

The Chinese Term Debate as Presented by Geo. Lillegard
and Examined by the Synodical Conference.

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"The Term Question, like the poor, we have with us always. It has been "settled" time and again-by papal decrees, by learned debates, by ingenious compromises, by solemnly drawn up agreements." (Lillegard, 1) George Lillegard uses these words to begin his analysis of the Term Question, or if you will, the Term Debate. At first this appears to be a rather biased and harsh statement on the part of Lillegard. Yet, when one considers the whole point of this controversy, it is easy to see why he would make such a statement.

The point at issue in the Term Debate was what word Bible translators would use for the name of God in the Chinese language. The problem did not center around the translation of Lord (Adonai in Hebrew and Kyrios in Greek) into Chinese. As Lillegard points out, "In most languages a word conveying the idea of 'lordship' is to be found." (Lillegard, 3) There was not a problem bringing the word YHWH (Jehovah) into Chinese. Normally a transliteration was done for this word. The focus of this debate was how the translators handle the word God (Elchim in Hebrew and Theos in Greek). The problem here is that the translators used two words to express the word God. Both Shang-Di and Shen are found in the Chinese Bible when referring to God as translated from the Hebrew and Greek. This differs from how the translators handled the word for Lord. In the case of translating Lord from Hebrew and Greek they used one word, but for God they used two.

The translators justified this on the basis that Shang-Di, which is the proper name of the supreme god in the Chinese pantheon, is used as the name of the one true God. They then used the word Shen, the generic Chinese word for god, in the places where false

gods are being referred to. This is where a number of people had a problem.

Some people may look upon this whole controversy as insignificant. On the surface it appears to be arguing over terms and nothing else. At best it ^{seems} is a minor footnote in the history of the Synodical Conference that has no bearing on what we do today. This is an incorrect assessment of the Term Debate. The question of how to translate "God" or "Lord" or "Messiah" has been around for as long as people have been translating the Bible into foreign languages. It is something we have to wrestle with each time we translate the Scriptures into a language in which it does not already exist. This is not only a question of historical importance, but one which has a relevancy we still feel today.

George Lillegard realized this, which is why he wrote his history of the Term Question. He looks at the problems associated with using two terms to translate "God", and also comes down pretty hard on those who use "Shang-Di" to translate "God".

Lillegard rejects the notion that it is good to use two names for God on the basis of the usage of Elohim and Theos in the original languages. "They are generic terms. These words are, in the Bible, applied to both the true God and false gods, without any distinction in form and spelling, the connection alone determining which is meant in each case." (Lillegard, 6) To support this he points to the First Commandment. "I am YHWH, thy elohim--thou shalt have no other elohim before me." (Lillegard, 8) The Chinese Bible rendered this, "I am Je-ho-hwa, thy Shang-Di, thou shalt have no other Shen before me." This type of a translation appears to have

been a compromise between the Shang-Di and Shen groups. These two groups had been around since the time the Catholics first arrived in China hundreds of years ago, and by the time Lutheran and Protestant missionaries arrived, there was still no set word to use for translating "God" into Chinese. Disagreements arose among the missionaries as to which word, Shang-Di or Shen was best. Lillegard has the impression that the idea to use both was a bad compromise. Many times he refers to the use of both terms as unionistic. I tend to agree with him, for reasons which will become evident when we examine the use of the word "Shang-Di".

It appears that most missionaries, including some from the Missouri Synod, didn't have a big problem using two words for the translation of "God". A man by the name of Rev. Soothill says, "Neither of these terms (Shang-Di or Shen) can possibly convey in itself the concept of God as we see it today." (Lillegard, 9)

This is a weak argument when we look at Scripture. Would we know that God is a loving God if John had not told us "God is love"? Does the word elohim convey the idea that God is "a jealous God"? Does theos, by itself, tell us what God did to save us? Of course not. We need to look at Scripture as a whole to get to know the qualities and attributes of God, not just at the words elohim and theos. So I find myself in agreement with Lillegard when he says there should only be one word used to translate elohim and theos, both because of the generic nature of the words and because those in favor of using both never advanced a compelling reason for doing so.

This brings us to the question which missionaries, the Missouri

Synod, and the Synodical Conference faced, which term is best suited to translate God, Shang-Di or Shen? ^{Pastor} Mr. Lillegard, himself a missionary to China from 1912-16 and 1921-28, offers some valuable insight into the meanings of each term. It is important ^{to} we look at each term along with its strengths and weaknesses before we can have a real appreciation for the Synodical Conference Term Debate and what sparked it, the 1929 Missouri Synod Resolution.

We will begin by examining the term Shang-Di. Once again, this is the proper name of the chief god of the Chinese pantheon. This is ~~also~~ the only real advantage to this term. Remember, China is a polytheistic society. The people do believe in many gods, as they believe in demons. So some translators looked upon using Shang-Di as a necessity. They hoped to divest Shang-Di of its pagan meaning so when the Chinese heard it, they would think of the one true God, the God above all other gods.

Ironically, Lillegard looks upon this as one of the weakest points of the term. Because Shang-Di is "The distinctive name of the chief god in both Confusianism and Taoism" (Lillegard, 12), he looks upon it as comparable as Paul using the term Baal for God in Syria, or Jupiter in Rome. Of course, Paul did not do this, so why would we want to start doing it in the case of the Chinese Bible? As Lillegard says, "Paul could not have made the Greeks realize that he was preaching a new god to them if he had used the familiar names, Zeus, etc." (Lillegard, 13) Another knock against the use of the term Shang-Di is how certain missionaries tried to apply the name to that of the one true God. "But then, what about the many who claim that Shang-Di, although now the name of an idol, was

originally the name of the true God, and can be, therefore, properly applied to the true God?" (Lillegard, 14) Some would even say that Shang-Di was the name of the God Melchizedek worshiped in Genesis. Lillegard points out that there is no linguistic evidence of this, "Missionaries may hold any theories they please with regard to what Shang-Di was originally, but they have no right to force those theories upon the Bible." (Lillegard, 14) These are the main arguments for and against the use of Shang-Di. From my research everything else that was said was nothing more than variations on these themes.

The term "Shen" also comes with a certain amount of baggage. The main objection translators had to this word was the generic character of it. Was such a general word a suitable and fitting name for the God of the universe? Could the generic nature of the word make the Chinese think of the one true God instead of one of the many gods they had?

These are invalid arguments against the term Shen. Remember that *elohim* and *theos* are not proper names of God, they are generic terms that apply to God and false gods alike. As far as using such a word in a polytheistic setting, we already say that Paul used *theos* among the Greeks.

The strengths of the term "Shen" are worth observing. This term is generally faithful to the usage of the terms *elohim* and *theos* in the Bible as far as its generic nature goes. The same phrase can be used for the one true God and idols, just as Scripture does. Also, "It has long been applied to the true God, even in the Shang-Di Bibles." (Lillegard, 23) So there was historical

president for using Shen even among its opponents. Lillegard even points out that there are ways to capitalize in the Chinese language. A word can have a space before it, or it can be raised above the rest of the line it is in. In view of these facts, Lillegard felt, "There is no valid objections that can be urged against Shen, the only word which adequately translates the words Elohim, Theos, and God." (Lillegard, 24) It is obvious to see that Lillegard preferred the term Shen over Shang-Di.

The Missouri Synod did not look upon this controversy in the same way. This is evident by their 1929 convention Report to Committee 21D. Because of the importance of this report, the fact that it is the focal point of the Synodical Conference's involvement in the matter, I will reproduce this proceeding in its entirety.

"A controversy arose among our missionaries regarding the use of the names Shangdi and Shen to designate the true God. A number of them were opposed to the use of the name Shangdi, which originally meant the "Supreme Ruler," but is now used as a name of a specific idol. There also entered into this dispute the question whether according to Scripture the name of a heathen idol could be used to designate the one true God. this controversy became so bitter personally that it threatened the success of our mission-work in China. The board submitted these questions to the faculty in St. Louis, which gave its opinion that it is not unscriptural to use the name Shangdi. When exception was taken to the opinion of the faculty, the faculty gave the matter further study, but each time came to the same conclusion. When all efforts failed, the Board felt compelled to take action in order to bring about peace and reached the following decision: "If for reasons of conscience you cannot tolerate the term Shangdi, we will make no further efforts to hold you in the service of the mission; we grant you permission to come home as soon as you decide to do so.

Your Committee is convinced that the Foreign Mission Board has done everything possible properly to settle this matter and recommends that the action of the Board be approved. It expresses the hope that the missionaries will abide by this decision." (Proceedings of the Thirty-Fourth Regular Convention, 196)

The Missouri Synod adopted this report and Shang-Di was the official term for God as far as the Synod was concerned. There were those who did not agree with this. Voices were raised against this report. So the Missouri Synod brought this question before the Synodical Conference. Missouri was looking for approval, but the 1932 Synodical Conference found it best to wait until Missouri had a chance to meet again in convention and try to reach an agreement on their own. So ratification was deferred until a future date by the Synodical Conference.

Things only got worse for Missouri in the Chinese mission. Two men, apparently Rev. Theo. Hanssen and Rev. E. F. Melcher (Synodical Conference, 1936) were removed from the mission field because they made it publicly known they disagreed with Missouri in this regard. They then charged Missouri with "false doctrine and practice" and brought their case before the Synodical Conference. The Synodical Conference, in 1936, admitted that they would need more time to examine this question. So they turned it over to committee. Interestingly enough, the Synodical Conference did listen to the arguments set for by Rev. Hanssen, but found no basis to charge Missouri with false doctrine.

In 1938 [†]The Synodical Conference again was asked to deal with the protests lodged by Rev. Hanssen. This time the delegates passed two resolutions. The first was that they appoint a committee to

look into this matter. The second was that they withhold ratification of the 1929 Missouri report until further study could be made.

The Committee, upon looking at the whole situation and the arguments for both Shang-Di and Shen, came up with these four recommendations, which I will paraphrase.

1. It is impossible to render a unanimous decision because the missionaries do not agree in their testimonies. Also the advocates of Shang-Di have changed their story regarding the meaning of the term, from "Supreme God" to equivalent of elohim or theos.
2. Because 1 is true, the committee has no choice but to only state the principals which will help guide to a God pleasing solution.
3. Because nothing is spelled out for us in Scripture, the choice of translating elohim or theos is an adiaphoran. Scripture does tell us not to diminish God's glory, cloud the truth of God, or cause offense with our choice of terms.
4. Our one mission to the Chinese is to clearly proclaim the truth of God.

There are two more points made, but only four of the members of the Committee could subscribe to them. They are paraphrased as follows.

5. In theory, an idol name can be emptied of its idol connotation, practically this is nearly impossible to do. So the proper name of an idol should not be used as a name for the one God.
6. On the basis of the evidence presented, the use of Shang-Di does not conform with the principles stated above.

Three members of the committee felt that if Shang-Di could be divested of its heathen connotation, it could be used. So even among the Committee appointed by the Synodical Conference, there was not a unanimous conclusion reached. The three men who did not agree to points 5 and 6 were Dr. Pfotenhauer, Rev. Heerboth, and

Prof. Graebner. The four men who subscribed to all six points were Prof. J.P. Meyer, E. E. Kowalke, H. M. Tjernagel, and S. C. Ylvisaker. All seven men agreed on point 7 which is paraphrased as follows.

7. We render no ruling and refer it back to the Missouri Synod.

Even though this appeared settled by the Synodical Conference's point of view in 1938, this debate still popped up a few years later. In 1940 Pastor Hanssen again lodged a complaint against the Missouri Synod, claiming they drew out the settling of the manner. The Synodical Conference agreed that he should take it up with Missouri and that the Synodical Conference should stay out of those talks, at least until Missouri met in convention to discuss the 1938 decision.

In 1944 George Lillegard made an appeal to the Synodical Conference to look into the fact Missouri had not changed its practice of using Shang-Di in China. The Synodical Conference left this decision in the hands of Missouri once again. The Conference recognized that Missouri was open to talk about the matter. Lillegard must have learned the same thing, for he withdrew his memorial. The one real point of interest in this is that a missionary named Gebhardt was mentioned by Lillegard as having been kicked out of his mission for refusing to use the term Shang-Di. Missouri denied this and demanded an apology from Lillegard, but at the same time agreed to meet with him privately to iron out their differences. Whether this indicates Missouri's guilt in the matter of ^{Pastor} Mr. Gebhardt or not would be an interesting debate.

The whole Terms Debate was an emotional topic, as is proved by the 1944 memorial by Lillegard. This, by the way, was the last time the Term Debate was mentioned in the Synodical Conference's proceedings. Missouri eventually decided to leave the whole decision in the hands of their missionaries, who should understand the Chinese language better than we do here in the states.

My personal feelings on the Term Debate was that it was rather drawn out. However, when we put ourselves in the shoes of the Synodical Conference, we can understand the difficulties they had. We in America just don't have a grasp of the Chinese language, so how can we be certain that the name for God we chose to use in our translation is the one which conveys the idea we want to convey. Personally, Lillegard's analysis of the whole issue does come off as extremely biased. He seems to be writing with a chip on his shoulder. He obviously felt strongly about this matter. I agree with the points he made and also feel Shen is the better word for God in the Chinese translation. The generic quality of the word most closely resembles the usage of elohim and theos. I also agree with the Synodical Conference Committee on the first four points of their 1938 resolution. Points Five and six are valid and I do agree with them. I do not agree with the three dissenters. There ^{in my mind} ~~is~~ ^{is} no way that using a name for a pagan ^g God can be acceptable practice. It opens the door to syncretism and a total misunderstanding of who God truly is. The majority made the right decision rejecting Shang-Di, and were also correct to phrase that rejection in a brotherly, loving way.

Evidence
for this?

If there is a lesson we can learn from the Term Debate, may it

be patience when dealing with something we know little about. It took the Synodical Conference years to render a judgment, because they realized that they just didn't know a lot about the Chinese language. May we always follow their example and practice patience and love in moments of debate among our brothers and do all things to the glory of God.

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