

Vulnerability Inherent in Bible Translation

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(For more of Eddie's writing see http://www.kouya.net/?page_id=47)

God the Son took on human flesh in God's supreme missional act of self-revelation. Through the process of the incarnation, death and resurrection, God not only revealed his nature to his creation, but his self sacrifice made way for the humanity, creation and God to be reconciled. We know from the Scriptures that the Incarnation was an act of supreme humility: typified by a baby in a stable, a triumphant entry on a lowly donkey and ultimately a criminals death on the cross. God the Son demonstrated his greatness through humility, self-sacrifice and suffering rather than ostentatious demonstrations of authority. When he did work miracles, they were to help others – not to save himself.

Because of this, God's mission through the incarnation was also a risky business. The baby Jesus risked his life at the hands of a homicidal ruler, he allowed himself to be tempted by the evil one and even at the climax of his suffering, Peter risked throwing the whole project off balance by taking up arms against the servants of the high priest. God the Son not only made himself vulnerable to his creation, he also allowed his mission to be placed at risk through the actions of others. Quite simply, he did not come in power to compel people to believe but in meekness and gentleness to win their hearts¹.

And because God wants to win hearts rather than compel people to believe, the Christian project remains vulnerable. Whole people groups reject the Gospel for long periods of time and areas which were once solidly Christian turn their backs on the faith. The Gospel does not (or at least should not) hold on to people by economic and political force, but it demands a personal and community allegiance which can be, and sometimes is, withdrawn².

A number of writers have compared Bible translation to the Incarnation, seeing a parallel between the 'translation' of God into human form and the linguistic transformation which happens when the Scriptures are translated into a new language. As with the Incarnation, Bible translation carries with it a whole series of vulnerabilities. Any translation runs the risk of distorting the message of the original text either accidentally or, sadly, purposefully.

People are not always willing to accept the translation of the Scriptures into a new languages and it is not unknown for translators of the Bible into minority languages to reject their own work, and to continue to use the majority language translation for public and private worship.³ Guder explains this unwillingness to accept the translatability of the Gospel as follows:

¹ Bediako, *Jesus in Africa: The Christian Gospel in History and Experience*, p.42,3

² Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History : Studies in the Transmission and Appropriation of Faith* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2002).

“The translatability of the gospel is a challenge, even a shock for rebellious humans. As beings who are so concerned about control, we find the cultural openness of the gospel offensive. A translatable gospel is fundamentally not controllable. It unsettles us to discover that faithfulness to Christ can, in cultures different from ours, look different from the patterns we have evolved.”⁴

In Sanneh’s words, Bible translation and the assimilation of the Gospel into a new culture is like “letting the Genie out of the bottle”⁵. For the missionary, this can bring another challenge as the new Christian communities may well use the translated Scriptures to critically assess the work and attitudes of the missionaries themselves⁶. Translators then, must make themselves vulnerable to the ones they are working with and for, and be ready to see their own attitudes and acts re-evaluated in the light of a new understanding of the Gospel.

Bible translators are sometimes portrayed (sadly, not entirely without validity) as cultural imperialists and as arrogant. Certainly the size and influence of some Bible translation agencies makes it extremely difficult to partner with them. However, the inherent nature of Bible translation as a missionary enterprise is that it reflects the Incarnation both by bringing understanding of the nature of God and by being an enterprise which is hedged about with risks and vulnerabilities.

References

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³ Rick Brown, "Selecting and Using Scripture Portions Effectively in Frontier Missions," *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 18, no. 4 (2001), p.10

⁴ Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, p.91

⁵ Sanneh, *Translating the Message : The Missionary Impact on Culture*, p.206

⁶ Sanneh, *Translating the Message : The Missionary Impact on Culture*, pp. 162-3