

**VAHEVAHE: A TONGAN CONCEPT OF RECEIVING AND USING THE BIBLE IN  
RELATION TO MATTHEW 4:19 AND 28:19**

Talofa lava, Malo e lelei, Ni Sa bula vinaka, Kia ora, and warm Pacific greetings. It is a privilege and honour to be part of this Conference and to contribute to the sharing of the rich heritage of our Pacific nations. This is my second attendance in this Conference and I am grateful to be in Samoa for the first time, to have a taste of the hospitality of its people. I live in New Zealand in the city of Dunedin with its much colder weather comparing to the weather here. I came to this Conference not only to learn from you but to have a break from our extreme weather. However, Dunedin is a lovely city with its wonderful scenery.

I would like to contribute to our *talanoa/talking* as a native of Oceania on the Tongan word 'vahevahe', which simply means, 'sharing, dividing, or distributing.' The word 'vahevahe' is commonly used in distribution of food (*me'akai*), possession (*koloa*), obligations (*kavenga*), and responsibilities (*fatongia*). For example, in a funeral context, the *kāinga* (family) would come together to meet, to talk and to share the tasks that normally contribute to the smooth running of the funeral. It is the role of the household head (*'ulumotu'a*) to call a family meeting to reaffirm the family connection and also to share the responsibilities between family members. In sharing the responsibilities the grieving family feel supported and comforted. Furthermore, everyone who has a task feels valued because he/she has something to contribute. When tasks are shared around for the purpose of consoling the grieving family it denotes another Tongan word, '*fevahevahe'aki*', which simply means, 'sharing with one another'. By sharing with one another the responsibilities, the burden will be lighter and the task will be easier to accomplish. *Vahevahe* allows everyone to give and take.

*Vahevahe* is also used for sharing of information and ideas. It happens during the preparation for any important occasion such as funeral or wedding. The members of the family/ *kāinga* would come together, not only to share the obligation as I mentioned before but also to exchange ideas and information to help running such occasion effectively. They share their ideas together until they come to a satisfying resolution. Reaching to a satisfying resolution is not easy because everyone is given an opportunity to speak and to express their opinions. When there are many opinions to discuss there will be difficulty in reaching an agreement.

However, sharing their ideas together enable them to reach a consensus decision. Any decision that they make will pass around the members of the family orally. Oral tradition is very much part of the Tongan culture. It is the same with most or if all cultures in Oceania. It is a way of communication, which our ancestors preserved and enabled the transmission of information from one generation to another. This way of communication was vital to the receiving and using of the Bible among the indigenous people of Tonga when they first encountered the teaching of the Bible. The majority of the people at the time were illiterate, and they found oral tradition as an effective way of sharing Biblical information.

The understanding of *vahevahe* as a way for sharing of ideas and information helped the first receivers of the Bible in Tonga in their interpretation. Through the interpretation of the missionaries, the first receivers of the Bible had a glimpse of the meaning of the Bible. They organised small groups with leaders to take the lead in sharing their knowledge of the Bible. Catechism was part of the method that they used to explore the meaning of the Bible and a message to share with those who participated in the discussion. The Bible became their primary source that they used to teach about God, love, peace, justice, repentance, forgiveness, and so forth. In sharing their interpretation of Bible texts, those who received and used it started to understand the meaning in relation to their contexts. They used the word '*vahevahe folofola*', which simply means 'sharing the Bible' to identify that the Bible is not to be thought of as being owned by just one person. It is the community who owns the Bible and therefore it is a shared resource. '*Vahevahe folofola*' (Sharing the Bible) is a phrase that is used in the context of a group discussion or study group, as opposed to a sermon context. It is a dialogue, which means there are many who talk.

In a sermon context, it's only one person who has the opportunity to share his/ her thought. The channel of communication is monologue. The chance for everyone to express their personal opinion is minimal. Furthermore, there is no opportunity to exchange ideas and share information because only person is allowed to talk. In contrast, the *vahevahe* concept permits dialogue and *talanoa/ talk*. Everyone who is present has the right to share their ideas. No one is excluded in the *vahevahe* for everyone is given the liberty to express their own opinion. If anyone is hindered from the *talanoa/ talk*, *vahevahe* concept is certainly violated. Apparently, the *vahevahe* concept enabled our ancestors to receive and use the Bible to

enhance their understanding of the Christian faith. They also used the same concept to widen their perspective through the knowledge and understanding of other people about the Bible. *Vahevahe* is part of oral tradition that allows and encourages other voices to be heard. It certainly provides an equal ground for every voice to be heard. This opportunity gives space for the voiceless to have their say. The more voices heard, the more understanding that a community can achieve. Therefore, I would say that the concept of *vahevahe* contributed significantly to the success of receiving and using of the Bible in the early Tongan society. There are four ways that the *vahevahe* concept is understood to be part of this success. Firstly, *vahevahe* is reciprocal, secondly, it's collaborative, thirdly, it's hospitable, and fourthly, it's educational. After a careful elaboration on these four areas and the impact of *vahevahe* in their progress I will then apply them to two texts in the gospel of Matthew, which are Matthew 4:19 and 28:19.

### ***Vahevahe* is Reciprocal**

Reciprocity is an integral part of the Tongan culture and perhaps it is common right across Oceania. It is a way of maintaining good relationship within the family/*kāinga*. Reciprocity enables each person to give and to receive as a way of keeping mutual intimate relationships. For instance, the exchanging of obligation and ideas on any important occasion would contribute to strengthen the bond within the family/*kāinga*. Because everyone has an opportunity to give and receive, therefore no one would feel the pressure and the frustration of organising any occasion alone. Being open to receive as well as to give is an integral part of *vahevahe*. You can't receive unless you are willing to give. This reciprocal attitude and action creates harmony. Keeping good relationship emphasises the value of another Tongan word, '*tauhi-vā*', which means 'keeping the space.' Every relationship has a space in between and that space must be kept in order for harmony to maintain. Keeping the space in between (*tauhi-vā*) contributes to '*vā-lelei*', meanings, 'good relationship'. If that space is exploited then there would be '*vā-kovi*', meanings 'bitter relationship.' Therefore, the *vahevahe* concept fosters mutual relationships and promotes equal sharing of resources and ideas. The concept of *vahevahe* challenges the myth of self-sufficiency and complacency. No one has everything and therefore everyone should be opened to give and to receive.

It is this understanding of *vahevahe* that encourages dialogue and open discussion of ideas in mutual respect, knowing that we have diverse of ideas and understandings. It means everyone needs to listen carefully to one another's opinion, rather than assuming that there is only one dominant view point. By being open to other points of view, mutual respect is created in the community of Bible readers. They receive the Bible together through the ministry of various people, and they use it in different contexts to meet the needs of different people. Understanding of diversity calls upon everyone to be open minded to other people's understandings and interpretations of the Bible. The *vahevahe* concept inspires give and take, which helps with the receiving and using of the Bible in the Tongan context.

### ***Vahevahe* is Collaborative**

Collaboration is an important factor of *vahevahe*. Because it exists in a group framework, the *vahevahe* concept would certainly encourage collaboration. Thus members of such groups would receive and use together their understanding of the Bible as part of their search for meaning. It is through their discussion together and open mindedness to one another that collaboration is experienced. It doesn't mean that they have to agree or have one mind but rather be encouraged to pursue on-going dialogue and discussion. Their seeking together opens new meaning and understandings of the Bible in relation to their individual contexts. Because the meaning of the Bible is determined by the contexts of the individuals, everyone needs to listen carefully to everyone else. Their attempt to share openly their individual perspectives enriches their discussion and surely deepens their understanding of the Bible.

Because *vahevahe* promotes collaboration, it would challenge any attempt for one dominant opinion to be superior. Instead, it encourages a collective of ideas and viewpoints so that the whole group is able to dialogue and discuss together controversial issues with a positive attitude and open mind. Those who come with the assumption that their opinion is the most authentic will be challenged by the *vahevahe* concept. The *vahevahe* concept resists accepting single opinions because it will violate the nature of collaboration. Having open conversations does not diminish the value of the Bible but rather increases the dynamic of sharing and searching for meaning. Everyone is encouraged to collaborate in such an environment because everyone's point of view is counted and valued. The Bible was

received and used by the community and therefore it needs collaboration to sustain it. If there is no collaboration, then the Bible would certainly lose its value in the community. Therefore, I believe, the *vahevahe* concept encourages collaboration in the midst of diversity. *Vahevahe* is communal and it is against any attempt for individualism or exclusion.

### ***Vahevahe* is Hospitable**

The *Vahevahe* concept is also an expression of hospitality. Captain Cook named Tonga as, 'The Friendly Islands' after receiving hospitality from the Tongan people. Historians tell us that the Tongan people welcomed, entertained, and shared their food and friendship with Captain Cook and his crews. They fed them well and loaded more food on their boat. Through that encounter Captain Cook experienced hospitality from the people of Tonga. It is through the sharing one's own resources that hospitality is truly conveyed. Quantity is not the real measurement of hospitality but rather the quality. It means that it doesn't matter how much you share with someone as long it is shared with good intentions and in a genuine spirit. There is a Tongan word that expresses the value of giving even if it is small and that word is '*femolimoli*'i.' '*Femolimoli*'i' means, 'sharing your smallness'. In sharing your smallness with someone who is desperate, it will certainly make a huge difference. Giving to someone who is in need is the equivalent with sharing of hospitality. The receiver of such hospitality certainly feels valued because someone is willing to share their love.

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However, in Tongan culture hospitality is not a one way responsibility. It is a two way processes, which means the receiver of hospitality has a responsibility to the giver. They exchange their roles to ensure that hospitality is genuinely provided and served. However, exchanging of hospitality in any given situation is optional. The receiver of hospitality is free either to give back something as a token of appreciation or conveys words of thanks, which denotes a common Tongan saying, "*Ko e koloa 'a e Tonga ko e fakamālō*", which means "The treasure of the Tongans is thanksgiving." Words of thanks for the Tongans are treasures and that is very much part of acknowledging the hospitality that has been offered. Such attitude creates mutual respect between the giver of hospitality and the receiver.

Exchanging of hospitality is a vital part of *vahevahe*. People share their hospitality so that others might be blessed. This concept was and still is vital to the receiving and using of the Bible. Those who learn and study the Bible are givers and receivers. The Tongans give their knowledge of the Bible so that others may be blessed and enriched. They don't withhold their knowledge because the *vahevahe* concept encourages them to give. Through passing on their knowledge the conversation is enriched and the discussion broadened. In the same way, the receiver of knowledge is encouraged to respond by sharing their thoughts as well. In sharing their ideas and thoughts together, it is discovered that no single point of view has the whole truth. Every point of view is important and worth listening to. Exchanging of ideas and knowledge will not only broaden their understanding of the Bible but also challenge the myth of one authentic interpretation. Our interpretation of the Bible is determined by our contexts, and therefore it is a sharing effort rather than one superior opinion. ] ✓

### ***Vahevahe* is Educational**

Because the concept of *vahevahe* encourages sharing of knowledge and exchanging of ideas, it becomes educational. It is educational in a sense that new knowledge and discoveries are opened up for sharing. Freedom of dialogue and open conversation lead into learning new ways of thinking and understanding. It also encourages exploration of new ideas which help the continuation of conversation. While ideas and understandings of individuals are shared, they are also opened at the same time for critique and evaluation. It means no one opinion is allowed to dominate the dialogue in a group discussion. This is the nature of *vahevahe* concept, which is to inspire everyone to share their opinion without fear of criticism. In sharing their opinions together they also learn together at the same time.

The *vahevahe* concept is educational because it generates new learning at all times for those who participate in sharing their ideas and opinions. Usually, that is what happened in receiving and using of the Bible by its readers. They do not only read it but they share their interpretations and open up for critique at the same time. In doing so they are able to learn from one another at the same time and deepen their knowledge about the meaning of a Bible text. They also learn from working together as a group in the midst of their diversity. As they open up for sharing and discussion they slowly build their confidence, which is part of

learning as well. They have the opportunity to learn from one another because that is the nature of sharing. If there is no confidence in sharing then new learning is impossible. *Vahevahe* is educational because it is an open forum for the Bible readers to interpret and critique. Those who participate in such discussions will certainly leave the gathering with new challenges, which deepens their understanding and inspires them in their daily living. They do not only share their opinions together as combination of ideas but they also put them into practice, which is educational. The purpose of any new learning is to deepen understanding and also to encourage new practices which have a positive influence on the lives of the Bible readers.

### Matthew 4:19 and Matthew 28:19

Both the texts of Matthew 4:19 and Matthew 28:19 emphasise the significance of *vahevahe*. The author of this gospel from the outset demonstrates the significance of discipleship, which is a vital part of *vahevahe*. Discipleship takes effect when there is an encounter between the giver of knowledge and the receiver. It is through the sharing of knowledge that someone who is ignorant may be able to learn. Learning happens when there is a desire to share the knowledge that has been acquired. The author of Matthew's gospel portrays Jesus as the source of knowledge for his disciples and his disciples are the recipients of that knowledge. Michael Trainor in his book entitled, *The Beginning of Wisdom: The Teacher and the Disciples in Matthew's Community*, states, "For Matthew, to be a disciple one must always be in relationship to Jesus; one must always be prepared to be taught by the teacher." (p.153) Through Jesus' encounter and dialogue with his disciples there is always an opportunity for new learning, which denotes the concept of *vahevahe*.

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In Matthew 4:19, we have the words of Jesus when he called the first disciples, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." There are three verbs in the phrase that emphasise the significance of Jesus' invitation. Those three verbs are, 'follow, make, and fish.' According to the author of this gospel, 'to follow' (Greek, *akolouthēin*) is a real attribute of a genuine disciple. The disciple is not only a person who answered to Jesus' call but is also someone who will follow him and ready to learn from him. It means the disciple must be ready to leave the old ties in order to be able to follow. This is the picture the author of Matthew's

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gospel is trying to emphasise. The author indicates that disciples left their vocations and families in order to follow Jesus. Apparently, they did not follow him for the sake of following but with a purpose and that purpose is to 'fish for people'. It's clear from the outset that they have a purpose and that purpose is their mission, which is 'to fish for people'. In order for the disciples to be ready for that mission they must be equipped. Jesus has to train them first before they are sending out fulfil their mission. Matthew uses the word 'make' (in Greek *mathēteuo*) to identify Jesus' desire to share his knowledge as part of their preparation. Before they are sending out for his mission he will teach them the way to fulfil it. The using of the word 'make' by the author utters the essence of *vahevahe*. It is an action that shows the mutual intimate relationship between Jesus and his disciples in sharing of knowledge and building of confidence. Jesus who is portrayed as the teacher (Greek, *didaskalos*) is willing to share with his disciples (Greek, *mathetai*) the desired skill. In sharing with the disciples, Jesus equipped them to be ready for their mission.

In Matthew's gospel there are five teaching discourses of Jesus and they are aiming to equip his disciples for their mission in his absence. These teaching discourses are the Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5-7), his teaching about the cost of discipleship (chapter 10), his teaching about the parables of the kingdom (chapter 13), his teaching about forgiveness and reconciliation (Chapter 18), and his teaching about the end of the age (chapters 24-25). These five teaching discourses depict the significant of the *vahevahe* concept as a way of receiving and using of knowledge.

At the end of Matthew's gospel, in chapter 28:19, the author emphasises again the vitality of sharing as a way of resourcing Jesus' disciples to be ready for God's mission. The author demonstrates his intention in the words of the Risen Christ. These words are known as the Great Commission, when the Risen Christ spoke to his disciples, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." (Matthew 28:19) The main focus of the commission is on the word 'make'. He commissions his disciples to go and make disciples of all nations. The words of the Risen Christ are parallel to the words of the earthly Jesus when he called his first disciples in Matthew chapter 4:19. The Risen Christ emphasises to his disciples the importance of discipleship as he did to them in the beginning of their ministry. He shared his skill with

them and therefore it is their turn to share their skill with others. Their primary role is to equip those who would join them later in their mission to be ready as well.

The words of the Risen Christ to his disciples denote again the notion of *vahevahe*. He didn't commission them to preach or heal but rather sharing their knowledge with those who will accept their message. By sharing their skill and experience, others would be confident and ready to take part in God's mission. Because it is a mission that has no boundaries for it is to all nations, therefore, everyone must be well prepared. According to the author of Matthew's gospel, the way for preparation is to share and exchange knowledge. Everyone has to be part of the sharing in order to create understanding, which is the nature of *vahevahe*.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, I would say that *vahevahe* concept is effective but is not in any way perfect. It is not perfect because it has its own weaknesses. For instance, it doesn't have a clear agenda or guideline because everyone has the freedom to speak and express their opinions. Its implementation could lead into debate and argument, especially if there is a controversial issue being discussed. Furthermore, everyone will leave that type of forum frustrated and with no clear conclusion, because there are so many voices to listen to. Despite these weaknesses, I would argue that while *vahevahe* concept is not perfect, it is certainly effective, because it enables dialogue and conversation to happen among people. It gives the liberty for Bible readers to speak and to share their thoughts. Its purpose is to build confidence among them through engaging in open dialogue. This form of communication helps to the receiving and using of the Bible on the first place. Evidently, if there was no commitment to share the Bible, its importance would certainly have diminished in the community. Fortunately this did not happen, which is why we are here today.

The first receivers and users of the Bible successfully utilised it in the same way as they shared their obligations and ideas. ~~Everyone has something to share and it is their duty to share it with others.~~