REFLECTIONS ON BIBLE TRANSLATION

Posted on March 7, 2019 by Eddie

The centre of this Good News is the creation of indigenous redeemed communities expressing the Gospel manifold cultures and all adding together to create a symphony of praise to our God.
Category: Observations

As a starting point for a reflection on Bible translation as a part of Godâ€™s mission to humanity, letâ€™s take JohnÂ 20:21:

â€œPeace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.â€

There are a number of ways in which we can reflect on this verse that will help us to explore our responsibilities and also to get to the heart of what Bible translation is allÂ about.

Jesus Invested inÂ People

By the time of his ascension, Jesus had eleven close disciples and an indeterminate number of other followers. In terms of measurable success, Jesusâ€™ earthly ministry did not produce a great deal (in todayâ€™s culture he might have been in danger of having his funding pulled!). Â Jesus invested the best part of three years in the lives of his disciples: this is an amazing commitment of time and energy from the creator of the world. Just think of all of the miracles he could have done if thatâ€™s what heâ€™d chosen toÂ do.

Of course the result was that despite the unpromising start, Jesusâ€™ disciples, empowered by the Holy Spirit, became catalysts for a world-wide movement. Â We could argue that Jesusâ€™ example shows us that the first task of any mission work is to invest in people so that have the capacity to carry on the work themselves and even to reproduce themselves. For Bible translators, this implies that their primary responsibility is to equip translators, not simply to translate the Scriptures themselves. Thinking about this, it is worth noting that even at his ascension after three years of close contact, Jesus did not view his disciples as capable of carrying his work on â€“ he told them that they should wait for the coming of the Spirit. Likewise, preparing Bible translators is a slow and multifaceted task. Academic training is part of the package, but translators need some sort of wider support structure if they are to be truly equipped to do the job. There are no shortÂ cuts.

Jesus Came as aÂ Sacrifice

Serving Christ is a deep privilege, but we must never lose sight of the fact that it is also a life of sacrifice. We arenâ€™t called to take things easy, but to take up our cross (Luke 14:27). Everyone involved in Bible translation, be they mission executives, supporters at home, expatriate missionaries or local translators, is called to a life of sacrifice and service. Some give up time and money, others sacrifice far more even to the point of giving their lives. There is a trend in Western Christianity to see the Christian life as being essentially one of self fulfilment â€“ essentially we are believers for what we can get out of it. There is no doubt that there is a huge amount of satisfaction and enjoyment which can be derived from involvement in mission (and translation in particular) but that isnâ€™t what itâ€™s allÂ about.

Jesus Came Preaching theÂ Kingdom

Jesus did not come preaching a typical evangelical Gospel sermon; he came announcing the arrival of the Kingdom of God (Mark 1:14, 15). Â This is not just the future Kingdom that will be ushered in on Christâ€™s return, but the present Kingdom demonstrated in the life of his people, the Church. Â A clear strand of Jesusâ€™ teaching is that the Kingdom is not just about spiritual salvation, but also about justice and righteousness and a concern for the poor and oppressed. (LukeÂ 4:17,19).

This world may indeed be â€œenemy occupied territory,â€ but the Enemy has got no property rights in it. He is a thief and a liar. Our responsibility as Christians is to be good stewards of the Kingâ€™sÂ property.

Bible translation is fundamentally a Kingdom activity. As Lamin Sanneh has shown, Bible translation not only gives people access to the Scriptures, it also gives value to communities and helps poor and marginalized peoples to become more developed. The process of language development and literacy increases the educational opportunities for minority groups and helps them to move out of the poverty which so often enslaves them. It is tempting to fall into the modern Evangelical trap of seeing mission as being confined to â€˜spiritualâ€™ ministries and to ignore the wider Kingdom agenda in Jesusâ€™ teaching. To do so is to reduce Bible translation to little more than an effective (if long-winded) method of preaching the Gospel message. A more rounded understanding of Jesusâ€™ message places â€˜spiritual workâ€™ in a much broader context and helps us to appreciate the full effect and importance of Bible translationÂ work.

Jesus Became aÂ Man

The incarnation of the Son of God on the earth is the central fact of the Christian faith and our primary responsibility is to bear witness to his life, death and resurrection. Our message is not a philosophical system or a religion, but the man, Jesus Christ. The incarnation is not only the heart of our faith; it is also at the heart of Bible translation providing both the possibility of translation and the model forÂ translation.

In Jesus, God became a man who could be seen, touched and heard (1 John 1:1,2). God had a physical presence on our planet accessible to our senses and, crucially, to our language. Human language strains at trying to describe a transcendental God. Â The Old Testament prophets pile image upon image trying to capture the grandeur of God and still leave us grasping to understand. Â In Jesus, however, we see the glory of God in human form (2 Corinthians 4:6) and while all the books in the world might not be enough to describe everything he did (John 21:25) human language clearly has no trouble talking aboutÂ him.

The reality of Jesus Christ is expressible in any language for the simple fact that â€œhe became a man and dwelt among usâ€ . If God had not chosen to communicate with us on our terms, rather

than on his, then none of our languages would beÂ adequate.

The incarnation of Christ not only provides for the possibility of translation, it also provides our model. Â In becoming a man and leaving heaven for the earth, Jesus made a cross-cultural journey which is beyond human imagining. Our calling to cross boundaries with the gospel is not rooted in finding efficient communication methods (though we want to be efficient) but in the fact that he did itÂ first.

Through the incarnation, Christ was metaphorically translated so that humanity could understand the nature of God (he also gave sanction to the idea of Bible translation by quoting from the Old Testament in the Septuagint â€“ Greek â€“ translation from the original Hebrew). Because of the incarnation, the Christian faith is, in Andrew Wallsâ€™ words, â€˜infinitely translatableâ€™. There is no human language or culture which cannot appropriate the truth of Godâ€™s revelation in Christ. You do not need to adopt the language and culture of first century Palestine in order to become a follower of Jesus. This was underlined at Pentecost where God did not reverse the consequence of the tower of Babel, as some have said, but actually underlined Babel by allowing everyone to understand Peter in their own language. God powerfully gave his own approval of the indigenising of the ChristianÂ message.

Across both geography and time, the expression of faith in Christ varies enormously in its outward expression. Indigenous language Scriptures are part of the larger picture of a translated faith with indigenous forms of worship and community life. This indigenisation is right and proper contributing as it does to the expression of the greater Glory of ourÂ God.

> *The full confession of Godâ€™s grace and glory can only take place through the assembled choirs of all human tongues and cultures. (Guder, Darrell L. The Continuing Conversion of theÂ Church. Edited by Craig Van Gelder, The Gospel and our cultureÂ series. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000,Â p.80).)*

The responsibility of the people of God then is to develop an indigenous expression of the Gospel in their situation. Viewed from this context, the translation of the Scriptures is no longer an optional extra but it is absolutely central to what it means to be a Christian community. We often say that Bible translation is a great help to evangelism. Letâ€™s suggest, somewhat radically, that in the light of the incarnation it is actually the opposite which is true. Translation of the Scriptures is ***the*** fundamental missionary responsibility of theÂ Church.

The Conversion of theÂ Translator

> *â€œMissionary translation always includes the continuing conversion of the translator evangelists. The Spirit, in wonderful ways, makes their telling and showing into their own*

> *hearing and responding.â€ (Guder,Â p.89)*

This theme is not related to John 20:21, but it flows naturally out of the discussion above, so it is included here. It is a fundamental truth noted by many authors that the process of taking the Gospel across cultures inevitably changes the person who carries the message. This is especially true of translators. The struggle to express the truth Godâ€™s revelation within the bounds of a new language and culture inevitably opens up the translator to new insights and understandings about the nature and character of God. Guder says: *â€œTranslation is a powerful process. It can uncover dimensions of a message which have not been recognized in quite the same way in previous translation processes.â€* What translators rather dryly refer to as looking for key terms is in fact an exciting theological reflection on Godâ€™s revelation to us. Things which are unclear or opaque in one language or culture become crystal clear when expressed in another. The translator has a responsibility to continually be learning. In addition, if we are to take the idea of a multi-cultural, world-wide church seriously, then the translator must also be willing and able to bring these insights from the new culture back to his hostÂ culture.

One example of this might be this authorâ€™s experiences trying to understand the nature of the atonement in Kouya culture. The Kouya (a language community of CÃ´te dâ€™Ivoire, West Africa) see salvation as primarily a deliverance from spiritual powers, as a transfer of allegiance from the kingdom of darkness to Godâ€™s Kingdom. Their understanding of the atonement does not deny penal-substitution, but it adds a depth and breadth of understanding that is absent from much Western commentary. However, as our society increasingly denies absolute morality and the reality of sin, the Kouya understanding of the atonement may well communicate more clearly to Western culture than the traditionalÂ message.

It seems that this reflecting back of experience to the home culture must be a central part of any mission or translation strategy. The reasons for this are not purely missiological; there is also a degree of self interest. If we can bring the learning and understanding gained during the translation process back to churches in our home countries, then it would seem to follow that the churches at home would be more inclined to support and pray for translationÂ work.

Conclusion

So where does all this leave us? The key issue is one of vision. Our motivation and vision for mission start with the incarnate Christ, bursting upon history holding nothing back but emptying himself and eventually submitting to death on a cross. As Christ came to the world, so his people spread out across the globe spreading the Good News of a God who translated himself so that we could understand him. The centre of this Good News is the creation of indigenous redeemed communities expressing the Gospel manifold cultures and all adding together to create a symphony of praise to our God. The translation of the Scriptures lies at the very heart of this. Translation is not simply a way

to convey the message: translation *is* theÂ message.

> *The incarnation translates and embodies Godâ€™s love for creation. That translation of Godâ€™s love into human history, commencing with Abraham and climaxing in Jesus, is the great and gracious risk of the mission of God. That risk of translation became global as the gospel of Jesus became the missionary message of the early church. The church was empowered and directed to cross boundaries and to take this message to the ends of the earth. (Guder,Â p.78)*

My attention was drawn to this article today. I wrote it over a decade ago and it was published online here. There are things I would change if I wrote it today, but I still think it touches on some important points.