LANGUAGE AND MISSION

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Category: Observations

Continuing my reflections based on reading J.H Bavinck, though the first quote actually comes from Abraham Kuyper.

> *In missions, it is not enough for you timply to profess Christ, to learn the langauge of an unfamiliar people, and to dedicate yourself personally to preaching the gospel in that strange tongue; what is even more essential than daily bread in this regard is that you possess a living rapport with the religious thought-world of the people that you would like to convert, and ultimately that you discover that point of connection that makes you one with them.*

I think this quote is great for a couple of reasons. The first is that it emphasizes the importance of the receptor culture whether you are in Telford or Timbuctu, saying "the right words" may not communicate what you intend if you miss some of the cultural issues that shape your receptors hearing.

The second quote from Bavinck takes a similar issue.

> *When Paul announced the message about Jesus Christ in Greece and Rome, he had to use all sorts of terms that had a completely different sound to his hearers than what he intended. All sorts of concepts that he employed - words likeÂ grace, sin, redemption, salvation - were known in the world in which he preached by they had a different content. And we can be sure of this: the preaching of the gospel in the Germanic world occured in the sae way. Christianity is simply something unique and diverges from all human thought. Over and again, whenever it is proclaimed in a different language and to a new people, it must redefine, as it were, all sorts of terms and give them new content. Nowhere in the world is a language found that is completely prepared to fully and purely convey the gospel.*

The notion that words like grace and sin are understood in a different way to the one intended by Christians is an important one in cross-cultural mission, but - even more so - in the English speaking world today. The English language has changed dramatically in the last twenty or thirty years and, if we want people to understand our message, we need to change our vocabulary to meet these changes. However, our role in communication is complicated by the fact that no human language system is perfectly designed for transmitting the gospel (no, not even the English of the AV). Whether we are cross-cultural missionaries or simply witnessing to our friends at work, we have to reflect and weigh our use of language to ensure that we are both being faithful to the message and actually communicating with our hearers.