

Allowing Jesus to Be Reborn in Weddings (And Other Ceremonies)

Hour Four of a Four Hour Seminar by Rev. Tongpan Prometta

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Today we're talking about communicating the gospel by using the best things found in local culture. It is important to be able to share in a way people understand. As I shared earlier, we are not using local language or tradition or cultural forms simply to preserve them but we use them because they clearly express the gospel in ways people can understand. When we are reborn in Jesus Christ we are given a new set of values from God. We have been changed from the old to the new. The new set of values are explained in the Bible and come from God.

I would like to focus on one of our cultural traditions in which we need to allow the gospel to speak. This is the wedding ceremony. We need to understand that this is a holy union which was ordained by God. The Bible tells us how God created Eve to be one with Adam. For us as God's children, some of the traditional rituals related to the Thai wedding ceremony do not express the new values we have in Christ. There is one particular part of the ceremony which we, as God's children in Thailand, need to change starting today.

What am I talking about? The very expensive dowry¹. This is a problem in our churches in the Udon area. In the past we used to hear the saying, "The only daughter requires the most expensive fields and a son-in-law who is a teacher."² In other words, an only daughter demanded a high bride price. Today it is not that way anymore. Today it has nothing to do with only daughter or one of twenty daughters. They're all expensive! Minimum 100,000 baht³. I've wondered how my son is ever going to get the money to get married. Actually I would like him to get married. We are seeing this too often now. Two young people, each from Christian families, are interested in each other and want to get married but the parents can't agree about the money.

I would like to have us change this. Those of us who have eligible sons and daughters should look at what is best for them and not say, "If you don't have money, don't come talking to us." When this happens two young Christians can't get married! Brothers and sisters, children of God marrying fellow children of God is something that is glorifying to God. Take a look at the days of Noah. People had stopped thinking about God. People who followed God and those who did not follow God married each other. These were signs of the depravity of those times. We should encourage our children to marry other Christians.

Look at what is best for our sons and daughters. Look for that which would help our child, and be best for them in a prospective spouse. Don't just allow money to be the deciding factor. This has happened too much among Christian families in Udon. They ask to marry but don't have enough to pay the high bride price. In the end a wife is found from a family who are not believers.

If it was me, I would not allow this to happen. I have two sons. One son is already married to a Christian. I've told the second, "If you don't find a Christian girl, I won't have her. We're children of God and we should find you a spouse who is also a child of God." "Are there any?" my son asked. I told him, "You just wait and I'll take you where you can meet some of them." He can meet them as friends, get to know them. If he doesn't like anyone there, no problem. There are many out there. We not getting engaged at this point! Wait until my son finds the right one. I'm not trying to advertise my son here, today. I'm just saying we should encourage our children to find Christian spouses.

A Christian Wedding is a beautiful experience. If you have a son-in-law or a daughter-in-law who is also a follower of Jesus you have real happiness. If you are a Christian and the first thing you think about is money you have not changed from the world's point of view. This is not living as a child of God according to what the scripture teaches.

Farangs⁴ don't have this bridal price tradition. None at all. According to their tradition, the father of the bride has to find the money to have the wedding and do everything. We don't have to go as far as that. But don't go overboard with a price of 100,000 baht cash and a solid gold necklace weighing 75 grams⁵. Don't set prices that way. Talk with the groom's family and ask, "What can you afford?" and negotiate in a friendly way. I'd like us to see people as more important than money. As Christians we should be able to talk things through.

In regards to the ceremony we should not let society dictate everything that we do. We do not need to have alcohol or tobacco involved. When my son married there was no alcohol. We just had an ordinary service. Some people say, "But that's what is expected." Expected or not, I don't do it. We need to remember we are doing this for the Lord and to be able to clearly communicate Christ to others. Some people complain that if you are going to have a party with good Isaan food you've got to have alcohol there. I say drinking Pepsi or Cola is enough.

Some people don't think about it and have an expensive wedding - even up to 100,000 baht. When it's all over they have a huge debt. Some couples who are starting to send their kids to school are still paying off their wedding! That is no good. That is the kind of worldly value that we as Christians need to counter. I want you to recognize and understand this.

Whenever we have a Christian youth gathering we should send out letters of invitation all around. Our denomination has an annual youth camp. The purpose of this gathering is that our Christian young people can meet each other, fellowship together, study the word and give glory to God in choosing a Christian life partner. If we don't do this our young people will all go their separate ways. Don't expect your young people to bring others into your own church and marry them. It doesn't happen.

Some people say, "Well, if they get married to a non-believer they can share their faith with them later." That is extremely difficult. If it does happen it is rare.

The marriage ceremonies that most churches practice are held in a church building but in our group we use the traditional forms. We meet in homes. People sit on the floor mats around the bride and groom. We use the Isaan cultural traditions. However we use the scripture as the teaching tool. I would like to share a portion of this service with you. The bride and groom are seated and hold their hands in the wai⁶ position.

(At this point Tongpa chanted the first few lines from the Isaan Christian wedding ceremony and everyone applauded).

When there is a break in the teaching everyone is to call out, "Thanks be to God!" We want to give God the glory during this ceremony. Now the bride and groom are to give thanks to their parents. (Tongpan started to chant the next section of the ceremony where the young people thank their parents for raising them).

At this point the bride and groom bow down to their parents and the parents give their children some words of wisdom and blessing. This is a Thai ceremony but we take what is good from it and use it. We don't want to make it farang style.

Now comes the scriptural teaching about being a good daughter-in-law or a son-in-law. (Tongpan chants the next section starting with Genesis - again to loud applause).

Brothers and sisters, what do you think of that? Most people who are raised in a westernized form of Christianity will not want to have anything to do with this. They will say it isn't Christian. However, the scriptural teaching is very easy to understand this way. Most people who have seen a ceremony like this ask to have theirs done in the same way. Even those who are not believers ask! In the past, no Thai Buddhist would ever want to do a wedding in a westernized Christian way. But they are interested in doing their ceremony this way because the meaning is so clear. I want you to understand that we do the wedding this way so that we can clearly communicate the gospel, so that the good news of Jesus can be easily understood.

When we hold a ceremony this way we can share about God. 1) There is no alcohol involved. 2) We talk about God. People who come say it is terrific. Those who are not Christians want us to do a ceremony for them the same way. Whoever has a daughter or son who want to be married in this Isaan traditional way to glorify God please write to me. I will be happy to come. However, the young couple must have some teaching from the scriptures beforehand.

This way is very Thai, not like a foreigner's wedding. We've done this many times. What I am sharing today is not theoretical. We have done it. If you would like help in doing a Thai wedding for God's glory please write me and I would be happy to help.

Now I would like to share with you another part of the ceremony, which includes scriptural teachings directed towards the husband and wife. (More chanting and applause). This is the way the ceremony prepares the way for the listeners coming to the wedding to understand and welcome Jesus in their life. Without knowing it they have started to learn about Jesus. He is reborn in their forms so they don't have any complaints against following Christ.

This allows the church to grow. We need to understand that the church is not something material. It is not the building. It is the people. Many times this is not understood. People think that putting up a building will build a church. However, in our group all of our churches worship in homes - no church buildings. We do have two places where there are multi-purpose salas⁷ which have been built - just a roofed area. These were built in the villages so that when the church is having worship others could come. If we build a church building people will not go in them. We don't call these "churches" but we call the structures "salas". Other than these two places all other churches in our group meet to worship in homes.

What would it be like to have a church in every village? Lots of churches? Lots of children of God? Many! In the future we may need to use the Buddhist temples for our places of worship (applause). We need to think of the people who will come - not just the structures.

I know of two places in Udon where church groups were given funds and built a church building but they have no people. I've seen them. There is nothing in there but termites. I call them Termite Churches. Not the people's church. There is no worship happening there.

We need to understand something else about Isaan people. When Isaan people come to follow God they feel they must change religions. As the speaker said yesterday, Thai people revere their religion. Therefore, when we think of a church building, it makes us think of "religion". It means going in there and doing religious practices. That is the reason our group does not build church buildings. When we have ceremonies (such as a wedding) we hold them in homes or in the village sala. We use the local cultural forms. We do not put the focus on the location, nor on building structures.

Once again, what I am sharing is what we do. If you do not agree that is fine. What we do is done so that people can come to God. If you would like to have a wedding ceremony in this way contact me and I will do it for you. Does anyone have any questions about weddings?

One woman asked, "Do you throw rice at the wedding?"

No. We do not. We use strings to tie on the wrists⁸. Please understand that the string-tying ceremony is one more tradition in which we need to allow Jesus Christ to enter in and redeem it for the sake of the gospel. It is not related to evil spirits. We chase the spirits out of it. We make our own flower arrangements and use ordinary strings. We explain that love is something we cannot see. It is something felt inside. But the string-tying is something that is visible externally. So we use the strings in the name of Jesus Christ. Any other questions?

Another woman stood and said, "Teacher, I haven't heard you say anything related to central Thai. If you were invited to come and do a wedding ceremony in central Thai would you come?"

I don't think that would be problem if you let me know ahead of time. I would have to translate the ceremony to central Thai and study central Thai tradition. It takes time to do this. We've been working on these things for twenty years. We have people who can make instruments, some who write, some who do paintings. We work together as a team. Many people have gone overseas where this topic of contextualization is popular but when they return they still do things in the western ways. They feel that the religious forms cannot be changed. However, if you do want help doing a Thai service I can help. I am happy to help.

If there are no questions about weddings, then I would like to move on to the next topic. Isaan people have a long history. Have you heard this saying, "12 Lunar Festivals, 14 Legal Codes⁹" Those who are older Isaan will remember this phrase. There are twelve months and each month has its own specific merit-making festivals traditionally associated with it. We have taken those 12 ceremonies and studied them. Isaan people have ceremonies for everything. We need to look at these and decide how Jesus Christ can be brought into that ceremony. We make every effort to bring the gospel into the traditional ceremonies.

Bible pictures that we draw we want to do in our own local style. This is done so that they will be attractive to Isaan people. Have you noticed that Isaan people love to learn their philosophy from maw lom¹⁰ songs? We use them to teach the gospel. We don't want them to miss out on the things they desire. We use the local tunes from the culture with the message of Jesus put right there in the ballad.

One time I went to go sell Christian books in the Buddhist temple. As soon as people found out that they were books about Jesus they wouldn't buy them. They didn't want anything to do with them. Pass them out for free and still no one would take them. So I started to sing a ballad of Noah (of which Tongpan now sang a few lines) and a crowd started to gather. They wanted to hear it this way. That is what they wanted. Before, I said the name Jesus and no one wanted anything to do with it. Then, when I sang it in the lom style people crowd around saying, "I want more, sing more! I want to hear more."

The pictures are the same. When they are done in the Isaan style people can't get enough of them. One monk saw these pictures of Noah done in Isaan style and he said, "I want you to come and sing the story with these pictures in my temple." "Isn't that going to be strange having a story about God's work in your temple?" I asked. "No problem. Come and share with us." He opened his heart when he heard the story in a way that was appealing to him.

I am sure that every region of Thailand is open to the gospel when it is presented in that region's own cultural forms. They will want to hear. They will want us to come.

The next thing I would like to share with you is the way we celebrate communion. When we have communion in our worship we use khao jee¹¹. We want to represent again that if Jesus had been reborn into Isaan culture he would eat sticky rice. We don't use bread. Many Christians don't think this is right. That is up to them. We use khao jee because we understand that sticky rice is the staple of life for Isaan people. Many Isaan people are like my father who could eat bowls of white rice and then ask, "When are we really going to eat?" The real rice is sticky rice. It is the life of Isaan people. If Jesus were here he would eat it all the time. That is why we use it for the communion service.

In Jesus' time people ate bread as the staple of their life. When we are trying to have Jesus be reborn in Isaan we use what is the staple of life for us here - sticky rice - when we celebrate communion. We don't have to look all over for bread which is hard to find in Isaan villages but we use what is common and familiar to all. We use the ordinary things of life which are available to bring Jesus into our village. The meaning is the same but externally we use what is familiar to us.

As far as the wine we use nam krachiap¹². We don't have any grape wine available so we use what we have which is nam krachiap. It is nice and red, easy to find and easy to make. We use the common things available to Isaan people to convey the meaning of communion to Isaan people. The khao jee has a hard crust that breaks when bent in half which clearly shows the meaning of Christ's body breaking for us. The nam krachiap reminds us of his death by the shedding of his blood. This is the first time I have shared this with other groups. If you have a question, go ahead.

A man stood and smiled¹³, "Teacher, how big of a ball do you make your khao jee?" (Lots of laughter)

That depends on how many people you have. If there are lots of people we make a big one. If there are a small number of people worshipping together we make a small ball. Each person takes a small piece, not a handful. Each person takes a small piece of the rice and a small sip of the nam krachiap to remind them of what Christ has done. Any other questions other than how big the balls are? (More laughter)

"Do you put egg on the outside, Teacher?" (Roar of laughter)

No, we don't brush egg on the outside. We used to and then the rice wouldn't make it past the first four or five people (they took too much). We had to explain the meaning again that this was not the time to fill our stomachs but to worship the Lord by remembering what he had done for us. The meaning of bread and rice is the same but what we use has meaning for Isaan people.

A woman asked, "Some people might think that using khao jee instead of bread is not following what the Bible says to do, wouldn't they?"

We are not trying to be different just for the sake of being different. Everything we do we need to have a reason for it and be able to explain what we are doing. We have a book that explains the Biblical basis for the procedures we are following in these contextualized Isaan ceremonies (he raised the Worship handbook produced by ISD). This is based on a study of the scriptures, Greek and Hebrew, as well as a study of the cultural meaning. We have staff on our team who are knowledgeable in these areas who help us research these issues.

This is also true regarding the songs that we use. The tunes are well known in our culture but we put the scripture message to them. Teaching something not following the Bible would mean finding some other way to be saved other than Jesus Christ. That would be wrong. But the reason we use these cultural forms is so that people will be able to receive salvation from God. We want people to clearly understand that Jesus alone can save people from their sins. That is not wrong.

We need to understand something about the Bible we use. Excuse me, I don't like to use foreign words but we need to understand the difference between 'Classic Greek' and 'Koine Greek'. Classic Greek was the high, written language, but Koine Greek was the common language. When it was read it was easy to understand. It was what people spoke in their homes and what they used in the market. The Bible was written in Koine Greek. The problem came when they translated it into Thai. They had to use the high language, the big words¹⁴. Our God is Supreme so all the words used to describe him were the big ones. The problem is that when we try to read it now we don't understand it. We need to go back to the Koine Greek so people can understand the meaning again. One example is the word "Prasiri"¹⁵ (the glory of God). What does it mean? It makes us think of rays of light coming out of the head. Actually, in Thai, there is a very clear meaning of this term, "Jesus Christ Fully God". When we read the classic Greek we need to translate it into Koine Greek.

It is important to study the original texts to get to the meaning. Even our term for God needs to be studied. If God intended for us to use fancy words then there was no need for Jesus to be born in this world as a commoner. God could have simply told us his words. The reason God sent Jesus to be born was so that mankind would come to understand Him through Jesus. Jesus came as a person so that people could understand him. If we wanted red ants to understand us we would have to become a red ant. That is the only way we could

communicate with red ants. It is the same with Jesus Christ. God wanted us to know him so he had to come down into our form.

Look in Hebrews 1: in the past God spoke through prophets but in the end he revealed himself through Jesus Christ. This is very important. If we want Jesus to speak to us today but force him to speak another high language we can't understand - that is wrong. It is so important that Jesus speak our language.

I can't speak English like so many Thai. If I go anywhere I need a translator because my brain is so full of Isaan. If we are going to really know the word we need to study or find those who can help us study the word from the original. I have some friends who have helped me in this area. They have explained to me the meaning in Greek.

Any other questions? If not, then I would just like to mention that the things that we use in our worship, songbooks, worship books, study material, are available. We are not trying to sell things but if they can be used by you or your church they are available. There are some samples up here that you can look at. There is an order form for you to fill out and send. There are tapes, sheets, lessons, many things. But before you use anything study it! If you use something you should be able to answer any questions people have about what you are using. If you don't understand it yourself don't start using it. Are there any more questions?

A woman stood to ask, "Teacher, what is your opinion of Thai Christians making floats to sell at Loy Kratong¹⁶?"

What is your opinion, brothers and sisters. As far as myself, I have not studied this ceremony so I do not have a Biblical basis for answering this question.

(Several people responded and all agreed that selling floats or participating in the ceremony was inappropriate for Thai Christians because it bordered too closely upon idolatry).

If it is idolatry we have nothing to do with it. If we can give glory to God and worship God through this ceremony it is okay to do. However, it needs to be studied. The origin of the ceremony needs to be studied. The good parts of cultural ceremonies that can be used as a means of allowing Jesus Christ to enter into people's hearts should be retained. The things that cannot be redeemed this way should not be practiced.

Thank you all for listening today. Please let us know if you have something with which you can help us. Thank you for this opportunity.

Endnotes

¹ Thai tradition demands that the groom's family pay the dowry to the bride's parents. In the past this would include livestock and gold jewelry. Today it is mostly cash.

² ?????????? ?????????? ??????????

³ About \$2,500 US dollars (as of this writing). Laborers earn the equivalent of about \$2.50 per day in Isaan with farmers having a disposable income of even less.

⁴ Farang is the Thai word for Caucasian foreigners.

⁵ In Thailand 1 baht of gold equals 15 grams. Here he mentioned a necklace of 5 baht which

means not money but weight of gold.

⁶ The wai position are raised hands with palms together.

⁷ Sala is the Thai word for a roofed structure, usually with paved flooring. There are no walls, just open space under the shade of the roof.

⁸ String tying is used in Laotian and Isaan culture as well as much of Thai culture in Buddhist ceremonies to gain protection from evil-spirits.

⁹ "?? 12 ??? 14" refers to the 12 monthly merit-making festivals (from the Thai word ??? referring to the unwritten oral traditions) and 14 categories to the written civil code.

¹⁰ Maw lom is a particular style of ballad found in Northeast Thailand.

¹¹ Khao jee (?????) is sticky rice rolled into a tube shape and roasted over a fire until a crust is formed. It is usually made with egg brushed on the outside as a fragrant and delicious breakfast.

¹² Nam Krachiap is the juice made of the sepals of the seed pod of the rose sorrel plant, a wild herb which grows throughout Isaan. When boiled it makes a dark red juice which has medicinal values and is bitter to the taste.

¹³ Khao Jee is usually considered the food of little children. The man asking the questions was trying to make a joke.

¹⁴ The Thai language has a whole realm of high vocabulary used in reference to the monarchy. It was this vocabulary which was used in Bible translation when referring to God or any member of the Trinity.

¹⁵ ????????????????

¹⁶ Loy Kratong, held at the end of the rainy season, is an annual event on the twelfth full moon of the year which has been celebrated in Siamese culture since the Sukothai period (going back over 600 years ago). Decorated floats (kratongs) are made of banana leaves in which a candle and stick of incense are placed. In the evening the floats are taken to the water's edge, the candle and incense lit, a prayer is offered and the float is pushed off into the water - to hopefully float far away. A kratong that sinks or returns is bad luck. It was originally intended as an offering to the goddess of the water to express gratitude for the use of water, so important for Thai life, as well as asking forgiveness for polluting the water. Today, while it is very much a social event, the spiritual significance, and praying to the water that wishes be fulfilled (especially for the young wanting to marry) is still very prevalent.