THE BIBLE AND DISCIPLE MAKING

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Category: Theology and Purpose of Translation

This is the first part of my answer to the question of why we should bother translating the Bible people when there are many more, apparently more urgent, problems in the world.

In a sense, this answer is the most straight forward, but perhaps it is also the most contentious. To put it simply, I believe that we should make the Bible available to people, whoever and wherever they are, because it provides the answers to life's most important questions.

Regular readers of this blog will know that I believe strongly in holistic mission. Proclamation of the Gospel and loving service go hand in hand and must never be separated. We must show compassion for the poor and needy, we must work for justice and peace and we must proclaim the Gospel of reconciliation through the death and resurrection of Christ. Jesus' greatest commandment (Matthew 22:36-40) goes hand in hand with the 'Great Commission (Matthew 28:16-20).

There was a time when Evangelical Christians would discount the value serving people's needs; condemning it as 'the social Gospel'. However, over the past few decades, compassionate service has regained its rightful place. The problem seems to me, that in the process we have lost a focus on the need to proclaim the Gospel.

To some extent, this is understandable. Day after day, our media show us dreadful images of people who are suffering from starvation, flooding, warefare and so the list goes on. Our hearts go out to our fellow human beings who face such unimaginable hardships, and we quite rightly want to do something about it. Different agencies, Christian and secular, use these images to encourage us to support their work and to make a contribution to alleviating human suffering.

But what we can never see on our televisions or in the media is the dreadful state of a human being who is not reconciled to God. Though we might believe in the need for people to come to faith in Christ and to grow as disciples, the urgency of that need has been lost somewhere along the way.

I believe that this is reflected in some research that was carried out for a number of Christian organisations recently. Focus groups of Evangelical Christians were asked to name some Christian charities. The answers were very revealing, people named a number of relief and development agencies, most of whom did not have a Christian basis, but they hardly mentioned any evangelisitic or discipleship ministries.

When people are suffering we must be concerned about meeting their needs and improving their living conditions - that is not negotiable. But we must also do our utmost to bring them to saving faith in Christ. After all, what good does it do if someone gains the whole world but loses their soul? (Mark 8:36).

I believe that Bible translation is absolutely essential for evangelism and disciple making. Because of this, I believe that the Church is obligated to translate the Scriptures in all situations. We must not and cannot ignore people's spiritual needs just because they have physical needs, too. That being said, we must not ignore their physical needs either.

That being said, and somewhat counter-intuitively, I do believe that a Bible translation project can also make a significant contribution to dealing with people's physical needs in the long term - but that is another post.