REASONS FOR BIBLE TRANSLATION: GOD

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We translate the Bible because God is who he is.
Category: Observations

This is the final part in my little series about the reasons why we should bother translating the Bible for minority language communities around the world. To be honest, this is also the only reason that really matters. We translate the Bible because the Triune God is who he is. Missiology that is based around human need or the actions of the church rather than on the character and actions of God is always going to lack something.

OK, lets lay some groundwork...

First of all, God is a relational God. We see this supremely in John 17 when the incarnate Son prays to the Father, but the theme echoes through the Bible. The fact that he created the universe (including humanity) finds its first cause in the relational character of God.

Secondly, God reaches out to humanity. Immediately after the fall in Genesis 3, God came down into the garden to look for Adam and Eve. He didn't wait for them to look him up, he was proactive and went out to find them. We see a similar thing in Genesis 12 when God chooses Abraham and right through the Old Testament as he sends prophets and leaders to guide Israel; he is continually proactive. This proactivity finds its ultimate expression when the Son takes on human flesh and lives, dies and rises again in order to bring reconciliation. God's actions are, perhaps best summed up in what I have called the strangest verse in the BibleÂ ColossiansÂ 1:20:

â€œâ€¦ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.â€

God intends to reconcile the whole of creation to himself through the death of Christ. Everything that we think of as mission" the Great Commission, Bible translation or what-have-you flows from this. God has been at work since the early chapters of Genesis bringing his plan for reconciliation to fruition; it is his mission, not ours.

But...

One of the remarkable things about God's mission is the way in which he has set out to do it. When he set things in motion in Genesis 12, he chose Abraham and his descendants to fulfil his purpose. The fact is that they weren't very good at it, but he chose them anyway. Likewise, after the resurrection, he commissioned the church to go out into the world and make disciples, knowing that we would make a mess of it. At any stage, God could have done things himself or he could have sent a bunch of angels; either of these would have been more effective than getting people like me to be his messenger. The thing is, the relational God wants to involve people, despite all our faults - because that's the sort of God he is.

So let's turn to translation. Anyone who has ever translated anything knows that it is a difficult and imperfect art. You can never render something from one language into another perfectly. At the very best there will be little nuances or shades of meaning that are either missing or have been added to the original. It is surprising, therefore, that God would use such an imperfect medium to spread his

message. He could just force the whole church to learn Hebrew, Greek (and a bit of Aramaic); that would solve the translation problem. Or he could commission a bunch of angels to use a heavenly form of Google translate to church out copies of the Bible in every language. That would be faster and more accurate than current methods. But he doesn't do that, he uses human translators. Why?

Well, the relational God reaches out to humanity. The one who came down to Adam and Eve in the Garden, called Abram in Haran and who was born as a baby in Bethlehem reaches out to people where they are. He doesn't expect them to take the initiative. However, the way that he does this is through his people, with all of their faults and weaknesses. Translation isn't perfect, but this is the way that God works: he breaks down barriers through his church.

All of the other stuff that I've mentioned in this series flows from this. The fact that translation gives people dignity and communicates to them is because this is the way that God has chosen to reach out. When the only reason we give for Bible translation is that the Scriptures speak clearly in the mother tongue, we are actually mistaking an effect for a cause.

Any discussions about Bible translation and any efforts to promote the work of Bible translation should find their grounding in the character and nature of God, not in human need or activity.

I've written a more academic approach to this topic if you are interested; you can read the draft paper here.

Posts in This Series

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