WRONG AGAIN (AND AGAIN, AND AGAIN, AND...)

Posted on December 28, 2011 by Eddie

Category: Controversies

Let's get one thing straight: just because people have been repeating an argument for 2,000 years or more doesn't mean that they are right. It could simply mean that they haven't learned by their mistakes.

For example, speaking about the Jamaican Patois Bible Project,Â Bishop Alvin Bailey, of the Portmore Holiness Church of God near Kingston in Jamaica:

> *"I don't think the Patois words can effectively communicate what the English words have communicated," he says.*
>
> *"Even those (Patois) words that we would want to use to fully explain what was in the original, are words that are vulgar."*

Of course, the question that I would immediately wish to ask the good Bishop is what makes him think English is such a good vehicle for expressing the nuances of Biblical text? Excuse me if I dip into a bit of simple linguistics. English has a really rich and flexible vocabulary, which is great. But it also has a very inflexible word order: "man bites dog" does not mean the same as "dog bites man". Koine Greek, on the other hand, has an amazingly flexible word order, which allows it to express all sorts of subtleties of emphasis and focus that English can't even begin to dream about. If you want to be really picky, no language - English included - can really grasp all of the nuances of the text!

Of course, the good Bishop has lots of precedence in his remarks. Until the 1400s it was illegal to own a Bible in English, because the Church authorities believed that Latin was the only language that was adequate to capture the nuances of the Bible message.

Going back even further, in New Testament times there were many who believed that to be a Christian meant to adopt Jewish culture. I'm sure that there were people on the sidelines on the day of Pentecost complaining that people shouldn't hear the message of Jesus in their own language - only Hebrew and Aramaic were good enough!

There are two concepts tangled up in all of this. The first implies that one language is superior to all others as a vehicle for the Christian Gospel. In the middle ages, Latin held this privileged position in Europe and even today, there are those who believe that the only authentic language for Christianity is the English of the Authorised Version. The other, linked, idea is that some languages are inadequate for expressing the Christian message - this is what the bishop is implying about Patois.

The origins and subsequent history of the Christian faith show that these ideas are simply wrong. Christianity cannot be tied down to one language, however high-flown and culturally rich that language might be. Equally, the Gospel can be expressed in all languages - this is the message of Pentecost, not to mention the experience of Wycliffe Bible Translators.

There will always be people like Bishop Bailey who insist that a given language is not good enough

for the Gospel and others like David Cameron who believe that only archaic language is adequate. But the God who translated himself into human on the first Christmas day and who opened up his word to the languages of the world at Pentecost won't be constrained by our linguistic snobbery.

Just because people have been saying something for 2,000 years doesn't make it right!