melanesians. Spirit possession and spirit-caused illnesses and catastrophes are among the chief "causes" in their cause/effect world. A prayer for deliverance from the Evil One would find a ready place on the lips of most Papua New Guineans.

"FOR THINE IS THE KINGDOM AND THE POWER AND THE GLORY FOREVER. AMEN."

While most modern translations leave the closing of the Lord's Prayer out on the basis of its poor textual attestation, it remains a standard part of our common liturgy. And, viewed semantically, it is an act of communication that goes beyond the sum of its parts. When Christians quote this formulaic benediction, it is not with a mind toward the distinctive definitions of each term. Indeed, it is clear that the terms are anything but distinct. They are terms of worship and awe, cumulative in effect. Melanesians and westerners alike understand them to be an expression of our common allegiance to one Lord.

CONCLUSION

What would it be like to sit in a room with Christian thinkers from a dozen different cultures, where each person is allowed to share his or her thoughts, from his or her own cultural perspective, on one of the great passages of the Bible? What might we learn from a Chinese Christian as they tell us their impressions of the great hymn of Philippians 2.5–11? How might our lives be informed by listening to a sister from Bolivia speak on 1 Corinthians 13? Would it change our world to hear John 17 from the perspective of a Zambian pastor? Perhaps in listening to one another we might better hear the voice of God speaking to us through his scriptures.

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