COMMUNITIES, COMMISSION AND TRANSLATION

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Category: Theology and Purpose of Translation

For many evangelical Christians, mission and the Great Commission of Matthew 28:16-20 are virtually synonymous. Mission, it is said, involves making disciples and we should avoid anything which distracts us from that goal. For an organisation like Wycliffe Bible Translators, this paradigm means that we need to indulge in a little verbal gymnastics to justify all that we do. Mission is disciple making, and you can't be a disciple without access to the Bible, so Bible translation is a necessary part of mission. Equally, you can't read the Bible without literacy, so literacy can be justified even if it isn't directly related to disciple making or mission.

However, God's mission - to which we are invited - is much broader than making individual disciples. In this context we do not need to seek for proof texts to defend the place for Bible translation. Seen from the perspective of the mission of God, we are freed up to engage joyfully in Bible translation, language analysis, literacy and other activities, as these are all part of restoring the unity within the human community which God wishes for.

Mission Involves Communities

The Western mission movement has been deeply influenced by the highly individual nature of the society that gave it birth. Because of this, we have tended to operate in a context which sees the salvation of individual souls as the highest priority of mission and the success of mission measured by the number of people *making decisions*. However, when we consider that mankind is made in the image of the relational, Triune God, we are forced to confront the Western concept of the individual head on. Although the modern Western world is obsessed with individualism, a Trinitarian theology is a theology of relationships and compels us to be involved in one another's lives. Men and women cannot achieve the closeness of the perichoretic life of the Trinity but the life of the community must take precedence over the values of individual achievement and competition. In Viv Thomas' words, "The individual is not the centre".

The mission of the Triune, relational God is to reconcile all things in heaven and earth and this must involve the creation of communities who will live out the reality of the kingdom of God in time and in eternity. People are not simply saved from something; they are saved into a community (see Acts 2: 42-47).

When we think about a missionary activity such as Bible translation, we need to remember that all of those who are involved, however tangentially, are part of a community. If we are first and foremost the Body of Christ; then mega-donors, leaders, administrators, translators, partners, members of language communities, etc. are all individually members of that Body. In God's evaluation of our efforts can our work be deemed to be successful if any members of that Body are experiencing the process as dishonouring, demeaning or marginalizing?.

Whatever Western culture may insist upon, mission involves Christian communities responding to God's call in order to see the community of Christians increased and grow.

"It is not the church that has a mission of salvation to fulfil in the world; it is the mission of the Son and the Spirit through the Father that include the church, creating a church as it goes on its way."

This is another excerpt from my paper on the Mission of God and Bible Translation.

Myers, B.L., 1999 (p.24)

Cunningham, D.S., 1998. These Three are One; The Practice of Trinitarian Theology. Blackwell Publishers, Oxford. (p.183)

Thomas, V., 2004. Paper Boys: A vision for the contemporary church. From delivery to dance through God as Trinity. Authentic, Milton Keynes. (p.44)

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