

**WANBEL HERMENEUTIC: RENEWING THE  
DOCTRINE OF SALVATION IN THE DAILY  
LIVES OF THE ELC-PNG**

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis intends to reinterpret the doctrine of salvation within the context of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Papua New Guinea (ELC-PNG). To achieve this, I have employed the concept of *wanbel* (one heart) as a way of making sense of the Christian doctrine as it was received from the missionaries up until the present. Before the arrival of Christianity, the existing understanding of salvation was restricted to the life here and now. In other words, according to the Papua New Guinea culture, salvation was mainly material while little consideration was given to life after death. When the Christian missionaries arrived, they introduced salvation as something that points to the future or eternal life. According to this teaching, being saved simply meant having faith in Jesus Christ and one would automatically go to heaven. However, both the existing and the received understanding of salvation did not correspond with each other. This resulted in a lack of *wanbel* and subsequently a misunderstanding of salvation.

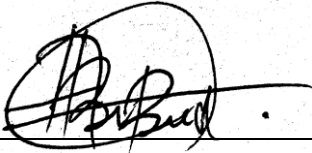
Of course, the church (ELC-PNG) was not a mere bystander in the growing misunderstanding. This is evident in the fact that before Christianity, Papua New Guineans were religious people. They conveyed a deep sense of spirituality in relation to their cosmic deities and it was the shaper and transformer of many of PNG's diverse cultures. The people knew how to live a right relationship with their gods and what it meant to be saved in line with their daily livelihoods. However, since the arrival of the missionaries, all these beliefs and practices were condemned and regarded as bad and evil. This had an adverse effect on the people. Christianity did not actually replace the religious lifestyle of the people but created a void that was left unfulfilled. As an ordained minister in the ELC-PNG, I propose that *wanbel* could assist in resolving the understanding of salvation. This alternative intends to be better-suited to the lives of the people of PNG as well as the church (ELC-PNG).

## DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that this thesis, which is 26,698 words in length, has been written by me, that it is the result of work carried out by me, and that it has not been submitted, either in whole or in part, in any previous written work for an academic award at this or any other academic institution.

I also declare that this thesis has not used any material, heard or read, without academically appropriate acknowledgment of the source.

Name: Abeg Bubun

Signed: 

Date: 17<sup>th</sup> September 2019

## DEDICATION

*To my grandparents, the Late. Pastor Bubun Bubun,  
Mrs Lae Bubun, Mr Ulengal Mareu, Mrs Dakin Ulengal & Father Sop Bubun*

*To my Brother the Late Tagol Bubun & Sister the Late. Sak Gilag S. Bubun.  
Your Wanbel spirit of one heart born from your womb anchored confidence and  
stability in my heart. May your soul rest in eternal peace.*

*Last but not least,  
To my Parents Mr Sumadum Bubun and Mrs Kulom S. Bubun.*

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## List of Abbreviations

Col	-	Colossians
Cor	-	Corinthians
ELC-PNG	-	Evangelical Lutheran Church of Papua New Guinea
Isa	-	Isaiah
Jer	-	Jeremiah
Jn	-	John
Matt	-	Mathew
Mic	-	Micah
NRSV	-	New Revised Standard Version
NT	-	New Testament
OT	-	Old Testament
Phil	-	Philippians
PNG	-	Papua New Guinea
Rom	-	Roman
Tim	-	Timothy

## Introduction

Foreign scholars have provided social/anthropological studies of Papua New Guinea (PNG) (Lawrence 1964; Morauta 1972; Strelan 1977; Gerritsen 1981), sharing their thoughts on the political climate in PNG since World War II. Some also touched on the topic of salvation as understood by the people of Papua New Guinea (Burrige 1960; Lawrence 1964). Yet much of these insights manifest a predominantly foreign view of natives, a view that was prevalent also in earlier missions to PNG (Lawrence 1964, vii).

The native Papua New Guineans, like other societies in Melanesia, were regarded by missionaries as immoral and hopeless savages in need of salvation. As David Hilliard wrote:

Melanesians had not really understood in depth what Christianity was all about. They were still children in faith, without a deep sense of God or sin or holiness...a watchful oversight of a 'white father' was therefore necessary... Melanesians could not control themselves and indulged in adultery and fornication (1978, 154).

As a result, many native Papua New Guineans were not only converted but were also monitored extensively regarding how well they understood the meaning of being saved or of having a life of abundance.<sup>1</sup> Paramount to this understanding is the biblical view that Jesus is the true revelation of God and therefore salvation is found through none other than him. In other words, believing in Jesus Christ becomes the origin and ultimate means to this so-called, prosperous life. Continuing this legacy, the Evangelical

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<sup>1</sup> In 1974, the Forum for Melanesian Affairs published an article surveying various case studies related to the church and adjustment movements (Murphey and Ahrens 1974). In particular, the objective of the survey was to discern what the people of PNG see as the struggles of attaining an "abundant life" (1974). The whole research was conducted by the outsiders' worldview and their perception of the natives.

ELC-PNG not only adopted this view but it also became central to the faith of the Church.

From the perspective of the Papua New Guineans the Christian understanding of God is problematic because it presents a very abstract concept of God and his relation to the world. This Christian view divides the world into two: the physical and the spiritual. The God introduced by the missionaries reigns and rules the spiritual sphere while humanity and the entire cosmos live in the physical world. The spiritual world is good and holy while the physical world below is bad and sinful. This separation created a gap between the physical and spiritual world and it was consolidated by Christianity. God had become distant from the people and the world, and this made people think that the world is only a temporary place with no significance. The physical life ends at the time of death while the spiritual life continues in God's glorious reign in eternity.

On the one hand, this interpretation makes sense, because it upholds the lordship of God as the creator and source of life. On the other hand, "it robs the nature from its spiritual values and reduces it to de-sacralization" (Ilailtia Tuwere 2017, 2). As a result, many people in PNG today have neglected and even destroyed their natural environments with eyes turned to eternal life or salvation. Put simply, they have destroyed what they were taught is temporal and abandoned their indigenous spirituality and relationship with the world to make them eligible for eternal salvation. Such knowledge not only allowed for the destruction of the earthly community, but also led to the breakdown of other human relationships.

The view that sees God as powerful, eternal and far removed from the world is contrary to what the Papua New Guineans know and practice. In the Papua New Guinean worldview, salvation is the result of ones' good relationship with the world, a world where both the spiritual and physical coexist. This is similar to Vaai's view that

humans should not aim to be “the ruler of the creation” but rather treat creation “as living dimensions in the embodied life” (2017, 34). Like Vaai, the people of PNG believe that when the right relationship is upheld among all dimensions of life, a sense of ‘in-ness’ can be realised between Creator and creature, as well as humans and creation. Salvation in this context can be experienced through one’s interaction with the world.

### ***Research Problem***

The understanding of good life in Papua New Guinea is about materialistic wealth and wellbeing. To have a good life means to have enough or even a surplus of material belongings. When the missionaries arrived, they were seen as agents of the good life. Therefore, the indigenous idea of good life as heard in the preaching and teachings of salvation by many in PNG flows out of their encounter with the missionaries in the past. As mentioned above, this misunderstanding on the concept of salvation has become a dilemma in the church.

Eternal life is not the ultimate goal among the ELC-PNG today. As a result, the understanding on salvation does not sit well with the day to day beliefs and practices of the members of ELC-PNG. A good example of this is seen in the way they treat worship. For them, worship is not so much about one’s unworthiness thus seeking forgiveness from God, but rather, it is about the blessings and the good life. The commonly held belief is people will receive blessings of wealth, good health, good education, and so forth through regular worship. But what happens when things turn out negatively? I will address this question in chapter one.

In the meantime, the aim of this study is to revisit the Christian concept of salvation in PNG and see how it fits with the literature on salvation. This is the main focus of chapter two. In so doing, an alternative understanding of salvation will be

proposed in chapter three, one that is inclusive and grounded both in the future and in the present. At the same time, this study challenges the idea that salvation is something purely laid out in the future.

### ***Research Methodology and Hypothesis***

In this study, the cultural concept of *wanbel* will be developed as a means to deconstruct the received understanding of salvation in the ELC-PNG today. The intention is to employ *wanbel*, which connotes ‘mutual inclusiveness’ and ‘oneness’ as a symbolic and harmonious meeting place between the PNG cultural understanding and the Christian understanding of salvation as adopted by the ELC-PNG. In this regard, *wanbel* aims to reconcile the gap not by imposing itself on top of the Christian understanding but by maintaining God’s creative and redemptive act as revealed in the Bible (i.e. Old Testament and New Testament understandings of Jesus Christ as the source of our salvation).

Within the PNG cultural context, *wanbel* (meaning one heart) is often employed as the basis or foundation for all aspects of life. It offers an avenue that has a great impact on the flow of life. For example, it mends broken relationships, it holds families and communities together, and it promotes a spirit of relationality as well as forgiveness. Before Christianity, *wanbel* was generally understood to be the regulator of peace, harmony, security, and unity.

One heart also captures a holistic view where life is often interwoven in a harmonious pattern of life between humans and creation. It is therefore, not difficult to locate the reality and fullness of *wanbel* in the doctrines of God, Creation, Sin, Christology, Holy Spirit, and the Church. This should assist in the task of using *wanbel* as a framework to review the current understanding of salvation.

The hypothesis of this study is that a cultural alternative like *wanbel* is crucial for Christians in PNG to reach a deeper understanding of salvation; one that reconciles the material world and the fullness of life found in Jesus Christ. Aligned with this goal, *wanbel* will offer balanced critique of salvation as attested to in the Bible, and flesh out a theology that corresponds to the daily realities of the ELC-PNG context.

### ***Overview of the Thesis***

The first chapter of this thesis will discuss *wanbel* as a hermeneutical lens explaining how it is rooted in the teachings and practices of the ELC-PNG today. This chapter highlights why *wanbel* is important to the spirituality of the PNG people and briefly touches on why *wanbel* ought to be incorporated into the current understanding of salvation. The main purpose of this chapter is to bring to the fore a more inclusive understanding of salvation that embraces the past, future and the present life of the people.

The second chapter is the lack of *wanbel* in the different understandings of salvation. In this chapter, I will discuss the different understandings of salvation from a cultural perspective, from the received understandings, and the various theological and philosophical understandings. The latter part looks at salvation through the likes of Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, Luther (16<sup>th</sup> century), and two contemporaries, namely, Grudem and Kinlaw.

In the third and final chapter, I discuss the implications of *wanbel* on salvation. The aim of this chapter is to provide a synthesis on the different theological understandings of salvation covered in chapter two and to emphasise some of the important themes discussed in the entirety of this thesis. In the conclusion, I offer some recommendations regarding any future undertakings regarding salvation in PNG.

# Chapter 1

## ***Wanbel* as a Hermeneutical Lens**

### ***1.1. Definition and Etymology of Wanbel***

The word *wanbel* is a collective indigenous term that unites 800 plus dialects throughout PNG. In this regard, *wanbel* is indigenous because it emerges from the life and context of the local people. In other words, it is a home-grown terminology born from the two English-Pidgin<sup>1</sup> words, ‘*wan*’ and ‘*bel*’. Though it is a *Tok pidgin/ Tokpisin* word, it is useful as it is understood by all within the PNG cultural context. This was one of the motivations behind my choice of *wanbel*, as it resonates well with the people of my country and poses a symbol that is culturally relevant to the ELC-PNG context.

The word *wan-bel* has two components with different meanings. ‘*Wan*’ refers to the word or number one and ‘*bel*’ simply refers to the stomach, heart, mind, feeling, emotion, spirit, word and action. When put together, the word ‘*wanbel*’ is interpreted as ‘*one*’ stomach, ‘*one*’ heart, ‘*one*’ mind, ‘*one*’ feeling, ‘*one*’ emotion, ‘*one*’ spirit, ‘*one*’ word, and ‘*one*’ action. In other words, *wanbel* implies unity in diversity, a community made up of different individuals, or a unified whole. This oneness employs a deep sense of living as one oikos, family, or community that gives life and survival a different meaning.

For PNG, *wanbel* anchors in the stream of mutual inclusiveness or ‘Inness.’ Others<sup>2</sup> may differentiate the heart from mind, feeling, emotion, word and action,

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<sup>1</sup>English-Pidgin or TokPisin is a neutral language born from an English language used as a means of communication throughout Papua New Guinea uniting all 800 plus different dialects.

<sup>2</sup>Refers to non-Papua New Guineans.



however, within the PNG cultural understanding those dimensions are inseparable. When *wanbel* is evoked, it includes the entire package. Thus, when one is separated, it defeats the composition of the whole and the meaning of *wanbel* is lost.

Therefore, when we talk about *wanbel* in PNG, it is deep in the sense that it is connected with people (living and non-living), with culture and the natural environment (world), hence, why it is fundamental to PNG life. The various relationships it comprises, reflects the harmony of life as it is supposed to be in the present context.

Alternatively, *wanbel* can also be understood as the centre post or king<sup>3</sup> post in a building. It is common in PNG that most people in rural areas often build their houses with a centre post or king post standing in the corner and centre of the house. The main purpose is for the house to be steady and to stand firm during natural disasters including earthquakes, strong winds and floods. A well-grounded king post conveys a message of hope, security, confidence and stability within the home. Such knowledge has been observed and practiced in many traditional homes for centuries. However, in modern setups, the king post has been substituted with iron and concrete cement while the concept of a king post is carried forth from the traditional houses.

The above example conveys a similar understanding to the way *wanbel* is perceived in community. This view suggests that life is not just about fluid relationships but also about maintaining, power, strength, and stability through interconnectedness. Above all, it creates a sense of harmony and peace in life. When one heart is missing a total breakdown is realized among the people, culture and their surrounding environment. In the following discussion, I will pinpoint some of the tenets of the *wanbel* concept that correlate with cultural understanding of salvation.

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<sup>3</sup>The word king in this section is used to illustrate how big and stronger the wood is among the smaller woods that are used as the post in house making.

## 1.2. *The Significance of Wanbel in PNG*

### 1.2.1. *Wanbel as Unity in Diversity*

*Wanbel* involves everything including all dimensions of life. This includes the ‘earthly turf’ (Tuwere 2002, 33) which is part and parcel of the cosmic order/environment. This signifies the coming together of the diverse dimensions of life as unified whole, as the archetype of how life should be lived. In this manner, *wanbel* invites and creates space for all individuals to come into agreement and unity. For *wanbel*, this is about appreciating the diversity of all forms of life, and the ongoing dialogue that each continues to engage in (e.g. human beings, land, islands, sea and sky are all connected to each other in the flow of life). This ongoing relationship is described by Horrell as ‘mutual custodianship’ (2008, 194). He states that “Earth is a balanced and diverse domain where responsible custodians can function as partners, rather than rulers, to sustain a balanced and diverse earth community” (2008, 194). In unity in diversity, equality and fairness ensures the flow of life. Such connections between these dimensions often give people in PNG a proper meaning in life. Referring to an inner connection from the Fijian context, Tuwere states that the land cannot be understood outside the context of a person’s livelihood (2002, 35). His idea is in line with the *wanbel* relational understanding of land, ocean, and sky as the connected partners in the flow of life.

### 1.2.2. *Wanbel as Oikos*

“The Greek word “*oikos*” which means “house”, ‘housekeeping’ was described in 1866 by Ernst Haeckel in terms of the relationships between “organisms and the outward world surrounding it” (Moltmann 2012, 131). In the context of *wanbel*, *oikos* can be translated as ‘*ab*’ in my dialect (*Takia*) which literally means house. ‘*Ab*’ in my

context assumes everything as being under one shelter including the people and all the lives in that particular house. It holds everything together giving meaning to the existence of that home. In PNG *tokpisin/pidgin* we say; *ol lain long dispela haus istap*, translated as ‘life is present in the house.’ It implies that a house is central to the survival or existence of the PNG people.

Similarly, *wanbel* sees *ab* as the symbol of earth/land. Land is the place where we receive food, water, money, clothes, security, and strength to name a few. In other words, it becomes the source of life or a birthing/breeding place where life flourishes. In ELC-PNG cultural setting, land also gives us a sense of belonging and identity. Our survival and life are understood in an anthropomorphic sense, in the ‘hands’ of the land. If the land produces less, then there are fewer benefits to life. This is because the land provides and is thus essential to the needs of humanity (Tuwere 2002, 35; Miller 2008, 124; Swenson 2008, 34; Halapua 2010). This is perhaps why Tuwere argued that the “land owns a person” (2002, 49). Without land, human beings are nothing more than nomads. He also adds that “without the people, the land is like a body without a soul” (2002, 35).

Cliff Bird also made a similar point when he said that “the home metaphor is filled with potential as well as practicalities that could transform how humanity lives, walks and works on the earth” (2011, 23). In this regard, the totality of human life (physical and spiritual) in many Oceanic cultures depends on what is provided by both land and ocean. I agree with both views that Oceania and the *vanua* are a pivotal means of peoples’ livelihood. Similarly, Davis contends that human life “depend[s] on the health of the natural system” (2009, 110). From her point of view, it is seldom possible to speak of the health and wellbeing of the people without addressing the contributions of the land and its natural order.

*Wanbel* is also holistic in the sense that it portrays an understanding of *oikos* as fundamentally sacred. It is sacred because it is a source of life and it also nurtures it. Since the *oikos* in creation hosts multiple realms of existence, the people in PNG usually associate land with all the sacred blessings we have received both in the past and present and not so much something that is entirely in the future.

### **1.2.3. Wanbel is Dialogical**

Another aspect of *wanbel* is the dialogical pattern of life. In *wanbel*, all living things and non-living things are dialogical in one way or another. Put simply, nothing in creation is insignificant as each aspect of life predisposes its own meaning. It can either be in a verbal form or through signs, symbols, and sounds. Human beings read and interpret meanings from these signs, symbols, and sounds.

While human beings have their own way of dialoguing and communicating through its forms and signals both verbal expression (dialects, languages and so forth) and non-verbal (sign/body language), dialogue contains so much more in a traditional sense. This includes other forms of communication like the sound of traditional drums, bamboos, conch shell, smoke and fire signals, and many others. These forms are used to convey messages, ideas and meanings to one another. They more or less act as doorways to the arena of knowledge where information, suggestion, direction and guidance are received. This knowledge and meaning can be accessed when telling and receiving stories or by observing rituals and receiving invaluable lessons from them.

In my early teens, I often observed such knowledge communicated as such by my seniors. When a couple wants to avoid interference from a visitor or a family member, they use body language and signs to dialogue. A husband may use his eyes, head and hands to convey messages to his wife. Such knowledge is observed as a silent mode of

relaying and receiving messages. In this sense, meaning is transmitted non-verbally as it is conveyed through sign/body language.

In a similar way, the entire cosmos has its own way of relaying messages for the human being to interpret or read. For example, a firefly entering a home can be interpreted as an impending death or danger. Similarly, the appearance of a green lizard (*kadai*) can be interpreted as a sign of a good catch (for fishing) or good fortune of another sort. In my home, a *kadai* reminds the community or family of the importance of mending broken relations. It is believed that if a broken relationship is mended, the *kadai* is the herald of blessings in the community or family.

Furthermore, the *kadai* informs the people of an enormous catch that is ahead and about to take place. It indicates a high season where fishers can expect an abundance of octopus and sea snakes which have left their habitats to breed closer to the shores. This event allows freedom of movement and interaction among the inland and coastal people as fishers heed the *kadai's* invitation.

Another example of dialogue is Halapua's reference to the conch shell as being a voice from the deep (2010). This idea speaks of the conch shell as conveying a message of communion, death, and harvest time. In other words, the conch shell informs the people of an event that is about to take place. This corresponds with Horrell's view that "earth is a subject capable of raising its voice in celebration and against injustice" (2008, 193). In agreement with Horrell, I contend that these voices embedded deep within the land and ocean, communicate and inform humans of their relationship and responsibilities to the land, ocean and all members of the earthly community. It is essentially a call for all to stand together in celebrating life and overcoming injustice.

In addition, a dialogical way of life is also about having *talanoa* with one another as what most Pacific islanders refer to when having a face-to-face interaction with one

another. When looking at the definition of the word *talanoa*, Timote M. Vaioleti defines it as a “face-to-face” interaction or engagement. “It is a conversation, a talk, an exchange of ideas or thinking, whether formal or informal” (2006, 23). In this regard, *wanbel* echoes Vaioleti’s definition. In the context of *wanbel*, the earthly family is positioned in such a way that there are unique faces confronting and facing one another. For example, the land faces the sky, the sky faces the ocean, and the people face the entire cosmos. This face-to-face image of the earthly family allows all to observe and listen to the voice of one another. Though there are different patterns and styles of having *talanoa* among these worlds, they all aim toward a common goal but in a fluidity and non-constricting manner. In this sense, a strong wind can be interpreted through its forceful movements. Human beings can relay this message as a precaution using words to fishers and navigators, while birds and other creatures can respond through sounds and migratory movements. Such *talanoa* way of life reflects in its own dialogical pattern, the various meanings of life. These diverse forms of dialogue should not be mistaken for division, but rather understood as unique patterns of communication working towards a common flow of life. *Wanbel* is dialogical in this sense because all dimensions of life have their own ways of revealing meanings pertinent to the survival of each species. Through dialogue, we know from the past what to expect in the present and likewise, what to anticipate for the future.

#### **1.2.4. *Wanbel* is Familial**

Family is another important aspect and value in *wanbel*. Within the familial context, *wanbel* acts like the primary social glue within a village, community or place. According to this view, family fashions life in various ways, giving it a purpose. It often maintains solidarity, oneness, interconnectedness, and inness. While it certainly implies partiality in terms of “occupying a side position” (Taumoefolau 2017, 141), *wanbel*

needs to take root within a family setting first, before it could be applied in wider relationships. In other words, *wanbel* begins with intimate partnerships where family members learn of their unique roles and responsibilities. These relationships are then developed further into the village. A family that practices *wanbel*, therefore, is a family that walks side by side, shares the same language, endures hardships and struggles together, and works together to achieve a common goal.

In cases where an authoritative pattern emerges, *wanbel* aims to resolve these issues at the family level. These are known in PNG *tokpisin* as '*em disasta ja* which literally means a disaster in the family. A disaster implies a total breakdown of life within a family and that the family is in a poor state. How long these disasters occur depends on whether or not that family rediscovers the *wanbel* spirit. At the same time, it can also be seen as an opportunity in the sense that division also allows for readjustment. This can result in stronger ties and relationships within the family. To avoid such a gap, upholding family values such as love and care is often necessary.

But family according to *wanbel*, is not just between humans. Rather, family symbolizes various members living in a relationship and in harmony with the cosmic order/environment including land, ocean, and sky. Every member of the family has a part to play in the life and survival of one another. These roles are fashioned in a communal order. As Taumoefolau states

...it is not enough merely to understand your roles, because your roles are played out relationally and communally in different spaces between two points, relationships [are] between two entities or people (2017, 145).

Taumoefolau is referring to both people and other members of the earthly family that belong together. For example, pigs and food are vital sources in the process of reconciling conflicting parties. This is why the earthly family is so important, because food comes from the land and the land helps to reconcile the relationships on it. The

relationship to the land is also sacred which is why an individualistic way of life that does not recognise these communal bonds, threatens the family. Within this context, being saved starts with the family.

### **1.2.5. *Wanbel* is Relational**

Similar to family, everything visible and invisible, living and non-living, are understood in *wanbel* as interrelated. In other words, all dimensions of life do not exist in isolation from one another but as mutually inclusive of one another. Similar to the earthly family, *wanbel* is the force that anchors and holds life together in love and care. Any form of life that believes it to be independent is devoid of a real life which can only be achieved through relationship.

In this light, Human beings are relational. They interact with one another including the surrounding environment. Gerald O'Collins stated that,

[m]any who reflect on personal existence argue that it should be primarily understood as being constituted by relationship to the other person. The personal self can be self only in relation to other selves. Being personal means being relational, [...] being personal means being present to other persons (O'Collins 2008, 210).

According to O'Collins, a person only becomes a person through the existence of the other. Such relationship is a call for lowering the individualist way of living by allowing communal life to take root. Human beings lived in this paradigm of life as a way of grasping a sense of self. As a species, humans are therefore not independent but interdependent.

Furthermore, *wanbel*/one heart touches the core of the Pacific relational paradigm of life. It is tied and linked to a relational pattern in which life is seen as a central meeting place and a shared basket of wisdom. This is the symbolic meeting point between *wanbel* or 'one heart' and 'relationality'. Relationality reflects an interconnectedness that speaks the language and tone of *one heart* in the ebbs and flows



of life. On the other hand, one heart accelerates the progress and the success of relationality. Vaai's creative notion of '*in*' resonates well with the idea of '*one heart*' (2017, 29-31). The idea of '*in*' promotes the idea of empathy in which '*one heart*' is about seeing oneself *in* the other and vice versa. When seeing oneself as being '*in*' the other of creation, the cycle of relationship is not static but continues to flow.

On the other hand, relationality constitutes the simultaneous releasing and receiving of life. In this reciprocal system, life is a privileging of less instead of more which is pertinent in maintaining a balance with other members of society (Vaai 2017, 223). According to this view, one must learn to refrain for the other to gain strength; the lowering of the self leads to the elevation of the other; and likewise, when the self chooses less, he or she has made room for the other to prosper (2017, 223). Within this circle of life, reciprocity is about living for the other. Similar to *wanbel* the spirit of reciprocity is about upholding the relationships within the human, earthly, physical and spiritual realms.

Vaai describes mutual inclusiveness as the "I" not being able to exist without the "we" and the "we" cannot exist without the "I" (2017, 30). This mutual coexistence is made possible when Christians take seriously their obligations within creation and the wider circle of life. The give and take approach is realized and fulfilled through *wanbel*. When everything relates to one another, the sense of life and meaning unfolds. My contention is that this is the immediate experience of salvation within the PNG context.

By reviving a sense of community, *wanbel* is about living and working together. The aim of this lifestyle is none other than to bring all of life into communion with one another through love, fellowship, peace and harmony. The practical realities would include, making community gardens with the involvement of the entire village. All

members of the community are to realise his or her role in the work and see their contributions as an integral part of the communal whole.

The same could also be said during a funeral. If every member of a community is to bring food and pigs to support the immediate family in their time of grief and sorrow, mourning becomes communal. In the *wanbel* understanding, no single family is to suffer alone or to bear the costs on their own. Arne Sovik puts it this way, "...our identity is also to be defined in relation to other men, for man is not made to live alone. Salvation is the abandonment of individualism and acceptance of integration in a community" (1973, 53-54). Sovik's notion of communal living is certainly commendable. It corresponds with the saying that 'no man is an island.' Human beings exist only in deep connection with others. This way of *wanbel* would therefore become obsolete without community.

Furthermore, relational living also creates venues for the earthly communities to dialogue as mentioned earlier. Here, human beings and the environment consolidate the relationships between them. For example, the burial of the umbilical cord of a child is often followed by the planting of a tree, symbolizing the connection of the child with the land and the whole environment. On the contrary, if the umbilical cord is not buried the connection between the child and the land and environment is disconnected. Land can become the child's enemy and vice versa. Land can bring sickness and bad produce as long as the child lives. Davis describes these tightly knit communities using Aldo Leopold's phrase of "land-communities" (2009, 118). These communities in which human beings are interconnected with the land are exemplary of the PNG context.

Therefore, living in reciprocal relationship implies that both suffering and prosperity are communal matters. This understanding also implies that individuals face the unknown future with the bold confidence that *wanbel* provides. Davis argues that

we may know nothing about our spirituality unless we know how to live responsibly in communion with others (2009, 117). Concurring with Davis, I argue that living responsibly is equivalent to living relationally. In this light, the self is always accountable to the other and vice versa.

### **1.2.6. *Wanbel* is Spiritual**

*Wanbel* spirituality is linked with the physical and spiritual although it is arguably dualistic according to Platonic thinking. This relationship where the physical and the spiritual interact treats divine matters of gods, spirits and deities as part of the human world. In this case, the body and spirit are one and belongs to the same realm. If a person dies, the spirit leaves the body and lives within this world in a spiritual dwelling place (world) with a link and access to the living.

In addition, *wanbel* spirituality sees its god in the tree, stone, mountain, cave, river, snake, star and bird to name a few. These gods are not far from the people but in close relation with them. This notion goes in line with Arthur Walker-Jones' argument of "God as rock" (2008, 96). He states, "God is in Earth and redemption comes through Earth, not from heaven" (97). These gods become the source of life and blessing, wellbeing and health, to name a few. In order for the *wanbel* spirituality to live in right relationship, there must be a deep-seated respect for the realm of gods, spirits and deities. When the right relationship is realized and maintained, unity and harmony bind the entire community (people and their gods). On the contrary, "any threat and damage to the integrity or fellowship of the physical, including the relationships with and responsibility to the creation, affects and damages the fellowship of the spirit" (Samuel 2018, 29).

In this case, illness, death and bad produce are deemed as the consequences of bad relationships with the divine. Seeking forgiveness and pardon from the gods warrant an

animal sacrifice. Through this sacrificial act, reconciliation takes place and the mending of relationship between the people and their gods is complete. This is an example of how human beings are saved within this life where instead of an animal sacrifice being used today, Christians have replaced this sacrifice with the atonement of Christ.

*Wanbel* is also spiritual in a triadic sense as perceived in the Trinity. For instance, the people, gods/spirits and cosmos live as one family and community in the one oikos called earth, just as the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit, live together within the Godhead. In the triadic formula of *wanbel*, the gods/spirits and environment provide and mutually serve the wellbeing and health of the people just as Trinity mutually participate in the life of God throughout the Old and New Testament.

In the Old Testament, God calls and treats the Israelites as ‘sons’ and provides for them. As members of his oikos, he provides them with land which manifests not only the physical blessing of Israel but also the spiritual. Likewise, in the New Testament, Jesus Christ calls his followers his brothers and sisters as part of his kingdom. He feeds, heals and teaches them as the mark of their physical and spiritual blessings.

In ELC-PNG, our oikos, family and relational pattern of life reveal this truth. Together with the other significant attributes of *wanbel* mentioned above, God is continually manifested in our culture today. These values are seen by many as the vehicle for which God can be experienced through the ELC-PNG context. *Wanbel* also unveils the Trinitarian lifestyle of God, in particular, the diversity of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Since God lives in a communion of three Persons as well as in relation to the earthly family, the ideal model of spiritual communion can be found in God.

In the Trinitarian relationship, the three divine Persons have their own functions. The Father is the Creator, the Son is the Redeemer, and the Holy Spirit is the Sanctifier.

Their roles reflect their diversities in the one Godhead. In the role of the creation, redemption and sanctification, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are all present. Let us look at these roles respectively.

In the creation story of Genesis 1, there is no clear account of the Trinitarian relationship. But we can assume this relationship in verses 1 and 2. In verse 1, “God” is mentioned and verse 2 the “wind from God” is mentioned (NRSV) which may symbolise the Spirit of God. In the most recent New Bible Commentary, the Genesis 1:1-2 narratives narrate the name “God” and the “Spirit” or “wind of God hovering above the ocean” (Wenham et al. 1994, 60). In this account “God” and the “wind from God” are mentioned without the Son. In this sense, we may assume that the Son is missing in this relationship. However, John’s gospel gives a clear evidence of the Trinitarian relationship existing in the work of creation (John 1:1-5) (NRSV). In verses 1-5, John speaks of the existence of the word before the entire creation was made. He further states that the word was God and “since God is a noun,” he “must be affirming the Godhead of the Word (Wenham and et al. 1994, 1025). In the later verse (1:14), John speaks of the word becoming flesh in the human form through Jesus.

In John 16: 5-15, Jesus mentions this Trinitarian relationship. He mentions the name “Father” and the “Advocate” signifying the spirit of God in which the whole Godhead is assumed to be present. These parallel narratives in the book of Genesis and the Gospel of John are evident of the shared workings of God, in and through the Trinity. From this perspective, life and salvation was already made known to our world.

The Scriptures also reveal this hidden knowledge of God’s unity and fellowship with the entire world. In the Old Testament, the creation narrative in Genesis 1:26-27 speaks of God having created the first human beings in the Garden of Eden. God began his fellowship with humans through visitation, communion and dialogue. This

fellowship in which God interacted physically with the first humans—Adam and Eve, God’s dialogical and relational way of connecting with the world was established. Though this fellowship and unity were somewhat destroyed through the fall, God’s plan of salvation was reconvened through the nation of Israel. God also continued to reconcile with the world through Moses and restored them to the land of Canaan (Exodus 3:16-22). In the same way, Jesus Christ through his life, death and resurrection completed the reconciliation with the entire world or creation (John 3:16). Today, the presence of God’s continual restoration can be seen in the work of the Holy Spirit (John 16:12-15). On this basis, *wanbel* is a symbolic birthing place derived from God’s own life of unity, harmony and love. It is within this meeting place that the problematic view of salvation in ELC-PNG will be revisited.

### **1.2.7. *Wanbel* is Salvation Now and in the Future**

To live in peace and harmony is the ultimate aim of *wanbel* but this is easier said than done. The interconnectedness of life in all of its relationships is anchored in an idea of salvation that serves some dimensions more than others. Through its relational links, human beings and the entire environment are supposed to be saved. But there are many areas in the Christian understanding that warrants another look. In *wanbel*, relationships are held together through upholding our present responsibilities to one another. When relationships are neglected or destroyed, the fluidity in the flow of life is also interrupted.

Moreover, *wanbel* does not see salvation as a future event and hope but is about right living in this world. When everything including human beings and the cosmic order embrace its true purpose in life here and now, they are more or less perceived to be saved according to the *wanbel* understanding. This means that as soon as peace and harmony is experienced by all in this world, so too is salvation. According to Vincent