

Jesus, the Word

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Evangelical Free Church of Keokuk, Iowa, December 15, 2013

This series of sermons during the Advent season, “Hope in His Name,” is focusing on the different names applied to Jesus in the Scriptures. The New Testament, as you know, applies many names or titles to Jesus, each of which carries its own cluster of meanings.

- He is the *Christ*, the “anointed one” or Messiah (*mashiah*), the vindicator of Israel, the fulfillment of God’s purpose in calling the nation of Israel to serve him and extend his blessing to all people.
- He is called *Son of God*, another title of Messiah indicating one who rules in God’s name.
- He is designated *Son of man*, a heavenly figure described in the Book of Daniel who receives an everlasting dominion.
- He is called *Lord* (*kyrios*), the supreme authority, a title applied to God himself in the Greek Old Testament as a substitute for the divine name, Yahweh or Jehovah.
- He is the *Savior* (*soter*), the one who is to deliver or rescue his people from oppression.

Interestingly, several of those titles — *Lord*, *Savior*, *Son of God* — were titles claimed by the Caesars, the Roman emperors. So when the apostle Paul applies them to Jesus in the introduction to his Letter to the Romans, he’s challenging the totalitarian authority of the political ruler of Rome. And when you and I speak of Jesus as our Lord and Savior, we’re declaring that we take our executive orders from Jesus Christ, and not from someone sitting in an oval office in Washington, D.C.

Finally, of course, Jesus is named *Jesus*. *Yeshua*’ is the same name as *Joshua* in the Old Testament. In the Bible as a whole at least sixteen men have that name, in one form or another — from Joshua, who was Moses’s successor, through Hosea the prophet, to Hoshea one of the last kings of Israel, to Joshua the high priest mentioned in the Book of Zechariah, to Jesus called Justus who was one of Paul’s fellow workers. The name comes from the Hebrew word meaning “deliverance, rescue, salvation,” which is why Joseph was told (in Matthew 1:21), “You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” It wasn’t an unusual name in Bible times, and as you know, *Jesus* is a common name today in the Hispanic community.

My particular assignment here, though, is to discuss what it means for our hope when Jesus is called “the Word,” the Word of God. Now, there are only two places in the New Testament where Jesus is expressly described as “the Word.” Both are in the writings of the apostle John. In neither of these places does the name Jesus occur, but we know from the context he is the one being spoken about. The first occurrence is at the beginning of the Gospel According to John.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. . . .

The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not. He came to his own home, and his own people received him not. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father (John 1:1-5, 9-14).

The second occurrence is at the other end of the New Testament, in the Revelation to John, chapter 19:

Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! He who sat upon it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems; and he has a name inscribed which no one knows but himself. He is clad in a robe

dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, followed him on white horses. From his mouth issues a sharp sword with which to smite the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron; he will tread the wine press of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has a name inscribed, King of kings and Lord of lords (Revelation 19:11-16).

What is John saying about Jesus, in referring to him as the Word? To begin with, we need to remind ourselves that the New Testament uses two different terms that are translated into our English Bible as “word.” The first of these is *rhema*, which refers to spoken or written words — the words we use in language. For example, that’s the term Paul uses when he declares, in Romans 10, “The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart (that is, the word of faith which we preach) . . .” Paul is referring to the words of Scripture — he’s actually quoting here from Moses, in Deuteronomy 30 — and explaining how it’s necessary to communicate the message of Christ in spoken words, in teaching and preaching.

But when John speaks of Jesus as the Word of God he uses a different term, *logos*. That term can refer to spoken words as well, but it has a much deeper meaning — actually, a wealth of meanings. To understand what he’s saying about Jesus we need to unpack that term *logos*, and that exploration takes us into several areas of thought.

First of all, we use that term today as a suffix to indicate a body of knowledge. When we speak of *biology*, or *archaeology*, or *theology*, we mean a body of knowledge about living things, or about ancient things, or about divinity. The *logos* is comprehensive understanding of a subject. When Jesus is called the Word, or *Logos*, we know we can expect to be enlightened by deep knowledge, just as John says in his Gospel: “The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world.” The earliest account of a Christian worship service comes from the second century. In this document, when the leader prays over the broken bread of the Lord’s Supper he thanks God “for the life and *knowledge* you have revealed through Jesus, your servant.” We don’t often associate the elements of Holy Communion, representing Christ’s body and blood, with the idea of *knowledge*; but that was an emphasis in the early church.

When we think about hope in Jesus’s name, we might want to consider how our commitment to Christ motivates us to explore many areas of knowledge — the sciences, the fine arts, economics, and the skills of political and social interaction — and to critique these fields of knowledge with a broad and profound application of the biblical world view. That, of course, requires us also to apply ourselves to more than a commonplace or superficial understanding of Scripture and Christian teaching. Without this knowledge we, as Christians, can’t effectively engage the destructive trends and distorted world view of our culture. As Peter wrote in his Second Letter, “Always be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you” (2 Peter 3:15). So Jesus, as the Word, is profound knowledge of truths concerning the universe we live in. As the apostle Paul wrote to the Ephesians, God has made Jesus “head over all things for the church” (Ephesians 1:22), and that includes our intellectual efforts. We need to expand our field of vision.

Along with this, Jesus as the Word of God provides us with *logic*, or *reason* (and you can see the relation between the term *logos* and our English word “logic”). We’re all familiar with Romans 12:1 where Paul appeals to us “to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” But those words translated “spiritual worship” are *logikein latreian*, our “logical service,” our “reasonable service.” Because Jesus is the *Logos*, the Word, his people are enabled to think *logically* about issues they encounter. We do not have to swallow the illogical concepts being foisted upon us by our degenerate culture, such as the idea of “homosexual marriage.” Reason tells us that some things are *just plain stupid*, regardless of how “politically correct” they may be. For that ability to think logically, we can thank Jesus who is the Word. In him we have the hope of transcending the falsehoods that bombard us each day through media, the educational system, government policy, or even incomplete or distorted understandings of our own faith. As Eugene Peterson’s *Message Bible* paraphrases Paul in 1 Corinthians 14:20, “Only mature and well-exercised intelligence can save you from falling into gullibility.”

Now let’s go even deeper into this name, the *Logos*, that John applies to Jesus. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made.” Jesus, as the *Logos* or Word, is the power of creation through whom all things came to be. John, of course, is echoing

Genesis 1 in which God creates all things by speaking a word: *yehi 'or*, “Let there be light.” Psalm 33 picks up this thought: “By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth” (Psalm 33:6). The Letter to the Hebrews begins, “In these last days [God] has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power” (Hebrews 1:2-3). The writer goes on to state, “we understand that the world was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was made out of things which do not appear” (Hebrews 11:3). This is a profound aspect of Jesus the Word that exceeds our ability to grasp its full meaning.

I am reminded of the story of three baseball umpires who were debating which of them was the best. “I’m the best,” declared the first. “I calls ‘em as I sees ‘em.” The second replied, “I’m better than that. I calls ‘em as they are.” The third finally chimed in, “I have you both beat. Till I calls ‘em, *they ain’t*.” That’s an illustration of how God’s creative Word works. But how can a Word create something? We can only take a stab at this.

First of all, let’s think about a word as a piece of *information*. Anthropologist Gregory Bateson defined information as “a difference that makes a difference.” Information exists in the *difference* between one thing and another, because there’s no information in undifferentiated sameness. (There’s no information on a blank sheet of paper, except at the *edges*.) So, in the creation, God created the first information when he divided, or differentiated, the light from the darkness — when he said, “Let there be light.” This is the binary, or digital, principle that’s the basis of how computers work; the byte is either turned ON or OFF, there’s no in-between state. God, in other words, creates his universe digitally. The Word of God is the digital difference that creates information, and information is the basis of all things that exist — every cell of living creatures, everything that’s made up of molecules and atoms and subatomic particles that differ from one another. When John uses that term *Logos* as a name for Jesus, he’s affirming that the reality of Jesus is the basis for our existence, and indeed for the existence of this vast universe of two hundred billion galaxies.

That’s one angle on what it means when Jesus is named the Word, and here’s another. Physicists wonder what “stuff” is really made of. We think of matter as “hard stuff,” but in truth matter is mostly space between the subatomic particles that make it up. And those particles themselves consist of mysterious entities with names like “quarks” or “gluons.” But what are *they* made of? One theory, called “string theory,” suggests that all these entities are the product of vibrating “strings,” vibrating in more than the four dimensions we’re familiar with, and these “strings” aren’t made up of anything else — they’re just *vibrations*. Now, when we use words we speak through the vibration of our vocal cords. Could we consider that these hypothetical vibrating “strings,” from which everything else is constructed, are a kind of *word*? At the basis of all reality is the Word of God, the Word that became incarnate in Jesus Christ: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.” And that Word is ever active, as Hebrews states, “upholding the universe by his word of power.”

What, then, is our greatest hope in Jesus, the Word? It is the hope, and indeed the certainty, that *in the end nothing can withstand the universal purpose of God*, which is the renewal of this good creation that has been spoiled, on our planet, by the ignorance and disobedience of mankind. How can any power oppose that which is the foundation of all reality? Jesus, the Word made flesh, reveals and demonstrates the activity of God that establishes all that exists. He does this in his teaching, in the knowledge and understanding he imparts to those who belong to him. He does this through his death on the cross, which cancels out the falsehoods that have gripped humankind and kept God hidden. He does this through rising from the dead, being revealed as the living Word through whom the Father is reconstituting his creation, “the new heavens and the new earth.” John, in the Revelation, captures this hope in his brilliant image of the Word of God: “His eyes are like a flame of fire . . . He is clad in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. . . . From his mouth issues a sharp sword with which to smite the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron; he will tread the wine press of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has a name inscribed, King of kings and Lord of lords.”

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