WHO DO WE TRANSLATE THE BIBLE FOR?

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Category: Bible Translation

Last week at the Bible translation leaders' conference a fascinating question was asked from the front. "Who provides our motivation for Bible translation, the worldwide church or unreached people groups?". (I may have got the wording slightly wrong - I wasn't taking notes at that point).

This is a fascinating question which to some extent reflects the history of those organisations which have been most involved in Bible translation around the world. The United Bible Societies have, for the most part, been motivated to translate the Scriptures for church groups around the world - their translation has been motivated by *ecclesiology.* Other organisations such as Wycliffe Bible translators have been motivated to make the Bible (or at least the New Testament) available for people groups who have not yet heard the Gospel - their motivation is primarily missionary. Over the last years this distinction has become increasingly eroded as the Church has grown explosively around the world - groups which were recently unreached now have thriving churches which are crying out for access to the Scriptures in their own languages.

In pragmatic terms, translating the Scriptures for an unreached people group is a very different undertaking than translating for an existing church. The degree to which the local community will take responsibility and provide resources for the translation work will depend largely on how much they believe it is important. Obviously, an established Church is more likely to see Bible translation as being important than a group with a very different belief system. Because of this, it may well be more strategic for a translation organisation to invest their resources in the unreached people group, because they are unlikely to translate the Scriptures for themselves. On the other hand, Bible translation is a highly technical task and very few minority peoples, no matter how well motivated, have the capacity to translate the Scriptures for themselves. Not only that, but a translation in cooperation with an established church is far more likely to be used than one which is produced as a missionary effort for an unreached people group. Perhaps it might be better to wait for a church to be planted before starting the translation. There are no easy answers.

Ultimately, our motivation for the translation of the Scriptures is neither the needs of the church, nor the plight of unreached people groups - it lies in the character and actions of the Triune God. I wrote this in another post a six months or so ago.

> ... 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. Translation is not simply a way to convey the message: translation is the message.

Diversity in unity, incarnation and communication are all fundamental to the nature of God and it is

God's character that provides the basis for Bible translation and different expressions of the Christian faith in different contexts. The Christian faith knows nothing of monolithic conformity - it started in a joyous explosion of variety and difference and continues to diversify as it spreads across the planet. One piece of fallout from the is explosion of variety is that people (whether in churches, or unreached people groups) are able to understand the Gospel clearly because it is expressed in their own language. This is illustrated in a must-read article by Patrick Johnstone (of Operation World fame) called Bible Translation and the Cross Cultural DNA of the Church. Patrick demonstrates very clearly how translated Scriptures have been essential to the growth of the Church down through the centuries. However, if I dare argue with such a well known figure, I don't think that he really grasps the heart of the issue. Patrick talks about the church having *cross cultural DNA* but he doesn't show how the Church inherited this DNA from the unity-in-diversity which lies at the heart of God's nature. Mission doesn't start with the nature of the Church, it starts with the nature of God.

Where resources are limited, all translation organisations have to make choices about which communities they are best able to serve. However, whether we work with established Churches or unreached people groups, Bible translation is about joining with God in his great mission to call a diverse multi-lingual, multi-cultural people to serve and worship him in this world and the next. We do Bible translation because *that's the sort of God we serve.*