A DIFFERENT TAKE ON BIBLE TRANSLATION STATISTICS

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Category: Minority Language Translation

From time to time, I've quoted from the official Wycliffe Bible Translation statistics. I usually do this in order to demonstrate the amazing amount of Bible translation that has been done. There is no other document which has been so widely translated and even as I write, there is translation work going on in around 2,400 languages. This truly is staggering.



However, let's look at this from another angle.

According to the fact sheet attached to the statistics there are 7,097 languages in the world, of which only 636 have a full bible. Which, means that there is a headline figure of 6,461 languages which do not have a Bible. However, this number needs to be treated with a lot of caution. Patterns of language use change and many of these languages have few, if any speakers and others will fall out of use within a few generations. It is extremely unlikely that there will ever be a translation into all of these languages.

However, the point remains, most languages do not have a Bible. It is amazing that there is some Scripture in 3,223 languages; but there is still work left to be done in all but 636 of them. That makes 2,587 languages which still need translation work before we even start to count the ones where there is still no Scripture or translation hasn't even started.

Of course, my point is that people need the whole Bible, not just the New Testament or Scripture portions. Churches need the Psalms in order to develop an understanding of faithful worship, rooted in all manner of human experience. It's nigh on impossible to understand the book of Hebrews without a background understanding of the Pentateuch and how can people begin to understand

how Jesus came to fulfil the Law if they don't have access to the Law?

When Paul wrote that "all Scripture is inspired by God", he was primarily referring to the Old Testament - the Bible that Jesus used. We can not and we must not assume that people today do not need access to the whole Bible.

I realise that there are logistical reasons why we might focus on the New Testament in the first place or why it might make sense to translate portions from across the Bible. I also get the point that changing patterns of language use might mean that while a New Testament translation was appropriate for a group at a given point in history, there might not be a need for a whole Bible today. However, this still leaves us with a lot of translation left to do.

A quick glance at a Bible will show you that the Old Testament is far, far longer than the New. Producing a New Testament doesn't even represent the half-way point in Bible translation for a given language.

Whichever way you look at it and with all of the possibleÂ *caveats* in place, there is still huge amount of Scripture translation work that remains. Suggestions that the task of Bible translation is close to completion are very premature.

A Couple of Further Comments:

- It is important to realise, that the vast majority of people in the world have a full Bible available to them. The languages with the most speakers; Chinese, English, Spanish etc all have Bibles. However, there are still more than one and a half billion people without access to the Bible in their language - that's a lot of people.
- Some people suggest that when some Scripture is available to every ethnic group, then Christ will return, so Â we don't really need to worry about translating the whole Bible. Without extending this blog post further, I disagree with this reading of the apocalyptic passages in the Gospels.