REASONS FOR BIBLE TRANSLATION: MISSIONARIES

Posted on June 18, 2018 by Eddie

Bible translation as an antidote to missionaries!
Category: Theology and Purpose of Translation

For the next few blog posts, I'll be going back to my roots and talking about Bible Translation. I'd like to examine some of the reasons that are given for promoting the translation of the Bible into minority languages around the world. If I have the energy, I might look at some of the objections, too.

The first thing I'd like to talk about is the role of missionaries.

For the last two hundred years, or so, missionaries from the Western world have had played a major role in the unprecedented spread of Christianity around the world. For the most part, modern missionaries have travelled from richer, more technologically advanced and militarily powerful nations to poorer and less advanced nations. For a significant period, mission took place against the background of Empire and conquest. This is not to say that all missionaries were colonialists, far from it - but there was generally an economic and power disparity between the missionary and the people to whom they went. This inevitably had an impact on the way in which the gospel was transmitted, received and perceived. It is, perhaps, significant, that the current exponential levels of growth that we are seeing in the African church didn't happen till after the colonial era had finished.

Even if we ignore theÂ impact of colonialism and the power disparity between the west and the rest, missionaries transmit the Christian message with a bit of spin. Baptist missionaries plant Baptist churches, Methodist missionaries, Methodist churches and so on. Missionaries bring their background to the situation that they are working in; it is inevitable.

To some extent, Bible translation provides an antidote to this.

The Bible comes without denominational spin. There is not Methodist or Baptist Bible. Translators work hard to make sure that the text is translated faithfully without a bias towards any particular confession. For the most part, translation teams are interdenominational and no one group is allowed to dominate, even if they wanted to. That being said, research has shown that while the translated Bible does not favour one denomination over another, the way in which people read and study it is to some extent a product of their confessional background.

The Bible Judges Missionaries. Â There is nothing more humiliatingÂ (or healthy?) for a Bible translation team leader to see their own faults being laid bare and discussed by proxy as the team get to grips with a Bible passage that addresses a particular sin. I know, I've been that team leader. Any illusions that a missionary-translator hold about their own superiority get shattered at the translation desk.

The Bible Addresses Issues That Missionaries Don't. People in different situations see things in the Bible that others miss. Missionaries come with a whole load of cultural baggage and they will never be able to see the Bible in the way that people from a very different culture will. By making the Bible available to people, translators provide the capacity for people to dive into the Bible on their own and to dig out things that the missionaries would never see in a million years.

The Bible Sticks Around. Missionaries go home, but the Bible is a lasting legacy for a church which

can endure for years.

To some extent, the issues that I'm talking about in this post are captured by a quote from Cameron Townsend, the founder of Wycliffe Bible Translators:

> *â€œThe greatest missionary is the Bible in the mother tongue. It needs no furlough and is never considered a foreigner.â€ Â*

As I point out here, this quote has a number of significant problems, but it does capture a germ of truth.

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