THE BIBLE IS NOT A PRODUCT

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Category: Observations

A friend recently pointed me to this article which promises a revolution in Bible translation. Now, please forgive me if I sound slightly jaded. After more than 35 years in the field, I've lost count of the number of things that were going to completely change the way that Bible translation is carried out.

The gist of the article is that a very rich man, frustrated with the way that Bible translation is carried out by the usual Bible translation groups, has decided to invest money in getting professional translation agencies to do the job instead.

> *â€œIt suddenly occurred to me that there were other translations going on in the world.â€ Â And some of these translation projects are every bit as complex and technically difficult as Bible translations.Â â€œWho translates treaties?Â Medical books?Â Educational materials?Â Poetry and movie scripts?Â Legal contracts?â€ Â*

The advantage of this approach is that translations can be done much faster and also, the funder would receive much better progress reports.

> *One aspect of this pilot project that is different from many other translations done by traditional Bible translation organizations is its transparency and commitment to clear milestones.Â*

Now, I sympathise with a donor who feels that they are not getting information on projects that they are funding (though, having sat on the other side of the fence, I also know the difficulty in getting information for donor reports).

However, I do think that this donor, though very well intentioned, is making a significant mistake. At first sight, using the tools of capitalism to improve processes and to speed up the production of Bible translations seems like a good thing. However, this is only the case if the underlying assumptions are correct.

The first thing to note is that although speed is very much a value in Western culture, it is not necessarily a Christian one. I've touched on this question before, here and here for example.

However, I think that the most important issue (which is hinted at in the linked posts) is that the Bible is not simply a product which can be manufactured and distributed like widgets in a factory. The Bible is God's inspired revelation, but it is also something which emerged from the experience of God's people as they lived in relationship to him. The fact that the Bible is translatable and translated shows that God intends to continue involving his people in the process of the transmission of his word. It is not provided as a finished work that people should consume as is.

Bible translation is the responsibility of the church; and that primarily means the local church, the believers who will use the translation for the foreseeable future. There is a role for outside support, in finance and technical areas and in those cases where there are no believers in a region a church group outside of the area might take responsibility for the work. However, the process of translation itself, the life and witness of the translators and their relationships with the community are vitally important to the transmission of the Bible.

The problem is that our disconnect between mission and the church has seen Bible translation become the domain of the specialist mission agencies and - all too often - divorced from the life of the local church. In this context, moving to a situation in which secular translation agencies are engaged to produce new Bibles seems the logical next step.

The problem is, this approach places things that Western culture value - speed and efficiency above the things that Scripture values; the fellowship of Christians and their relationship to God's Word. The article raises some legitimate questions about the way in which the traditional Bible translation organisations go about their business and relate to donors. However, in thinking through solutions to these issues it is not enough to default to the thinking patterns of Western business. We need to have a theologically grounded understanding of mission and Bible translation which takes into account the way in which God works through the whole of Scripture. Speed and efficiency are not bad things, but I am far from convinced that they are at the centre of God's mission to the world.