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CHRISTOLOGICAL TITLES

LESSON TWELVE

WORD

“TATA JESUS IS BANGALA!”

“‘TATA JESUS IS BANGALA!’ declares the Reverend every Sunday at the end of his sermon. More and more, mistrusting his interpreters, he tries to speak in Kikongo. He throws back his head and shouts these words in the sky, while the lambs sit scratching themselves in wonder. ‘Bangala’ means something precious and dear. But the way he pronounces it, it means the poisonwood tree. Praise the Lord, hallelujah, my friends! For Jesus will make you itch like nobody’s business.” Thus, daughter Adah sums up the disparity in her father’s preaching.

This paragraph was written by Barbara Kingsolver in her book The Poisonwood Bible. It is the story of the Price family who pilgrimaged from Bethlehem, Georgia to the Belgian Congo as missionaries in 1959. Reverend Nathan Price, autocratic and self-righteous, was an old school missionary who firmly believed that the gospel of salvation coupled with Americanization was the only viable means to transform a tribal people into a civilized society. Aghast rather than respectful of their customs, not only was he unable to speak their language but failed to comprehend the significance and beauty of an intricate social system that he could only view as barbaric.

As an uncompromising Baptist minister, Price held firm that salvation required baptism, and baptism necessitated being immersed. The only water suitable for the sacrament of repentance was the river. Repeatedly the villagers would flee rather than flock when summoned to the river bank. It took many a month for Price to realize that several children had been devoured by crocodiles that lurked in those forbidden murky

waters. Inflexible, even with this discovery, he remained relentless in his pursuit to baptize offspring in the hellish river. What well meaning parent would place a son or daughter in such danger for any god; especially one with joyful hallelujahs could bring upon them an unforgiving rash?

Coinciding the gospel of Jesus Christ to diverse cultures is a perennial issue for the church. Thankfully we have matured in recent decades with mainline Protestant denominations having learned to be respectful, recognizing that the traditions and customs of others can enlighten our own concept of the Deity. Nevertheless, we must realize cultural misunderstanding of the personhood of Jesus began during the early stages of church growth.

Initially, the church was absent of schism and misinterpretations caused by the clashing of dissimilar societies. The church was birthed with Jewish Christians preaching to fellow Jews that Jesus is the Messiah. They spoke a common language and shared an identical heritage. Preaching the message of Jesus, there was no confusion when the orator used the terms Son of David, Son of Man, Prince of Peace, Messiah. Could this man from Nazareth truly be the Savior of Israel was the only question upon the lips of the hearers. The prophecies of Ezekiel, Isaiah, Ezra, Jeremiah, Nehemiah could be lavishly quoted without interpretation. Those gathered in the synagogue only had to determine if the child of Bethlehem fulfilled the words of these esteemed sages.

As the church matured, evangelists went forth from the center of Jewish society – Jerusalem – and into the distant cities of the Greeks. The residents of Antioch, Laodicea, Alexandria did not speak Hebrew and were unschooled in the religion of Judaism. The sermons of Jerusalem fell on deaf ears to the residents of Corinth. The rite of circumcision, Mosaic Law, a prophet named Daniel, and the ascension of the Son of God were meaningless expressions to the followers of Zeus. For Jesus to be comprehended the message of Jerusalem needed to be spoken in the language of Rome. Residing in Ephesus in 100 C.E., this was John's dilemma as he set forth to write what became the fourth gospel.

John made a number of modifications. The most noted is his use of the concept of "word," a term familiar to both Greek and Jewish philosophies. In the Jewish community "word" was a unit of energy. It did things. Throughout the Old Testament there are references to the power of God's spoken word, the most notable being the creation story.

Throughout the Old Testament we read of a God who is anthropomorphic; that is, described in very human terms, having hands and feet and walking. Later Judaism greatly modified this concept, presenting a God who was transcendent. Thus in the Targums, the Aramaic translation of Jewish scripture, the word “Memra,” meaning “the Word of God,” was substituted for the anthropomorphic Deity. Now, for example, Isaiah does not speak that God’s hand laid the foundation of the earth, but “By my Memra I have founded the earth...” (Isa 48:13) The result is that the word Memra, the Word of God, is scattered hundreds of times throughout the Targums. Thus “word” became descriptive of both the power and presence of God.

The Greeks also had a concept of the meaning of “word” that was reflective of a god. The Greek word “Logos” has two meanings. It means “word,” but it also means “reason” or “mind.” Logos was incorporated into the writings of the Stoic philosophers to define a god who created and controlled an orderly and dependable universe. This established that both the Greeks and the Jews understood a dynamic relationship between the meaning of “word” and the attributes of a god.

John chose logos as the conjunctive point between Greek and Jewish thought. Without altering the message of Jewish Christians he could present the gospel message to a Greek audience in terms that could be comprehended. Jesus was logos, the word of God. Jesus was logos, the power of God. Jesus was logos, the mind of God. Jesus as logos was the true representation of God. As such, Jesus is God. John immediately established this doctrine in his prologue, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” (Jn 1:1) Ascribing to Jesus the Christological title “Word” John avowed the God of Jerusalem is the same God of Ephesus, in a vocabulary that both Greeks and Jews could comprehend.

Oliver Wendell Holmes once wrote, “Language is the blood of the soul into which thoughts run and out of which they grow.” Logos became the lifeblood of a universal Christ.

Soli Deo Gloria,

Ron Love