EATING SOUP WITH A FORK

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In which I disagree quite forcefully with the founder of my organisation; this may not be a great career move!
Category: Impact

Many years ago, I found myself reading a bookÂ by Marcel Pagnol. The last paragraph told how his brother had settled into a simple life in the Provence hills, keeping goats and making cheese. Then the last line said simply that he died in the hell of Paschendale, a long way from home. It was beautifully written and it moved me to tears, despite the fact that I am an English speaker and I was reading in French.

This is by way of introducing another of my occasional series about missionary sayings; things said by missionary statesmen which sound great, but which may not quite match up to reality.

Today's offering comes from the founder of Wycliffe Bible Translators, Cameron Townsend:

> *Understanding Scripture in a language other than the heart language in which we think and experience emotion is like 'trying to eat soup with a fork. You can get a little taste, but you cannot get nourished.'*

I realise that disagreeing with the founder of my own organisation is possibly not a great career move, but this is simply wrong. Firstly, anyone who speaks more than one language with a degree of fluency knows that you can think and experience emotion in languages other than your mother tongue. In fact, there are situations when your second (or third...) language works better than your mother tongue because of its vocabulary and cultural reach.

It's also inaccurate to say that people can't be nourished by the Bible, apart from in their mother tongue. Down through history, people have had to work with the Bible in a language that wasn't theirs; it isn't ideal, but people have always grown in their faith and understanding through reading the Bible in foreign languages. It still happens today.

One of the key rationales for Bible translation is that there is no sacred Christian language in which our Scriptures, liturgy and prayers must be expressed. This is demonstrated by the fact that the Gospels were written in New Testament Greek, not the Aramaic that Jesus would have spoken. The New Testament was written in a trade language, not in the mother tongue of the early Christians.

The Scriptural basis for Bible translation demonstrates that there is a time and a place for non-mother tongue Scriptures.

There is a solid case for translating the Scriptures rooted in God's activity through history. Of course, it is also trueÂ that people understand better in their mother tongue. However, we don't need to throw the baby out with the bath water by saying things like there is no nourishment in reading the Bible in another language - that simply doesn't stand up to examination.