THE GOSPEL AND THE BIBLE

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Category: Theology and Purpose of Translation

> *Bible translation is a means to an end, and itâ€™s not so that everyone can have a Bible*

Sometimes the blogosphere moves too quickly. I've not had time to respond fully to David Ker's (Lingamish) last post on Bible translation and now he has come up with another interesting, though flawed observation on the subject. Let me start off by saying that I thoroughly agree with David's title (The Gospel is more important than the Bible) and also the quote that I've put at the top of this piece - but beyond that, I start to disagree!

David goes on to write:

> *We translate motivated by an evangelical conviction that everyone should be â€œfree indeedâ€ through Jesus.*

The problem is, that this is not my motivation, so David would do better to stick to saying 'I' rather than 'we' in phrases like this. No doubt there are many of our colleagues who do share his motivation, but it isn't universal. (He made a similar claim in his earlier piece which one of the commentators addressed).

The reasons I disagree with David on this one is that he makes the Gospel all about the salvation of individuals, rather than God's all encompassing work to *reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross* (Colossians 1:20).Â In a piece I wrote a few years back about why I think Bible Translation is Important, I wrote:

> *So where does all this leave me? I think the key issue is one of vision. My motivation and vision for mission start with the incarnate Christ, bursting upon history holding nothing back but emptying himself and eventually submitting to death on a cross. As Christ came to the world, so his people spread out across the globe spreading the Good News of a God who translated himself so that we could understand him. The centre of this Good News is the creation of indigenous redeemed communities expressing the Gospel manifold cultures and all adding together to create a symphony of praise to our God. The translation of the Scriptures lies at the very heart of this.*

Individuals being free indeed is a part of the picture, but it isn't the whole picture, not by a long chalk. To misquote David, 'the Gospel is more important than individual salvation'. (I bet that gets a few comments!)

David goes on to talk about the relationship between the Old and New Testaments:

> *At the Bible college where I teach New Testament and exegesis to Mozambicans I frequently*

> *tell them that a sermon that begins in the Old Testament must end in the New. And the key passage that I make my students memorize is 1 Corinthians 10:11, â€œThese things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come. â€ The Old Testament is backstory to the New Testament. And the New Testament is a reference library centered on the person, words and deeds of Jesus Christ. When BibleGateway counted the most popular verse searches on their site, 84 of the top 100 were in the New Testament.*

I'm not sure what we are supposed to make of the BibleGateway statistics, but I dealt with a similar phenomenon here. Yes, the Old Testament does provide a 'backstory' to the New Testament, but that is not all that it does. The Old Testament has a value on its own merits too. The Old Testament has huge amounts to teach us about the nature of God, ethics, the relationship of God to creation (including humanity) and how we should live on this planet. Let me requote something I put on the blog a few months ago:

> *It is a recurring deficiency of many Protestant evangelical readings of the biblical narrative that it can be told without the inclusion of Israel at all! An over-individualistic concentration on the Fallâ€¦ results in a stunted engagement with the biblical text which almost inevitably leads to an interpretation that individual salvation was the whole purpose of Godâ€™s creative act. Consequently, we quickly jump from the Fall episode to the coming of the Messiah whose death and resurrection fixes the personal sin question â€“ and hey presto! weâ€™re back on track!â€¦ To the contrary it is really only when we get into the Israel story that all our interlocking overtures sound forth with a new vitality and vibrancy, mainly because this story consumes so much of the overall narrative. (Metavista: Bible, Church and Mission in an Age of Imagination (Faith in an Emerging Culture) (Faith in an Emerging Culture) (p.122)*

I don't think it is a coincidence that it is an Old Testament Scholar (Chris Wright) who pointed out some of the false dichotomies that have arisen in evangelical missions over the years. Taking the Old Testament narrative seriously and in its own right helps us to avoid the temptations of individualism and over-spiritualisation which can easily disfigure the church.

David then goes on to say:

> *This is why I think missions like New Tribes, Faith Comes By Hearing and Gospel Recordings are on the right track to focus on the New Testament, and repackage the Bible in specifically Christological terms. Their materials are effective in bringing the essence of Christian belief to many people in a way that simply dropping Bibles on a culture isnâ€™t.*

I would agree that the sensitive presentations of the Scriptures are far better than 'simply dropping a Bible on a culture'. But to imply, as David does, that this means concentrating solely on the New Testament is a step too far. God had reasons for inspiring the Scripture he did and we pick and choose which bits we want to read and that we want other people to read at our peril. Now, I fully realise that when resources are limited we may have to make choices about which parts of the Scriptures we make available, but the questions are far more nuanced than David gives them credit for. I have looked at this subject in some detail in this post, with a brief follow up here.

Interestingly, though I disagree with his reasoning, I do strongly endorse David's conclusion that Bible translation is a hugely important ministry of the church. I agree wholeheartedly with David that Wycliffe needs to work in partnership with others; missions and churches, so that the translated Scriptures are brought into use in a culturally sensitive way as quickly as possible. I also believe, with all my heart, that the way in which the translation process is carried out and the way in which translators are in communication with the local community will make all of the difference to the way in which people will accept and read the Scriptures.

I noticed last night, that David has returned to blogging about photographs of hippopotami. This might give me a space to catch up on other stuff he has written, or to think of some things to blog about of my own!

If you are interested in exploring more about the main themes I touched on here; the nature of the Gospel and the place of the Old Testament in the narrative of Scripture, you really can't do any better than read Chris Wright's The mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative. You can also listen to him on the Seize the Day podcast or read his lecture on Mission and The Bible.