A LOCALISED GOSPEL

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Category: Impact

A few weeks ago, I wrote a series of meandering posts looking at the relationship between the Gospel and culture. However, since then, I've come up with a metaphor which I find helpful (and which almost certainly is not original) in thinking about how the Gospel, culture and language inter-relate.

When software developers produce new computer programs they have to localise them. That is they do stuff to the program so that it functions effectively in a new locality. At its most simple, localisation simply involves translating the menus and dialogue boxes into a new language. However, it can sometimes be more complex than when certain localities call alphabets that use complex characters or which may be written from right to left. But, and this is the key, localisation does not change the core of the computer program. Microsoft Windows looks pretty much the same in English, French or German and if you are familiar with one version you can find you way around another with a bit of guess work and a dose of trial and error. Localisation involves a change in how we relate to the program, but it doesn't change the program itself. Translation is a much more drastic concept than localisation. A translated text looks very different to the original and if you don't know both languages you will not be able to follow the translation. The Windows dialogues are translated and the words bear very little resemblance from one language to another: it is the fact that they are placed in familiar places that allows us to guess their meaning - not the words themselves.

When the Gospel moves into a new culture it is localised. The words: the Scriptures, songs and prayers may be translated and become almost unrecognisable, but the core of the Gospel remains unchanged. Andrew Walls in his wonderful paper, "The Gospel as prisoner and liberator of culture" suggests that there are five elements which are common to every Christian community across time and space, I'd suggest that these could be seen as the unchanging core of the Gospel (though others might argue).

- the ultimate significance of Jesus of Nazareth
- worship of the triune God, who is the same as the God of Israel
- the special use of the same Scriptures
- the special use of water, bread and wine
- an awareness on the part of each local group of believers that it is in some way continuous with ancient Israel as well as related to the new people of God that transcends time and space.

The way in which these realities are expressed can change drastically from one culture to another, but the realities themselves do not change. The task of the Bible translator then, is analogous to that of translating the menus in Windows (though far, far more complex, I hasten to add). We translate the text from one language to another, but the deeper reality, the experience of the Gospel in the life of the community and individual, mediated by the Spirit, remains unchanged.

It is possible, with a bit of guesswork, to find your way around a copy of Word or Windows in another

language as long as you are prepared to make a few mistakes. In the same way, Christian communities in different languages and cultures have familiar elements which allow us to navigate through them. Bread and wine is bread and wine; whether served in small glasses and neat cubes or from a common cup and in huge hunks. It is even recognisably bread and wine when it isn't actually bread and wine as such (grape juice, orange juice, coke... I've seen lots of variations). Because of the familiarity of the underlying core, it is possible for a Christian to experience Wall's last point - the continuity of believers across time and space - even when it's more or less impossible to understand a word the other believers are saying.

It could be said that the metaphor of localisation doesn't add anything to our understanding of how the Gospel crosses cultures. After all, in Translation, the language changes, but the core message does not change. However, I think that the localisation concept is more helpful in that it highlights the difference between the unchanging core code and the translated interface, capturing some of the complexity of what happens when the Gospel moves into a new home.