

Bible Translation & Church Planting

IS IT POSSIBLE TO BE A BIBLE TRANSLATOR AND A CHURCH PLANTER?

THE TESTIMONY OF A BIBLE TRANSLATOR, BY DENNIS COCHRANE

Is it possible to be a Bible translator and a church planter at the same time? J. Allen Thompson, former International Director of the mission agency Worldteam, said, “Wycliffe is one of the most effective church planting agencies in the world today.”

But how can that be? Wycliffe’s specialty is Seed planting—the Seed of God’s Word. Does this Seed planting lend itself to church planting? Apparently so: thousands of churches have come into existence as a result of Bible translators living among a people group, winning their friendship and helping to give them God’s Word in the language that most effectively speaks to their hearts. The evidence is compelling: when this Seed is well planted it tends to give birth to churches.

Some years ago Wycliffe translators in one country had completed New Testaments in 64 languages. A careful survey was then conducted to determine the long-term spiritual results of Scripture translation. The survey found that among those sixty-four language groups there were 110,000 believers and 1300 churches. The director of that survey said, “The great majority of those churches were the direct result of the work of Bible translators, not of other missionary activity.”

The late Dr. Richard Pittman, a student

of church history, said, “In all history there has never been a stable, long-lasting church in any society where Scripture does not exist in the vernacular.” Of course churches can be planted in societies where no Scripture exists.

But the key words in Dr. Pittman’s statement are “stable” and “long-lasting.” Only Scripture can provide the necessary foundation for any enduring work of God.

When the gospel first began to be preached among the Duna people of Papua New Guinea, the people frequently said to each other, “Like this says the white missionary.” But when Scripture began to be translated into their language for the first time, that earlier phrase changed. Now the people began saying, “Like this says God’s Carving [Writing].” And missionaries and translators alike rejoiced to see Scripture becoming the foundation on which that infant Duna church was developing.

If there is to be a healthy church there must be well-disciplined church leadership. And Bible translation work lends itself to quality discipling of those who will become church leaders. As these mother tongue speakers sit around a

translation desk, carefully weighing every word and phrase of Scripture, they can receive a better-than-seminary knowledge of Bible content. They become men

and women of the Word, often able to be spiritual leaders in those newly formed churches, serving as evangelists, pastors and elders.

Some have thought that church planting ought to precede Bible translation work. But Scripture is not *a* sword of the Spirit, it is *the* sword of the Spirit. He has no other. Since it is the Spirit of God who convicts unsaved people of sin and righteousness and judgment (John 16:8) should we not give Him His

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might remain spiritually anemic, always an easy prey to false teaching.

Nothing so effectively reaches people at their heart level as does the mother tongue. Gregorio Tingson, Philippine evangelist, said, "In my county the English language is widely known and used. But when a young man wants to say to his sweetheart, 'I love you,' he says it in the local dialect, not in English, because it is his soul speaking to her soul."

Should we think it strange if God, wanting to say "I love you" to all the peoples of the world, would want to say it in the language that best reaches people at the level of heart and soul? God wants to speak not just to people's heads but to their hearts—because He desires a heart-level response.

For nearly a hundred years there was very little response to the preaching of the gospel among the Navajo. As a people group they were considered extremely resistant to the gospel. Finally the New Testament was translated into Navajo and many Navajo began coming to faith in Christ. An old Navajo believer said, "We Navajo used to think of Christianity as white man's religion. Now that God speaks to us in our own language, we have stopped thinking of this as white man's religion."

Scripture in the mother tongue can make all the difference between success

or failure in church planting efforts. Even among people groups where Scriptures are intelligible in some language other than their mother tongue (trade language, national language, etc.) those Scriptures might nevertheless be ineffective until translated into the heart language.

A veteran church planter in Central America said, "Many people think that cross-cultural church planting is very complicated. It isn't. It involves essentially just two things: first, live among the people and win their friendship. Second, at the earliest possible moment get them into intimate contact with *this book*."

That is what Bible translators are doing the world over. And as people are coming into intimate (mother tongue) contact with God's Word, churches are coming into existence, thousands of them. That should be no surprise because seed planting is universally a critical part of any birthing process. And God's Seed, His Word, is no less critical to the birthing of churches.

It should be noted that many Bible translators serve in environments where churches already exist, but mother tongue Scriptures are needed. In such environments the translator will function as a support to these already existent churches. And in a growing number of environments the expatriate missionary will serve as a trainer, consultant and facilitator to nationals who will do the actual translating. But whether serving existent churches or working among language groups where no church has yet been birthed, Bible translators help provide an indispensable foundation for healthy, long-lasting, Christ-honoring churches.

Sword, the primary instrument by which He does His convicting work? Therefore Bible translation should be seen as a powerful instrument for early evangelism as well as for later church development.

And there is another reason why Scripture translation should occur very early in missionary outreach to a particular people group. History shows that if a church grows accustomed to getting along without the written Word, it can be difficult to change those established patterns. Thus the believers might never become a true "people of the Book" and

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