CONSULTANT, THEOLOGIAN, TRAINER AND REFEREE

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Category: Methodology

The Role of a Translation Consultant

A couple of weeks ago Eddie wrote a blogpost entitled What Does a Translation Consultant Do? Eddie wrote about how I help the team to check that their translation is an accurate representation of the meaning of the original by asking questions and discussing, in French, the words and phrases they have used to translate the passage into their language.Â So I thought it would be interesting to say a bit more about my role as I see it, so here goes.

The 'Expert'?

Just as the church is like a body made up of different parts, a translation team needs to be made up of members with different gifts and skills. No one person has everything it takes to do a great translation (including linguistics, translation, theology, anthropology, Greek/Hebrew, Biblical studies, facility in the language etc) but if each one plays their role, together they can do a good job. As a consultant I bring my areas of expertise, but I am not there like a teacher with a red pen correcting all the mistakes! I don't speak their language and I certainly don't have all the answers. I am there to come alongside the team, not to find fault, but so that together we can all play our part in making a good translation better. If I am working with a large team, managing discussions can be a real challenge, but the resultant synergy means that we can end up with a much better translation than just one or two members of the team could have produced on their own. For example, sometimes I might suggest a way of restructuring a verse to make it clearer, one of the translators would come up with a different option and we would finally settle on a third expression which was even better!

Doing Theology



One of the greatest challenges facing Bible translators is how to translate concepts in the Bible which are unknown in their culture. Languages are so flexible and people will always find creative ways of talking about innovations such as computers and mobile phones. This could be by adopting a foreign word or by creating a new word or phrase to describe the new concept. But choosing a local term to translate a biblical concept such as 'sacrifice' or 'prophet' can be more complicated, especially if the term is associated with traditional religious practices. It is rare to find a word in one language which has the exact same range of meanings as a word in another language, but a choice has to be made. As a consultant, I have to help translators reach a decision, but it is never easy. As they search for an appropriate term in their language and discuss this with church leaders and language community, I believe they are actually *doing theology* in their own cultural context. The terms they finally choose may affect how people in their language community eventually understand the Christian gospel. Translation is an awesome responsibility...

On The Job Training

Another aspect of my role as translation consultant is the ongoing training of translators. As we go through a book and come across different problems in their translation, these can be great learning opportunities for the team, as we discuss how to apply translation principles to solve problems such as translating metaphors or dealing with biblical weights and measures. Then, when we've finished the checking, I take time to write up a detailed report, documenting all the changes and why we made them. This is important as a written record, but it is also an opportunity for offering feedback to the team, to help them develop their translation skills.

How Do We Work?

Bible translation work can be fascinating but also frustrating. It's easy to get irritated with one another especially if you are convinced that your translation of a verse is much better than your colleague's and you can't agree! There is no such thing as a 'perfect' translation - each one is a work in progress. We try and do the best we can, but in the end how we actually work together as a team and respect one another is just as important as the end result. To paraphrase St Paul: ' If I can

translate perfectly into the tongues aÂ of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.'