

A Devotion

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“In this new life, it doesn’t matter if you are a Jew or a Gentile, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbaric, uncivilized, slave, or free. Christ is all that matters, and he lives in all of us.” *Colossians. 3:11 (NLTse)*

Barbaric did not have the meaning for Paul that it has for us today. Today we live under the influence of Social Darwinism, and we associate *barbaric* tribes with backward, underdeveloped, primitive, poor – or we use *barbaric* to mean violent/cruel. The latter was the meaning of *Scythian* (NLT *uncivilized*); *barbaric* did not imply fierce/crude.

Nor did *barbaric* imply backward or underdeveloped – in fact the *barbaric* peoples in Paul’s day could be living an identical way of life to Paul himself.

So what did *barbaric* mean? The idea was simple: it referred to anyone who could not speak the dominant global language of Greek.

Today we have the saying “it sounds like Greek to me” – meaning we can’t make any sense of it. But the Greeks said, “It sounds like *bar bar* to me, I can’t make any sense of it.” From this sound *bar bar* they coined the word *barbaric* to describe any foreign language. So Paul is simply saying that people don’t need to understand the language of the Empire, the language of international commerce, the language of high-class education. Christ can be understood, and can change lives, even among people who only speak languages that sound to us like *bar bar bar*.

This verse came to life for me in Burkina Faso when I began living among the Nanerige Senufo people, whose language was unknown to the outside world. Before settling into a Nanerige village, I first learned a local West African trade language. Surprisingly, that language is still called Barbara or Bambara. The ancient Greek word *barbar* has been adopted in North Africa to describe the tribal languages of African peoples, so the language I was learning was still called *barbar*!

But that language was only a stepping stone into the Nanerige language – and I was surprised to discover that Nanerige was, in turn, also described by

outsiders as *barbar*. In other words everyone is still calling each other's languages *barbar* today just as they did in the Apostle Paul's day.

So I always drew comfort and encouragement from Paul's statement 2,000 years ago, for two reasons:

First, it remains true that Christ is all that matters, and he can live in people and change their lives even if they do not speak the language of the empire but rather speak a language that sounds to everyone else like *bar bar bar*.

Secondly, it remains true that one person's language (and we might add: their whole world view) is always *bar bar* to a speaker of another language, regardless of the socio-economic status of either side. English is only *bar bar* to the many language groups on the southern edge of the Sahara Desert. French is only *bar bar* to most people in those villages. Even the local African trade language is still *Bambara* to the Nanerige people who need the Good News of reconciliation with their Creator through the mediator Jesus.

When we settled among the Nanerige and learned their language, we found them to be receptive to our message because we had taken the time—and made the effort—to set aside the *bar bar* of other languages and to learn their own beautiful and sophisticated Nanerige language.

To be committed to doing mission in the language of the people is not a handicap, not some kind of hurdle to get over, not some kind of unfortunate interruption to the real business of doing mission. Rather, learning a people's language is the one door through which the Gospel *must* enter their world. Anything less will remain *bar bar* to their hearts and minds.

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