BIBLE TRANSLATION AND THE INCARNATION

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The last few weeks, I've been mulling over what Bible translation is all about (this comes a bit late, after twenty years in the field). At the most basic level, Bible translation is a very effective tool for transmitting the message of the Gospel. By translating the Scriptures, we are allowing people to hear God's words in their own language in an unvarnished way. Viewed like this, Bible translation is effectively a (rather good) technique for evangelism and discipleship training.

However, I think there is far more to Bible translation than would be implied by it being regarded simply as a technique. For a start, even if it is only a technique for getting the message across, it is a very old one. The Old Testament was translated into Greek as the Septuagint which was widely used at the time of Christ. Jesus himself spoke in Aramaic, yet when the Matthew, Mark, Luke and John came to write down his words, they did so in Greek which was much more widely understood. Even in the original language, the Gospels are a translation! But it goes deeper than this. Our God is a communicator. Through the incarnation he communicated the reality of his character in a unique way (2 Corinthians 4:6). God crossed over the chasm which cut humanity off from him. In a small way, Bible translation is a reflection of that great act of God. The translated Word crosses over into new cultures taking the message of the Gospel to people who were cut off from God. It isn't just a technique it is a reflection of the very character of God.

But we can take this a stage further. Bible translation is not just a reflection of the Incarnation. But, it is the Incarnation itself which ultimately makes it possible for God's revelation to be transmitted in human languages. God became a man in Christ and lived in space and time. People heard, saw and touched Him (1 John 1:1), in Christ, God became accessible to human senses and so his actions could be described in human language. Yes, there are times when the Glory of God is so overwhelming that the Bible has to resort to poetry, image and apocalyptic language to describe it, but the essence of the Gospel, the life of Jesus, is presented in clear accessible language.

Darrell Guder puts it very well:

> *Confession of faith in all languages is possible because of the distinctive character of God's action, as it leads to faith. God's self-communication takes the form of incarnation in history, events in which God encounters us and enables us to recognize that it is God who is speaking and acting.*
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> *Because this incarnation in history could be witnessed, it could be reported and be put into words. Yet, there are no particular sacred words in a sacred language that must always be learned and used in order to encounter the divine.*

Whatever language you speak, God is not a foreigner.