

Bible Translation for the Glory of God

**How to Glorify Jesus Christ through the
Translation of His Word**

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Introduction

Do you want to live a life that glorifies the Lamb who has redeemed a people for God the Father from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation (Revelation 5:9)?

Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, has commissioned the church with the task of proclaiming the gospel and teaching the Scriptures in the languages spoken by the redeemed. How do we engage in this task for his glory and not our own, to advance his purposes alone and not anyone else's?

In the following essays I present the critical components of engaging in Bible translation for the glory of our triune God. The first section of this work focuses on the right motivation. In the second section, I cover several preliminary questions about Bible translation, especially the global need for Bibles.

The third section focuses on language in the plan of God for humanity, examining the events at Babel and Pentecost along with reflections on the role of the Holy Spirit in gospel proclamation and Bible translation.

The fourth section explores a biblical theology of language, Scripture, and Bible translation, especially as they relate to the church. In the fifth section, I examine in more depth the concept of the audience in Bible translation and its relationship to the purpose of translation.

The sixth section responds to current developments in the field of Bible translation that could prevent you from translating for the glory of God. I consider how the concepts of accuracy and quality are being redefined. I

then show how many unfaithful works are being produced in the name of Bible translation, especially Muslim Idiom Translations.

The final section focuses on three men who defended Bible translation during the Reformation. I consider John Calvin's support of the Bible in French. I then introduce an English theologian, William Whitaker, who wrote extensively in defense of Bible translation during the second generation of the English Reformation. Lastly, I share quotes from Myles Coverdale along with a book review of a recent biography of Coverdale.

The 38 essays in this work were originally written as blog posts over a four-year period. Lord willing, I will continue publishing blog posts on topics related to the theology of language and Bible translation. In the meantime, I thought it was the right time to bring these blog posts together in one document. The current essays cover enough topics to provide a critical resource on Bible translation, outlining a biblical theology of translation and, in the process, responding to contemporary challenges to the faithful translation of God's Word.

As you read these essays, may the Lord increase your love for him and his Word, especially his Word in the languages of the redeemed from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation (Revelation 5:9). May the Heavenly Father guide you as you seek to glorify the Lamb by the power of the Holy Spirit for the ultimate glory of our triune God.

SECTION I

This first section consists of three essays that address the motivation for Bible translation, the first and most essential being the glory of God the Father and Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.

It is critical that the task of Bible translation be reoriented from an audience-focus to an author-focus, from the benefits to readers to the glory of our triune God.

In fact, orienting our endeavors toward God and his glory does not diminish, in any way, what we accomplish for readers. On the other hand, focusing too much on the reader diminishes the rightful place of God, ultimately leading to translations that dishonor him and, consequently, are of no benefit even for their purported readers.

Translation for the Glory of the Lamb

What comes to mind when you think of Bible translation? Millions without a Bible and no way to know Christ? The image of a missionary preaching with an open Bible in hand? The need for a faithful translation in your own language? Yet there is another image that we should consider.

In Revelation, the apostle John witnessed a vision of heaven and unending praise around the throne of God. Furthermore, he saw Jesus Christ exalted and declared worthy of all praise. In the words of praise uttered around the throne, we encounter profound truths about Christ with implications for the Word and the translation of the Scriptures for the nations.

In light of John's vision, we see that the ministry of Bible translation is a response of humble obedience to Jesus Christ, equipping his bride, the church, for the ministry of the Word in her own language and all the languages of the redeemed.

John's Vision of Heaven

In Revelation 4, the apostle John is taken to heaven and given a glimpse of eternal praise around the throne of God. John first witnesses the praise of God the Father. Then, in chapter 5, the praise halts for an announcement. A special scroll is presented to God the Father. An angelic voice asks if anyone is able to open the scroll.

However, the silence grows because no one is worthy to take the scroll. It appears to John that no one has sufficient authority to open the scroll and thereby usher in the judgments in it. He begins to weep.

Then one of the elders rebukes him and says that the Lion of Judah will take the scroll. John looks and sees not the Lion of Judah, but the Lamb, Jesus Christ. The Lamb approaches the throne and takes the scroll.

The heavenly beings around the throne burst out in praise, singing that Jesus is worthy to take the scroll and open its seals. The angels then respond in praise, repeating that the Lamb is worthy.

Worthy Is the Lamb Who Was Slain

Why is Jesus Christ worthy? The four living creatures and the twenty-four elders around the throne declare that he is worthy because he was slain. The multitudes of angels joining the praise call Jesus “the Lamb who was slain.”

The praise of Christ focuses on his sacrificial death on the cross, an act of humble obedience to God the Father to fulfill his Father’s will.

In John 10:18, Jesus tells his disciples that he will lay down his life of his own accord and by his own authority. Jesus struggled at the prospect of suffering on the cross but willingly submitted to the Father’s will. He prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me. Yet not as I will, but as You will” (Matthew 26:39).

God the Father has exalted Jesus to his right hand because of his willingness to humble himself to the point of death (Philippians 2:8-9). In the heavenly throne room, the apostle John saw the exalted Christ, who willingly laid down his life, now taking up the scroll with authority.

Worthy Is the Lamb Who Redeemed the Nations

The Lamb is worthy because he laid down his life in humble submission to his Father. Yet heavenly praise does not stop with his death.

The four living creatures and the twenty-four elders also declare that he is worthy because he redeemed a people for God from every tribe, language, people, and nation (Revelation 5:9).

During his earthly ministry, Jesus said that he would give his life as a ransom for many (Matthew 20:28). On the night he was betrayed, he told his disciples that his blood would be shed so that many would find the remission of sins (Matthew 26:28).

When Jesus appeared to his disciples after his resurrection, he told them that they would proclaim the gospel to the nations (Luke 24:46). Furthermore, Jesus gave his followers who gathered on a mountain in Galilee a commission to take the gospel to the nations (Matthew 28:18-20).

Amid the praise of heaven, the apostle John hears that the redeemed includes people from every tribe, language, people, and nation.

Worthy Is the Lamb Who Made a Kingdom and Priests

The four living creatures and the twenty-four elders do not stop after declaring Jesus worthy for his death which redeemed a people from every tribe, language, people, and nation. They continue by praising him for making the redeemed a kingdom and priests.

In the first verses of Revelation, John writes that Jesus made believers a kingdom and priests of God the Father (Revelation 1:6).

The apostle Peter also writes of the redeemed as “a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9).

The church is a “kingdom” in the sense that believers reign on earth. Furthermore, believers are “priests” because they are set apart for a special ministry to God the Father through faith in Jesus Christ.

How do believers carry out their priestly ministry to God? How do they “proclaim the excellencies” of God the Father? Through the ministry of the Word in the languages of the redeemed.

The Redeemed and the Word of God

The redeemed from every tribe, language, people, and nation are to proclaim the excellencies of God the Father. They are to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ to all creation (Mark 16:15).

On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit moved the first disciples to proclaim the mighty works of God in the languages of the pilgrims in Jerusalem (Acts 2:11). The apostle Peter then preached the gospel of Jesus Christ to the crowds in Greek, since it was a message of salvation for the nations (Acts 2:14-47).

For the kingdom to advance and for the redeemed to proclaim the excellencies of God, the people of God must minister to the ethnolinguistic groups of the world in their respective languages.

Translation for Christ and His Bride

Jesus Christ has redeemed his Bride, the church, from every tribe, language, people, and nation. He builds them up with his Word, and his

followers build each other up through the ministry of the Word. It follows that an essential part of equipping a group of believers is to provide the Word in their own language.

When we approach the ministry of Bible translation from this perspective, we recognize that it is centered in Christ and for his glory. Because he is worthy, we praise him and offer him our humble, obedient service. We submit to his purpose, building up his kingdom and priesthood. Some are specifically called to equip the saints from every language with the Scriptures in their own language.

May those who are called to the ministry of Bible translation be encouraged and persevere in the power of the Spirit and for the glory of the Lamb and our heavenly Father, who are worthy of all praise and honor and glory!

In Conclusion

The fact that millions don't have the Word of God in their language should move our hearts, but shouldn't be our first reason to translate. Unreached people groups without a church should grab our attention, but not more than the Lamb who is worthy of all praise. He knows every one of his sheep, even those who are still unreached. As important as these and other concerns may be, they fall short of the reason we should translate the Word.

We should give our time, our resources, and even our lives to the ministry of Bible translation for the glory of Christ. And when we focus on the glory of Christ and serve him as our first motive and greatest love, we will be used by him to accomplish his purposes, which are greater than any specific need we might see.

If we focus on a specific need, however, we risk serving out of guilt and glorifying the need instead of the One who gives us joy as we serve with his strength.

So, we translate to the glory of Christ, on behalf of the church, equipping churches in their own languages for the reading, preaching, and teaching of the Word, in personal obedience to God who calls us to this ministry.

Let us keep the Lamb of God ever before us. Until we join the worship of Jesus Christ, the Lamb, around the throne, may this vision move us to serve the church, proclaim his greatness, and advance the translation of his Word.

10 Reasons to Translate the Bible

There are many reasons for translating the Bible, but are they all equally important? How do they relate to each other? Are some reasons not actually reasons at all?

After researching this topic in some depth, I have compiled a list of 10 reasons to translate the Bible. Most of these reasons are commonly heard today. They are each important, but not all complete in themselves. In fact, the first few reasons are not able to stand on their own. But taken all together, they help us better grasp the importance of Bible translation and the biblical basis for this vital ministry.

1. To end Bible poverty

In 2003, a challenge went out to place a portion of Scripture in every home in the world, and specifically in the mother tongue of those living there. Loren Cunningham, the late founder of Youth With A Mission (YWAM), responded by launching the [End Bible Poverty Now](#) initiative at YWAM and eventually wrote a [Covenant to End Bible Poverty](#). It has become increasingly common to hear the call to “eradicate” or “end Bible poverty.” These expressions were fresh and attention-grabbing at the time. Bible “poverty” is more gripping than Bible “translation” or “distribution.”

However, the goal of ending Bible poverty cannot stand on its own. We must move to more profound motivations. It's essential to look past the need in an abstract sense and consider the people in need.

2. Because so many languages lack Scripture

Another way to emphasize the need for Bible translation is to highlight the number of languages that lack Scripture.

William Carey, the father of modern missions, may have been the first to have a vision to translate the Bible for the languages of a given region of the world. He translated the Bible into [six languages, including Bengali, Hindi, and Sanskrit](#), and the New Testament into [26 other languages of India](#). Burdened for South Asia, he spoke of the number of people and languages there.

A century later, William Cameron Townsend had an even greater burden. He wanted to see the Bible translated into all the languages of the world. But was that practical? How many translators would be required? How many languages were there? After several years of research, he and his colleagues concluded that 2,000 languages still needed a Bible. They set out their vision in a book titled [Two Thousand Tongues To Go: The Story of the Wycliffe Bible Translators](#).

Over the past several decades, research has continued, and the number of languages without Bibles has grown.

The vision of all languages having Scripture is important, as long as it is part of a greater vision to see the redeemed of every tribe, tongue, people, and nation know and worship their Lord. When I have an opportunity to speak on the topic of Bible translation, I often mention the number of languages in the world and the number without Scripture. As with “Bible poverty,” though, the focus on need must be supported by more profound motivations.

3. To provide for the Bibleless (who deserve a Bible)

Another common way of expressing the motivation for Bible translation today is in terms of the “Bibleless” who “deserve” to have God’s Word in their own language.

In *Two Thousand Tongues To Go*, the term “Bibleless” was used as a concise way to refer to language groups in need of a translation.

Before Townsend and Wycliffe Bible Translators used the term, the American Bible Society and other organizations were using “Bibleless” to refer to those who didn’t possess their own copy of the Bible. But Townsend rightly expanded the term to refer to those who didn’t possess a Bible because it wasn’t translated yet.

More recently, I have noticed that the “Bibleless” are said to be deserving of the Word of God. It is true that we have a responsibility to proclaim the gospel to everyone. It is equally important to realize that it is God's will that his people have his Word. But no one in particular deserves these gracious gifts from God.

If someone deserves a Bible, who owes it to them? Does God owe them a copy? Or perhaps the donor is supposed to feel the burden of responsibility and give.

Yet we only owe God our obedience and a debt of love to others. Don’t let anyone make you feel guilty for having a Bible in English while others don’t yet have a Bible in their language.

For those who have a Bible and love the Word of God, the term “Bibleless” may be very impactful. Yet the idea of giving Bibles to those without is only a part of a larger picture. It’s important to view the need for Scripture in light of what the Bible itself is, the very Word of God.

4. Because the Bible is the very Word of God

The previous reasons focus on the need for Bible translation without saying anything about what the Bible itself is.

Translators should be motivated to translate because the Bible actually is the Word of God. We must recognize that the Scriptures are inspired, inerrant, authoritative, and sufficient for life and godliness (2 Timothy 3:14-17; 2 Peter 1:3; Acts 20:32).

The [translators of the English Standard Version](#) summarize their motivations as follows: “Scripture is sacred and that the words of the Bible are the very words of God.”

Their convictions resemble those of the translators of the King James Bible, who in 1611 wrote, “God’s sacred Word . . . is that inestimable treasure that excelleth all the riches of the earth.”

The very nature of what the Bible is and what God intends for his Word should be an even stronger motivation than current needs. At the same time, we shouldn’t forget about the needs of others. In fact, we should remember our greatest need.

5. To enable people to understand the gospel

With this fifth reason we have shifted our focus to the spiritual benefit that comes from having a Bible in one’s language.

We don’t translate the Bible simply so that it might be possessed, read, or understood. No, we translate with the hope and eager expectation that readers will understand the gospel message and put their faith in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.

As [Dave Hare writes](#), “Bible translation is necessary because people cannot be saved if they do not understand the gospel. And for many

people, they will never understand the gospel unless it is communicated in their heart language.”

When we recognize and affirm the importance of people coming to faith in Christ and the role of Scripture in this miraculous work of grace, we can also affirm the first three reasons. In other words, it is only appropriate to talk about the lack of Bibles if we recognize that this physical need is part of a greater spiritual need—the need to understand the gospel and be reconciled to God through faith in Jesus Christ.

Yet we shouldn't stop here in our discussion of the reasons for Bible translation. If we do, we risk viewing Bible translation in general and the Scriptures in particular as merely part of evangelism.

6. To enable Christians to understand the Scriptures and use them in ministry

With this sixth reason we have broadened our view of the Bible. The Scriptures are more than a tool for evangelizing the lost; they are an essential part of the life of the people of God.

With this in view, [William Barrick writes](#), “Without the Word of God, no ministry can be satisfactorily performed—the Word provides the authority for ministry, the instruction for ministry, the power of ministry, and the message of ministry.”

An essential part of this reason is the recognition of the church as the audience in translation. The translated Scriptures equip the visible church to read, preach, and teach the Word.

But what about the Great Commission and taking the gospel to the nations?

7. To fulfill the Great Commission

For many years, I thought it was sufficient to quote Matthew 28:18-20, the Great Commission, as the scriptural basis for Bible translation.

In this passage, we read, “And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, ‘All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to keep all that I commanded you; and behold, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.’”

Many, if not most, Bible translators working in missionary contexts look to this passage as their personal commission to engage in Bible translation. For many translators today, “all the nations” includes the language community they serve. Furthermore, they view translation as part of disciple-making. If asked for more specifics, they might add that the command to teach presupposes that the Bible has been translated. So they translate to fulfill the Great Commission.

Modern translators are not alone in viewing Christ’s commands as the basis of Bible translation. In 1542, the French Bible translator Jacques Lefèvre d’Étaples wrote, “And doesn’t he also say through Saint Mark ‘go through the world and preach the gospel to all creatures’? And through Saint Matthew ‘teaching them to keep all that I have commanded you’? And how will they teach them to keep Christ’s commandments if they don’t want the people to see and read the gospel of God in his own language?”

Lefèvre devoted the final years of his life translating the Bible into French. He had a significant impact on a group of young reformers, including John Calvin.

8. To obey God’s command to read and search the Bible

If you are familiar with the [Westminster Confession of Faith](#), you might know that it has a short but profound section addressing Bible translation.

The first chapter of the confession addresses the Scriptures. In section 8, it says that the people of God have a right to a Bible in their own language because they are commanded to read and search the Scriptures in the fear of God.

This statement was the first of its kind in a Protestant confession to address the topic of Bible translation and state that the translation of Scripture is for the spiritual benefit of the people of God. Furthermore, the people of God are to read and study the Scriptures in obedience to God. It is worth noting that the writers of the confession drew on the earlier writings of the Cambridge theologian William Whitaker. Whitaker defended the translation of the Scriptures in his classic work *A Disputation on Holy Scripture*.

Whitaker focused on the reading of Scripture and defended the right of each believer to read the Bible. He was responding to the Council of Trent and leading Roman Catholic theologians of his day who did not want the common person in the pew to read Scripture and thereby fall into heresy.

It may seem narrow to focus on reading, but reading is the first and most important manner in which one may interact with the Word. And by the public reading of Scripture, the Holy Spirit has spoken through the Scriptures to the people of God over millennia.

9. Because the Holy Spirit ministers through the Bible in the hearts of the redeemed

The Holy Spirit ministers to us through the truths of Scripture as we comprehend them and respond in faith.

In 1 Corinthians 14, the apostle Paul confronted the practice of publicly speaking in a language that the church didn't understand. He stated that this practice was of no benefit to the congregation. On the contrary, it was essential to speak to the church in a language they understood in order for them to comprehend and for the Holy Spirit to minister to their hearts according to that truth. Interestingly, Paul writes that the Holy Spirit had

given the gifts of tongues as well as of interpretation for the edification of the church (1 Cor 14:10, 27-28).

There are many unanswered questions about the gifts of tongues and interpretation at the church in Corinth. But it is clear that the Holy Spirit worked to ensure that believers understood the truth in their own languages.

Even today, the Holy Spirit ministers in every heart regardless of language. And when the Spirit convicts people of their sins and drives them to repentance, the Spirit also places a desire in their hearts for the written Word. Thus, Bible translation is an integral part of the ministry of the Holy Spirit. When the Bible has been translated into a particular language, the Holy Spirit works in the hearts of the members of that language community as they comprehend the Scriptures in their language.

10. To obey Jesus Christ, who is working out the will of God the Father by the power of the Holy Spirit through his Word in the hearts of his redeemed

This final reason focuses on translation as an act of obedience to the triune God. Whether you are a Bible translator or involved in the ministry of Bible translation in another way, we must recognize that the translation of the Bible, just like reading, teaching, or preaching it, is an act of obedience to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

It's also important to recognize that Jesus Christ is working out the will of God the Father, having redeemed a people from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation and making them a kingdom and priests to God (Revelation 5:9-10). In this light, the ministry of Bible translation is part the work of Jesus Christ, equipping those he redeemed for God from every language group with the Word.

Furthermore, as noted in the previous reason, the Holy Spirit is the power of God working through the Word. The Holy Spirit moves us to serve in this

key ministry, sustains us during it, and is our hope as we put translations into the hands of others. The translated Word changes lives because the Holy Spirit uses our feeble efforts to accomplish God's glorious purposes.

It's essential to view Bible translation as obedience to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and, by extension, to our triune God. We must seek to glorify him in this endeavor.

In Conclusion

I have presented the major rationales for Bible translation that you will encounter today, as well as some that you may not have encountered. It's hard to get people's attention today; gripping language and moving images have a role in compelling others to stop and think about Bible translation.

But once this important topic is in view, we have to move beyond the level of needs and focus on the glories of our triune God. I hope these reasons will encourage you to reflect more deeply on Bible translation and specifically on the centrality of our triune God and his purposes through his Word.

Translating the Bible for the Glory of God

Over the last thirty years, a growing number of Bible translators have defined success in translation in terms of how well their translations achieve a specific purpose for their intended audiences.

Today, translators often define their success in terms of their own goals, achieving the purpose they set out for themselves. With this approach, it shouldn't be surprising that God's place as the Author of Scripture is seldom discussed, and translating for the glory of God is not even a topic. Yet given the high priority of glorifying God in Scripture, we must seriously reconsider the place of the glory of God in translation.

Doing All for the Glory of God?

In 1 Corinthians 10:31, the apostle Paul writes that we are to do all things for the glory of God. What does it mean to do everything for His glory? What does it mean to translate for the glory of God?

To answer these questions, we must first understand how God glorifies Himself. Understating God's self-glorification will provide us with an example we can emulate in our lives and at the translation desk.

When we look at the Scriptures, we learn that God glorifies Himself when He puts Himself on display and manifests His divine attributes. One way He does this is through creation. The heavens declare His glory (Psalm 19:1), and all who ponder them recognize the eternal power and divine nature of the Creator (Romans 1:20).

We also see Him supremely glorify Himself in the incarnation of Jesus Christ (John 1:14; Hebrews 1:3). Moreover, Jesus revealed the Father's glorious attributes in his obedient life, sacrificial death, and triumphant resurrection (John 17:4; 12:28).

Translating for the Glory of God?

What does it mean to translate for the glory of God? Translating for His glory involves engaging in Bible translation in a manner that seeks, first and foremost, to reveal God's character and divine attributes according to His purposes. And this approach to the task of translation begins with the translator's heart.

Recognizing God

To translate for the glory of the triune God, translators must first acknowledge and personally trust in the God who reveals Himself in the Scriptures, both as Creator and Lord. They must confess with their lips and trust in their hearts that Jesus Christ is their Lord and Savior. Furthermore, they must seek the power of the Holy Spirit as they endeavor to live in obedience to the God of Scripture.

In addition to having a right relationship with God, translators must be certain they have a divine calling on their lives to engage in the ministry of Bible translation. In other words, translators engage in translation with a confidence that it is God's will for them and not simply their own desire. With such confidence, they translate as faithful servants instead of presumptuous interlopers.

Submitting to the Scriptures

Furthermore, to glorify God in the translation of His Word, it is essential to submit to what God says about the Scriptures. They are His inspired, infallible, inerrant, and authoritative Word.

The church is commanded to publicly read, preach, and teach the Scriptures as part of corporate worship. Moreover, they contain the gospel message that followers of Jesus Christ are to proclaim to all nations.

It follows that the task of translation produces a text that equips the church to read, preach, and teach, enabling faithful believers to advance the Kingdom of God by the power of the Holy Spirit.

If translators do not submit to God and His Word, faithfully translating His Word, they risk translating in a way that only brings glory to themselves.

Translating in Utter Dependence

With a desire to glorify God in translation, it is essential to pray for the Spirit to move and bring God the glory He is due through the translated Scriptures. Such prayer is an expression of our utter dependence on God, who alone can work through us to bring Himself glory.

With our trust fully set on our Heavenly Father, we must persevere even when we don't see others giving God glory because we know He works in ways we can't see or imagine. It may be His will to receive glory through the translated Word in decades to come, and so we persevere in faith.

We must not forget that even if we never hear of a person being impacted by our translation, God is nonetheless glorified as we translate as an act of obedience according to His will. Furthermore, He receives glory as He is made known in a new language community through the translated Word, regardless of the response.

In Conclusion

Some may think the glory of God has no place in a conversation about translation, whether of the Bible or other texts. Still others may doubt the value of this topic. The current focus, they say, should be on methodology (how to translate) and not the place of God in translation. However, for

those who truly desire to honor God with their lives, it is essential to engage in the translation of Scripture as a ministry for His glory alone.

Translation must be more than the transfer of meaning, more than communication, more than elevating language communities, and even more than establishing churches.

With a right focus on the glory of God, we have the most important motivation for the task of translation. From this motivation, we have confidence and the strength to persevere because we know He will use our feeble efforts to accomplish His wondrous purposes.

Finally, recognizing the rightful place of God as Author provides a framework for better understanding the importance of the audience and guards us from trends in translation that elevate translators and their intended audiences over the Author.

SECTION II

How could we translate for the glory of Jesus Christ without recognizing the full extent of what he has accomplished for the Father? The Lamb who was slain has redeemed a people for God from every language group (Revelation 5:9). Furthermore, he is building up his church among those he has redeemed. It follows that the church in every language group must have the Scriptures to be fully equipped to read, preach, and teach the Word.

The following four articles address this and other common questions about Bible translation. The need for Bible translation is great, and the purposes of our heavenly Father are greater still.

10 Essential Questions about Bible Translation

The most essential questions about Bible translation are not related to the product but to the purpose and process. Why translate? What is the purpose of a translation? Who is a translation for? And how does this task ultimately glorify God? Here are ten questions to guide you into the most important and challenging issues in Bible translation.

1. Why translate the Scriptures?

From Mount Sinai to today, God's revelation has been preserved in writing so that God's people in every generation may know the Word of God and respond in obedience (Romans 15:4). Furthermore, God has commanded his people to read the Scriptures and, based on their reading, to exhort and teach others (1 Timothy 4:13). The Scriptures are to be translated for the church so that believers, corporately and individually, may read them and communicate truths found in the Word.

It follows that the purpose of translating Scripture is to equip the church to minister with the written Word, corporately and individually. To the extent that believers are faithful to this task, they will also have an impact on their language community.

It is not uncommon for someone to say that they translate to fulfill the Great Commission or to transform a community. We should desire these goals, while recognizing that merely producing or distributing a translation does not accomplish these grand objectives. But the Word in translation does equip the church. Believers, in turn, when equipped and trained, are God's

instruments to lead others to Christ and advance the kingdom of God. So, translation is for the church, and the church, by the power of the Spirit, furthers the kingdom of God.

2. What are the needs for Bible translation?

Across the world today, thousands of translators are committed to bringing God's Word to language communities large and small. Because of their work and the dedication of previous generations, an estimated 1,500 languages have a New Testament. 670 languages have a complete Bible. And work is progressing in many other groups.

However, there are an estimated 4,200 languages without any Scripture. As many as 1.5 billion people may not have a complete Bible in their own language. Furthermore, many with Scripture have a need for a revision of their translation. In fact, the work of Bible translation never actually ends.

No sooner is the New Testament completed than the Old Testament should be started. No sooner is a Bible dedicated than a revision should be planned. And with the Bible comes a desire for other literature and resources to better study and teach the Scriptures. Beyond these needs for translation, there is an even greater need for translators, reviewers, teachers, and pastors, all with a deep love for Christ and his Word.

When the Lord puts such teams together, work progresses, local churches are strengthened, and our triune God is glorified in their community.

3. What is the task of translation?

The translation of the Bible isn't merely an academic task, though it requires a scholar's mind and serious study. It's not merely a cultural study, though it requires an in-depth knowledge of biblical culture as well as continual inquiries into the culture of the group receiving the translation.

Translation is more than linguistics, even though linguistics is an essential tool in the translator's tool belt.

At its essence, translating the Word of God is an act of obedience to God, motivated by a love for Christ and his church, empowered by the Holy Spirit, in service to local churches and their language community. In short, it is a ministry of the Word. The translator is a servant of the Word.

4. What is the relationship between the Holy Spirit and translation?

When the followers of John Wycliffe were persecuted for reading the Bible in English, they defended reading and preaching in the English language by referring to the ministry of the Holy Spirit as recorded in Acts.

A popular pamphlet of the time, [Wycliffe's Wicket](#), asks why the Roman Catholic Church punishes those who preach in English when the Holy Spirit moved the early disciples to preach in the languages of the nations. On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit empowered the apostles to preach in the languages of the different nationalities who had come to Jerusalem. The Spirit could have moved in the hearts of the audience and enabled them to all understand Aramaic or Greek. But instead, the disciples were miraculously empowered to declare the mighty works of God in the languages of the nations. In so doing, the Spirit affirmed that the gospel should be communicated in other languages by preaching and teaching. If it is fitting to preach and teach in a language, who would hold back the whole counsel of God?

5. Who should translate the Scriptures?

If Bible translation is, first and foremost, a ministry of the Word, translators should be servants of the Word. Furthermore, translation is a community activity. The days of Martin Luther translating in seclusion at Wartburg

Castle have passed. Translation is done in a team, and so a translator should bring skills needed by their team.

A translation team needs someone skilled in biblical languages and linguistics, someone else with a good grasp of the target language and its structures, another with insights into the local culture and religion, and yet another with a good understanding of poetry and song in the local culture and language.

More areas of expertise and practical skills could be added to those above, such as computer skills and programming. We now live in a time when the first drafts of a translation may be read on smartphones instead of paper. It is also essential for the members of a team to have a willingness to learn from each other and, as a group, to grow in their understanding of the task before them.

So, translators must be servants—serving each other as they work as a team, serving local churches, and serving their Lord and Savior, who himself came to serve.

6. Who is the audience for a translation?

The Scriptures are from God and for his people, equipping them for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17). The church is instructed to read, preach, and teach the Scriptures corporately and, by extension, individually (1 Timothy 4:13).

It is true that the Scriptures are a tool to bring people to salvation, but they are not primarily or exclusively a tool in evangelism. The Word of God has a larger purpose, which is accomplished in and through the church.

It is essential that a translation be produced with and for local churches. A church with the Word of God in their own language is the most effective tool

for evangelization. It is more effective than a special translation, designed for evangelism but not accepted by local churches.

In short, the Scriptures are for the church, and so the church, globally and in every community, must devote itself to the Word.

7. Which portions of Scripture should be translated and when?

Translations usually start with the New Testament and specifically with narratives about the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. It may take eight to ten years to complete a New Testament. However, once this milestone is reached, a translation team usually has the experience to tackle the rest of the Bible in a relatively shorter time.

Some translators have started with Genesis because of the importance of establishing a biblical worldview and addressing fundamental questions about origins and sin. In Islamic contexts, some translators have started with passages from the Old Testament because of local respect for the patriarchs.

In general, translators recognize that some passages of Scripture are easier to translate and more appropriate for teaching and evangelism. But wherever a team starts its work, it is a joy to have God's Word on the lips and in the hearts of the translators, the local believers, and eventually, the whole community.

8. What is the role of the church?

The church has been entrusted with the Scriptures and, consequently, has a significant role in their preservation, teaching, and translation.

The church is to minister the Word and should ensure that local churches in every language community are able to read, preach, and teach the

Scriptures in their own languages in obedience to the Scriptures (1 Timothy 4:13).

Churches should recognize their unique role in the ministry of Bible translation, beginning with living in obedience to their own translation of the Scriptures and continuing by committing to the translation of the Scriptures for churches and language groups that lack the Word.

Any commitment to translation should be part of a larger commitment to establishing and strengthening churches in their respective communities. What is the value of Scripture with no one to read, preach, or teach it?

Finally, churches should prayerfully reflect on what the Scriptures instruct them about the Word and translation—in other words, churches should develop a theology of translation.

9. Do we need a theology of Bible translation?

The most common questions about translation often revolve around the product—the Bible in our hands or the one we're thinking of buying. We want to know why there are so many versions or which one is best for us.

Once we have answered those questions and begun to think more about Bible translation itself, we can start asking questions such as those above.

In order to answer them, we need to reflect thoughtfully on the Scriptures and what the Scriptures themselves reveal about the task of translation.

The careful, systematic study of Scripture with the goal of understanding what Scripture is, why it should be translated, and for whom it is to be translated, leads to a theology of translation. A theology of translation, in turn, assists us as we seek to be involved in this strategic ministry in a manner most honoring to God. In short, it is essential to have a theology of

Bible translation in order to correctly understand the importance of the task, its place in the mission of the church, and its ultimate potential to give glory to our heavenly Father through Jesus Christ our Lord.

10. What will be your part in the ministry of Bible translation?

This final question is the most important as it relates to you and your response to the Word of God. It's a question only you can answer. What will you do to be part of the strategic ministry of taking the Word in translation to the peoples and languages of the world?

My heartfelt prayer is that we will all recognize, with a new clarity and fervor, the importance of the Word of God in the languages of the world. May we each be even more engaged in giving glory to God through making the Word of God known among every language, people, and nation!

Why They Have No Bible

When I reach for my Bible, I must ask myself, *which one?* I have several Bibles: several versions, basic texts, and study Bible editions. And I am not the only one so blessed. The average American family has three Bibles.

It is not surprising that most Americans assume everyone has a Bible in their own language. It may come as a shock that an estimated 1.5 billion people don't have the complete Bible in their own language. These Bibleless people can be divided into 6,665 distinct language groups.

Why don't all the languages of the world have one? I'd like to consider five reasons why thousands of language groups still don't have a Bible.

1. The Staggering Number of Languages

How many languages need a Bible? We must first ask how many languages are spoken around the world.

In the 1950s, William Cameron Townsend, the founder of Wycliffe Bible Translators and SIL International, attempted to answer that question. After several years of research, he and his team concluded that there were 2,000 languages that needed a Bible. Townsend was so confident of the number that he titled a book *Two Thousand Languages To Go*.

Over the past several decades, though, research has continued, and the number of languages has grown. After decades of research, the number of languages spoken around the world surpasses 7,350. The number of languages in need of translation is approximately 3,852.

There is a staggering number of languages, but that is not the main reason why so many have no Bible. In fact, if it were not for the inaccessibility of many languages, the Bible would probably be translated into every language spoken today!

2. The Inaccessibility of Many Languages

Not only is there an incredible number of languages, but many of these languages are in inaccessible regions.

In 1845, Alfred Saker and his family arrived on the shores of modern-day Cameroon. Saker set about proclaiming the gospel among the local Duala people. By 1848, Saker and his co-workers published the Gospel of Matthew in Duala on a small printing press. The New Testament was published in 1862, and the complete Bible was finished 10 years later. In 1872, at the age of 62, Saker returned to England due to fatigue and never saw Cameroon again.

Mission work and Bible translation made progress along the coast of Africa, but malaria, political instability, and the difficulties of travel made many regions and languages inaccessible.

Other language groups are inaccessible for political reasons. The Uzbeks of Central Asia were part of the Soviet Union. The first translation work there began in the 1970s, but it was done by Uzbeks living in Germany and Israel. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of an independent Uzbekistan in 1991, the Bible Society of Uzbekistan was created. The complete Bible in Uzbek was published in 2016, and after many years of work, the Word is finally available to the 30 million speakers of this language.

It is amazing to see how the gospel is penetrating regions of the world previously inaccessible, and we pray that the last remaining boundaries will

fall. Yet there are other factors that have impeded the translation of God's Word.

3. The Elevation of One Language Over Others

As recorded in the book of Acts, the apostles proclaimed the gospel on Pentecost, and by the end of that day, over 3,000 were baptized. In the following decades, the gospel spread from Jerusalem west to Rome and Carthage, a city in present-day Tunisia.

In these predominantly Latin-speaking cities, the believers apparently gradually shifted from Greek to Latin, even translating the Scriptures into Latin within three generations of the gospel arriving in this area.

The Latin-speaking Christians of the Western church evangelized other regions, continuing to preach and teach from their Latin Bible. In many cases, they would read the Scriptures in Latin and then give an interpretation for those who didn't know the language.

For instance, Patrick of Ireland preached across Ireland, but he and his followers apparently never translated the Scriptures into Irish. In the generations that followed, missionaries from Ireland traveled to Scotland and northern England. They eventually established a monastery at Lindisfarne.

One of the most prized possessions at the monastery was a Latin Bible. In approximately 720 AD, a monk by the name of Eadfrith carefully added English words below each line of the Latin, presumably to assist in the reading of the Bible in English.

This Latin Bible with an English translation, known as the Lindisfarne Gospels, is significant because it shows the high place of Latin and, at the

same time, the desire of the monks to be able to read in English and make the Scriptures accessible to those who didn't know Latin.

In the centuries that followed, the church in the West held the Latin Bible in such high esteem that it eventually banned the translation of the Bible into English and other European languages. During the Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church put extreme limitations on the use of the Bible in any other language than Latin.

Time and again, those with the Bible in their own language view their translation and language as more valuable than other languages. Still, some may ask: even if those with a Bible may not value another language, can't the believers without a Bible just translate for themselves? Let's consider the next factor that impedes translation work.

4. The Technical Requirements of Translation

Another reason many languages lack a Bible is that the work of Bible translation requires a unique group of individuals with uncommon skills.

For translation to begin, at least one person must know two languages—the language in need of a Bible translation as well as a language with an existing Bible translation. In the best of situations, the translator also knows the biblical languages—Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic.

The first Bible published in America was not in English. It was the Bible in the Massachusetts language, a member of the Algonquian family of languages. It was the culmination of many years of work by John Eliot and his Massachusetts co-translator.

John Eliot came to New England in 1631. He was a graduate of Cambridge in England, trained for pastoral ministry, and skilled in the biblical languages. After ministering in Boston for a year, he moved to Roxbury. He

pastored the church for the colonists in that community; however, he had a burden for the neighboring Massachusetts villages. Eliot began visiting the neighboring villages but could make no progress with only English. He found a man willing to teach him their language, and they started the process that led to the proclamation of the gospel and eventually to the translation of the Massachusetts Bible.

Despite the importance of these first four factors, one last factor remains that is the most serious of all.

5. No Vision for Missions and Translation

The most significant reason for the thousands of languages without Scripture is a lack of a vision for the advance of the gospel to the ends of the earth and Bible translation as a part of equipping churches with the Word.

Around 340 AD, a young Christian by the name of Wulfila was consecrated as bishop and given the responsibility of establishing the church among the Goths in present-day Bulgaria. He believed that to establish this Germanic people in the faith, they must have the Scriptures, so he assembled a team and translated the Bible into their language.

Wulfila was the first Christian missionary who understood the importance of having the Bible in the language of the local church so that the believers there could be properly grounded in their faith. Unfortunately, very few church leaders shared his vision and commitment to translation over the next several centuries of the church.

In 1793, William Carey and his family left England to serve as missionaries in India. He learned the Bengali language and within a few years, had a draft of the New Testament prepared. He eventually established a printing press and, with his missionary colleagues, produced Scripture translations in more than 40 languages.

In the two centuries since William Carey, mission work has expanded at an incredible pace, and Bible translation has been a key part of strengthening churches in previously unreached ethnic groups. However, too often, those with a Bible in their own language lose sight of the importance of proclaiming the gospel to other language groups and ensuring that they have the Scriptures in their own languages as well.

In every generation, in every believer's heart, it is essential to recognize and advance the proclamation of the gospel to ethnic groups who have yet to hear. Furthermore, as Wulfila and his Gothic colleagues understood, the proclamation of the gospel must be accompanied by a translation of the Bible so that the church can read, teach, and preach the Scriptures and thereby strengthen believers while calling the whole language community to repentance.

A Glimpse of Worship around the Throne

It may be discouraging to think about these five factors that have worked together to impede the translation of the Bible. However, the point is not to discourage but to learn about the realities facing many around the world.

There is indeed an incredible need, a multitude without Christ and the Word. Yet there is another multitude. In the fifth chapter of Revelation, Jesus appears before the throne as the Lamb that was slain. No longer a lowly servant, he stands before God the Father as the resurrected and triumphant Lamb. He is praised for giving his life to ransom a people for God from every tribe, language, people, and nation (Revelation 5:9).

In John's vision, Jesus Christ is triumphant and worthy of all honor and praise today and for all eternity, and he will receive praise from the multitudes that he has redeemed from the ends of the earth.

Pray that God would receive glory as his life-giving Word goes forth to the nations and that those who have his Word would seek to make it available

in the languages of all the redeemed—so that the Lamb may receive the glory and praise he desires!

What Happens to Christians Without a Bible?

High in the Finisterre Mountains of Papua New Guinea, Luke Ketenu wrote a letter requesting a *wokman* 'worker' to come to his community, referring to a missionary who could translate God's Word and teach his people. Luke wrote his letter on May 28, 2004. He had written before, and he will no doubt continue writing.

Far too often people groups receive the gospel message but never the written Word. What happens to these believers who have no Scripture in their own language? Why is it so important to translate for these seemingly forgotten groups? When a group of believers does not have God's Word in their own language, three challenges emerge that could extinguish a young church.

Limited Preaching of the Gospel

Believers who lack the Scriptures in their own language struggle to preach and teach the gospel in a language that neither moves their hearts nor is as readily understandable as their first language.

Pastor Aarav shepherds a small congregation in India. He used to teach and preach from the Scriptures in the national language, Hindi. However, Hindi is neither his own language nor the language of his congregation. During this period, his ministry gradually became a lifeless routine. He even started to question his own relationship with the Lord.

Then Pastor Aarav was appointed to serve as a translator to help bring the Scriptures into his own people's language. He took this responsibility seriously, praying earnestly for the Lord's help. While he found translation challenging, he was often motivated by the plight of those who lived without the Scriptures.

With time, he found himself praying more. His passion for the Lord and the Word was growing. He enjoyed translating and studying the Bible so much that he lost track of time while in the Word.

Recently Pastor Aavar has become deeply concerned that he had never rightly understood many passages of Scripture. He had even preached erroneous interpretations of many passages. He was moved to pray for forgiveness and recommit himself to the faithful exposition of the Word.

"Now I deliver good and dynamic sermons," he wrote. "It happened only by this translation experience. I give all the glory and honor to Jesus."

With only a Bible in the national language, Pastor Aavar was hindered in his ministry to his own soul and flock. Now with the Scriptures in his own language, he grasps more deeply the meaning of passages and proclaims the gospel with more conviction.

Limited Understanding of the Gospel

The second struggle that churches without the Word in their own language face is a limited ability to grow in their understanding of the gospel.

When the gospel came to the Kekeme people of Cameroon, they recognized their need to be reconciled to their Creator and place their faith in Christ. The Kekeme were familiar with confessing sins and making amends for wrongs by offering sacrifices to their ancestral gods. They have an expression for appeasing such a wrong: *law vohna* 'cooling of the heart.'

Although the first Kekeme believers used the expression *law vohna* in their churches in the context of forgiveness, the concept of *law vohna* differs significantly from biblical forgiveness. When Kekemes seek *law vohna*, they acknowledge their wrongdoing and offer a sacrifice, but neither remorse nor turning from wrong plays any role in this cooling of the heart.

Many Kekeme Christians now have an unbiblical view of forgiveness and repentance. They believe that in response to their confession, God will bear with their offense (similar to how their ancestral spirits and gods do) but will not release them from their wrongs. They erroneously believe that after confessing a sin, they are free to do the same thing again.

This traditional view of God's forbearance of sin has taken a deep hold in the Kekeme church, as it has in the culture. *Law vohna* eventually became 'forgiveness' for most in the church. Few understand the biblical teaching of repentance and forgiveness.

With the beginning of Bible translation in the Kekeme language in the 1990s, missionary translators began to grasp that most church-goers held a syncretistic view of forgiveness.

The missionaries and the Kekeme translators started using the expression *mbi law tul suya ma fal* 'take one's heart off of the bad' to more accurately convey the concept of biblical repentance. They also utilized a more precise expression for forgiveness, *sel nzuik* 'release someone.'

The Kekeme New Testament is now completed. With the Word in the Kekeme language, the people will be better equipped to grow in their understanding of the gospel and faith in Christ.

Without the work of translation, the faith of the Kekeme church would remain obscured by unbiblical concepts of forgiveness and repentance and, ultimately, a skewed understanding of the gospel.

Limited Faith in the Gospel

The third struggle that churches without the Word in their language face is that their children may grow up in the church but without a saving faith in Christ. With limited preaching and syncretistic views unchecked by the Scriptures, the next generation may not follow even the weak faith of their parents.

Yanti grew up in a church in Manado, Indonesia. She was accustomed to hearing the services in the national language, Bahasa Indonesian, not her own language, Manado Malay. She did not understand the gospel message, though she recognized that social prestige came with church leadership.

So, as she grew older, she decided to study theology. She noted, "I thought that if I went into theology school, that all my sins would be forgiven."

Yanti studied in a theological school where she learned the Scriptures in the national language. She graduated and began serving in a church, but she had not submitted her life to Christ. Then one day, she heard the preaching of the gospel in her own language for the first time. She understood that everyone must surrender their lives to Christ, and she was moved in her heart. She knelt down and put her faith in Christ right there.

When the Scriptures are translated into the language of a people, the Holy Spirit brings conviction and salvation as they comprehend the good news about Jesus Christ. Young believers are equipped to read, preach, and teach the Scriptures (1 Timothy 4:13), leading to growth among the believers and a greater impact beyond the church as new believers come to faith.

Without the Word in the local language, the faith of the people often stagnates, and eventually, churches may die.

A Call to Translate the Word

It has been years since Luke Ketenu wrote from his small village in the mountains of Papua New Guinea. For him and fellow believers to grow in their faith, they need a Bible in their own language.

Luke and his small community are not alone. An estimated [1,680 languages still have no Scripture](#) and no translation underway. Though the number of languages and communities without the Scriptures is staggering, another number is greater still.

In the fifth chapter of Revelation, Jesus appears before the throne as the Lamb that was slain. By his death, he has ransomed a people for God from every tribe, language, people, and nation (Revelation 5:9).

And for all eternity this multitude of the redeemed will declare that Jesus Christ is worthy of all honor and praise.

With our hearts moved by a love for our Savior and desire to glorify the Lamb who was slain, let us seek to build up his redeemed in the faith. And what greater service to our Lord than to spend our days translating his Word to equip his church to grow in their knowledge of him!

An Open Letter on Behalf of the Bibleless

For several years I lived in northern Cameroon. In this region, I knew people from various ethnic groups and religious backgrounds. Yet these diverse peoples had one thing in common: they were all, to some degree or another, Bibleless.

Most of my neighbors did not have Scriptures in their language. A few had heard that the New Testament was available in their language, but they didn't have access to it. In fact, when I traveled to the capital city, I often went with money to buy French Bibles for some of my Christian friends.

Since returning to the United States, I have been struck by the fact that we have access to so many versions of the Bible in English. And we can easily access hundreds of other translations online with a few clicks. It shouldn't be surprising that most Americans think that everyone has a Bible in their language.

However, my neighbors and friends in Cameroon are part of the millions without a Bible in their own language. Millions more don't have access to the Scriptures that do exist in their own languages, whether due to persecution, poverty, or isolation.

Whenever I speak about the need for Bible translation, it seems that most are caught off guard. Not only are they shocked, but they also want to be part of the response.

The problem seems to be clear—people without God’s Word. But is that truly the problem? Moreover, is the answer to translate the Scriptures into their language? Could the Bibleless access the Scriptures in another way? Could they learn to use an existing Bible?

Could they use an English Bible?

I realize it can be overwhelming to hear that a group of people doesn’t have the Bible in their language and, even worse, that the solution involves years of painstaking work, including developing an alphabet, teaching literacy, translating the Scriptures, and more.

In response to this long and difficult road, some wonder whether they could just give English Bibles to those who are Bibleless. After all, with millions wanting to learn English, these Bibleless people might also want to learn English. Knowing English might open doors for advancement in many other aspects of their lives.

Others ask me whether the Bibleless could just use the Bible of their neighbors or the Bible in their national language.

It’s not unlike suggesting that someone without a bike just use mine. I have an extra one. I’m glad to share. Or if that is not feasible, why not borrow one from a neighbor? Given the urgent need, why not just take advantage of what is already available?

What surprises me even more is that some follow this line of reasoning even further and conclude that the Bibleless don’t need Scripture in their own language at all. It’s as though those who haven’t been blessed yet with a Bible in their own language are too late to the table. They will have to make do with reading the Bible in another language.

When I speak about the needs of the Bibleless, I am encouraged by those who take the situation seriously enough to seek a solution. Yet the need of the Bibleless is difficult to solve because their need is, in fact, greater than receiving Bibles.

Do the Bibleless only need Bibles?

Those without God's Word do need the Bible. However, we need to recognize that many of the peoples who lack Scripture may have even greater needs.

Many are unreached ethnic groups without any gospel witness in their context. Many have some Christian witness in their language community but may not fully comprehend the gospel message and Christian teachings.

Stepping back from the specific issues of translation, it's important to ask what is necessary for a given language community to know Christ as their Lord and Savior and to grow in their faith. Furthermore, what is needed to equip them in raising up the next generation of believers while faithfully witnessing to their neighbors and the broader community?

I would suggest that the fundamental concern should be advancing the cause of Christ in a specific language community.

It's not about Bibles, but believers. It's about our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ having all that God intends for them so that they, in turn, know and glorify him.

Do the Bibleless grasp the gospel?

When I hear that the Bibleless don't need Bibles in their own language, I feel that we are dismissing millions without considering their most fundamental need. Whether they need the Scriptures in their language or

not, they must hear and be able to articulate the gospel message in their own language.

On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descended on the disciples and empowered them to proclaim the gospel in the languages of the pilgrims in Jerusalem. From that moment until today, the gospel has been proclaimed in thousands of languages across the globe.

As missionaries take the gospel to new language groups, it's essential to learn the language and carefully translate and teach the truths of the gospel. Key theological terms such as 'grace,' 'mercy,' 'sin,' 'worship,' and 'glory' may be difficult to explain and translate, but the gospel can't be proclaimed without them.

And following the faithful proclamation of the gospel, the new church will need the Scriptures to grow in their faith, to proclaim the gospel to their whole language community, and to pass their faith to the next generation.

If no one takes care to ensure that a people group understands the gospel in their own language and religious context, they are inviting confusion, misunderstandings, and ultimately, syncretism.

Do we know what the Bibleless need?

The apostle John was imprisoned on the Isle of Patmos (Revelation 1:9). At what must have been a very difficult point in his faith, he was allowed to see the eternal worship of God in a heavenly vision.

In Revelation 5:9-14, John witnessed the praise of Jesus Christ around the throne. He heard the heavenly beings declare that Jesus was worthy of all praise because he had redeemed a people for God from "every tribe and language and people and nation" (Revelation 5:9). He not only redeemed them but has made them into a kingdom and priests.

We need to set our hearts and minds on the Lamb who was slain and who is worthy of all our praise. He is victorious, and we only glimpse a small part of what he is doing. He is expanding his kingdom, building up his redeemed by his Word as they comprehend and live by it in their respective linguistic contexts.

We have an obligation to proclaim the gospel to people groups or “nations,” ensuring that they have grasped the truths in their own language and can express and proclaim these truths to others in their group.

If Christ says they are his sheep and entrusts them with his gospel, who are we to deny them the full counsel of God? And we shouldn't ask others to live without the Scriptures in their own language when we hold our own translation so precious.

Let's pray for the Bibleless!

Instead of dismissing the Bibleless as not actually needing Bibles or simply assuming that the Bible alone is all they really need, let's prayerfully place their need for Scripture in its proper context.

We should view Bible translation in the context of advancing the Kingdom and equipping our brothers and sisters in Christ with the Word for their spiritual benefit and the ultimate glory of God.

A Bible is not something we provide once and move on from. It's not a problem to solve with a donation or merely a project to be funded. It is more than a book to be distributed.

The Bibleless need to know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. They need to hear the gospel message in their own language and, in turn, be able to share that message with their whole language community. And they

need the Scriptures in their language. We have the privilege of joining with them as the Lord directs.

Let's not become overwhelmed with the needs of the Bibleless, but rather, set our mind on the eternal praise of our Lord and Savior, the Lamb who was slain and who has redeemed a people for himself from among the Bibleless peoples.

He is building his church through the Word and working in their hearts as he has in our own. Let's lift up Jesus Christ, the Lamb who was slain, in praise and lift up those he has redeemed in prayer.

SECTION III

How do we translate for the glory of God when we don't fully grasp his purpose for human language and his Word in the languages of the world?

In this third section, I focus on language in the plan of God for humanity, examining the events at Babel and Pentecost and reflecting on the role of the Holy Spirit in gospel proclamation and Bible translation. One recurring theme is that God's will is for us to have a diversity of languages. It follows that we should learn and minister in the languages of the world instead of expecting others to learn our own language.

To the extent that we devote our lives to the purposes of God the Father, serving those that Jesus has redeemed from the language groups of the world, ministering by the power of the Holy Spirit, we can engage in Bible translation for the glory of our triune God.

The Tower of Babel, Part 1

The tower of Babel, though never completed, has never been completely forgotten. Babel has endured to this day for most as a fable, an intriguing attempt to explain the many languages spoken around the world and the diversity and disunity that come from language barriers.

For those who understand Babel as more than a myth, the events surrounding the tower serve as a reminder of mankind's sinful and rebellious nature.

Yet the tower of Babel is a reminder of something greater than our pride. It is also a testimony to God's unfathomable mercy and boundless grace. God may have impeded our ability to communicate with each other, but he did not take away our ability to praise him and make his greatness known.

Noah and the Tower of Babel

The story of Babel traces back to Genesis 9 with God's blessing and instructions for Noah. It's important to start with Noah because the events at Babel involved Noah's family and offer a glimpse into the last years of Noah's life.

In Genesis 8:18-22, Noah and his family leave the ark, and he offers a burnt sacrifice to God. God is pleased and promises to never again destroy all life on earth with the flood (Genesis 8:21; 9:11,15). Then, in Genesis 9:1, he blesses Noah and says, "Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth."

God's words to Noah are almost the same as what he said to Adam and Eve in Genesis 1:28. After creating them, God blessed them and commanded them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it."

It's important to remember this command to fill the earth because the events at the tower of Babel resulted in the scattering of the people to the ends of the earth. In short, God ensured that his command was accomplished.

The next recorded event in Noah's life is found in Genesis 9:20-29. Noah plants a vineyard and makes wine from his crop of grapes. He drinks this wine until the point of intoxication and falls asleep undressed. Then Ham comes into his father's tent and sees him. Ham does not respond in a respectful way, such as covering his father with a blanket and quietly leaving. Instead, Ham goes outside and announces to his brothers what he saw.

Ham's brothers, Shem and Japheth, treat their father with respect. They go into the tent and cover him with a blanket, taking pains not to see him with their own eyes. When Noah learns about all that has happened, he is upset with Ham and curses his fourth son, Canaan.

Let's consider what Noah said as he blessed and cursed his sons and grandson. First, he said that Canaan would be the lowest of servants and would serve his brothers. In case there was any uncertainty as to whom Canaan would serve, Noah specifically stated that he would serve Shem (Genesis 9:26) and then Japheth (Genesis 9:27). Noah also blessed Japheth and stated that he would live in the tents of his brother Shem (Genesis 9:27).

These blessings and curses suggest that Noah envisioned his sons, grandchildren, and their families living in close proximity and as a single

community. Yet Ham's side of the family would have a lower position because of their disrespect for Noah.

From these events in Genesis 9, we can infer that Noah and his sons and their children lived as a community for a considerable time. In fact, they may have lived in close proximity until the time that Babel was founded.

On the Plain of Shinar

Take these observations side by side with Genesis 11:2: "As men moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there." The text suggests that Noah and his sons, grandchildren, and even great-grandchildren moved as a community and settled in the same area, the plain of Shinar.

Naturally, they would be a close community because Noah's grandchildren were likely marrying their cousins, and then his great-grandchildren would likely also marry their first and second cousins. So, by direct descent, by marriage, and by the necessity of survival, they lived together, or at least in the same general region.

Noah was the leader of his growing family, but tensions with Ham and his side of the family were about to reach a new level. One of Ham's descendants, possibly a great-great grandson through his firstborn Cush, was apparently a very charismatic leader. His name was Nimrod.

We read in Genesis 10:8-12 that Nimrod became a leading figure in their community, even establishing permanent settlements in Babylon and three other locations in the plain of Shinar. He may have been the one to first propose building a city and tower with fired bricks and tar.

During this period, another noteworthy thing happens. Shem has a great great grandson named Peleg. In Genesis 10:25, we are told that Peleg is given his name, meaning "division," because during his life the earth was

divided. This appears to be a reference to the division of the plain of Shinar and, by extension, the earth, among the distinct nations and clans, with people scattered and living in separate areas. In short, the confusion of their language and the scattering of the people at Babel happened during the life of Peleg.

When we reach the end of chapter 10, we read that the descendants of Noah are spread out over the earth in different clans, nations, and languages. However, we don't know exactly how these events came to pass.

Do Noah's descendents move away in a gradual manner out of a desire to fill the earth in obedience to God? Or are they compelled to leave against their will?

Rebellion in Shinar

The events that transpired at the tower of Babel are presented in Genesis 11:1-9. The account begins by mentioning that everyone spoke the same language. At this point in the history of Noah's family, between 100 and 300 years after the flood, not enough time had passed for their language to develop into separate languages.

Furthermore, they are a single community, living and moving together. As long as they remain together, they will continue to have the same language.

If the speakers of a single language remain together, their language may change, but they will not readily perceive it because they will continue to communicate together. On the other hand, if speakers of a single language separate and have no further contact, their language may become two separate languages after 500 to 1,000 years.

In verse 3, the people decide to make fired bricks and build a city. They want a permanent home and a new place of worship; they do not want to be scattered but instead want to make a name for themselves. The desire to make a name for themselves fits well in the mouth of Nimrod. He was already making a name for himself as a hunter, and he wanted others to stir up their own pride and spirit of rebellion.

Nimrod and those who were following him doubtless knew Noah and his sons. Noah and others who were still faithful to God must have been warning them to stop their foolish plans. They may have reminded Nimrod that they were supposed to fill the earth, not settle down and make permanent settlements with a tower. But Nimrod would not listen.

Confused and Scattered

In Genesis 11:5-6, God descends from heaven and observes that the people have a common language. God states that nothing will be impossible for these descendants of Noah because, with a single language, they can rebel to greater heights.

In other words, a common language was essential for this group of people to function as a community, especially a community with the goal of establishing a new religion in a new city with a tower of unprecedented height. However, if they could not communicate, their community and common endeavors would stall.

Then God confuses their language, and they are no longer able to comprehend each other. No sooner does God confuse their language than he scatters the peoples.

Importantly, the text does not say that the people left their work because they couldn't understand each other. Some commentators have suggested that new language barriers halted the work. I don't doubt that the confusion

of their language would impair their work, but I don't think it would have led them to abandon their community, homes, crops, and all they knew.

More likely, they would have stumbled along, hampered in their ability to work collectively but able to do their regular work in the fields and at home. Furthermore, with time, their children would have become multilingual, understanding several languages. After a generation or two, they would be a multilingual community back at work on the tower. So it was essential that God scattered this community.

God's Mercy at Babel

From these passages, we see that God is sovereign over humanity and, although he tolerated some rebellion on the part of Noah's descendants, he finally acted firmly and decisively. He scattered the peoples so they would fulfill his initial command to be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth.

Furthermore, God's judgment is a merciful correction. There is no fire from heaven, no earthquakes, no disease or death. Instead, the people are confused and scattered. And in fact, not everyone was scattered very far. Peleg's family and his descendants, eventually including Abraham, remained in the same region.

Recall that Noah and his three sons were alive at the time of the building of the tower. Noah may have preached against Nimrod's rebellion and the building at Babel just as he preached against the sin and rebellion before the flood. Could it have been for the sake of Noah and a faithful handful that God was so merciful?

God's Grace at Babel

When God confused the language spoken at Babel, he turned a monolingual community into a number of distinct language communities.

However, God was gracious to these rebellious communities because he didn't confuse their language in such a way that they could never communicate again with each other or with him. God confused their language, but left them with the ability to learn multiple languages.

God scattered the languages and thereby ensured that these communities remained separate. If he had confused their languages without scattering them, they could have gradually learned each other's languages over a generation or two. Furthermore, one of the languages, such as the language of Nimrod and his people, could have become the dominant language and eventually displaced the others. By scattering the people, God ensured that the languages created at Babel were preserved and, in fact, continued to diversify.

There is an even greater grace in the confusion at Babel. God impeded their ability to unite in rebellion but not their ability to unite in praise of him. To this day, we struggle to communicate with those who speak other languages, but not with God. God understands every prayer and word of praise we offer him, and the Holy Spirit ministers to every heart, regardless of language.

In Conclusion

The tower of Babel is more than an account of God's judgment. He did judge the people at the tower, but with a merciful correction that resulted in them being scattered over the face of the earth.

His judgment also included the confusion of their language. Yet even their confusion and inability to communicate with each other did not impair their communication with God. God drove them apart from each other but not apart from him.

In the next chapter, we'll consider how God brought about a diversity of languages on earth yet preserved human language as the unique quality of

mankind that distinguishes us from the rest of creation. Language is an important facet of being made in the image of God.

Furthermore, we will also consider Babel in light of another miraculous event—Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit descended on the disciples and empowered them to take the gospel to the nations, scattering them to the ends of the earth.

May we remember Babel as more than a reminder of rebellion and pride. It stands as a testimony to the mercy and grace of our God who is ever working to accomplish his purposes for his glory.

The Tower of Babel, Part 2

The tower of Babel is a well-known story but not necessarily a well-understood event in redemptive history.

In the preceding chapter, I argued that the tower of Babel is a reminder of something greater than human pride and divine judgment. It is a testimony to God's mercy and common grace. God impeded our ability to communicate with each other, but not our ability to know and praise him.

Let's continue our study and consider Babel in light of another miraculous event—Pentecost.

After Babel

In the aftermath of the confusion and scattering of the people at Babel, the descendants of Japheth and Ham were largely driven from the region. Nimrod, for instance, traveled north to the region of Assyria and built new cities (Genesis 10:11).

By contrast, it appears that Noah and his immediate family remained in the plain of Shinar. Shem, Arphaxad, Reu, and Peleg may have as well. We read that Peleg's descendent, Terah, lived in Ur, in the region of Shinar. His sons include Abram (Genesis 11:27-32).

In Genesis 12, God chose Abram to have a special covenant relationship with him. God promised to bless Abram and through him to bless the nations (Genesis 12:3).

Pentecost

No study of this passage is complete without considering it in relation to the events on the day of Pentecost. For centuries, students of Scripture have compared the events at Babel with those at Pentecost.

In Acts 2, in the first part of the chapter, we read that the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues (Acts 2:4). It appears that they miraculously spoke in other languages for a period because they left their meeting place and went outside, where they met people from various regions of the world who understood them.

These events resemble Babel in that God moves miraculously, causing people to speak languages they didn't normally speak.

Yet there are also some differences. At Pentecost, this miracle is a blessing and a benefit, advancing the gospel. But at Babel, it was a punishment for disobedience, though merciful and showing grace.

Note that we are given a summary of what the disciples were saying in these languages: "the mighty works of God" (Acts 2:11). In this context, the mighty works of God would have included the coming of the Holy Spirit and the greater work of God in the life of Jesus Christ—namely, his death and resurrection. The disciples may have preached the gospel just as Peter does later in this chapter.

The Languages of the Nations

It's important to note that the Holy Spirit was moving the disciples to proclaim the mighty deeds of God in the languages of the pilgrims, who were visiting Jerusalem from around the known world.

The Spirit didn't empower the pilgrims and other Jews in Jerusalem to understand one language, such as Aramaic or Greek. No, the Spirit was affirming that the gospel was to be proclaimed to the nations in the languages of the nations.

It follows from these events that the church is to preach and teach in the languages of the nations. I would even suggest that this passage gives a biblical basis for the translation of the Scriptures into the languages of the nations, since believers cannot read, preach, and teach in their own languages unless the Scriptures are translated.

Reversal of Babel

So how does Babel relate to Pentecost? At Babel, God confused their language, leading to many languages being spoken. At Pentecost, God moved through the disciples by the power of the Spirit to minister to the nations in their respective languages.

At Babel, God divided the peoples into distinct language groups for their good, to impede their rebellion. At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit ministers in every language, not removing division but overcoming it and redeeming it. So, the gospel is to be proclaimed in every language, and the redeemed of every tribe and tongue will eventually be united around the throne.

Babel and the Eternal Praise of Heaven

If Babel was not reversed at Pentecost, will it ever be reversed?

Revelation 22:3 offers a glimpse of heaven: "No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him."

Jesus has redeemed a people for himself from every tribe and tongue, but in heaven, with our redeemed bodies engaged in eternal worship, our heavenly praise will no longer bear the marks of Babel. Instead, we will worship in a heavenly way that we can't yet imagine.

In the meantime, Jesus has redeemed a people for himself from every tongue, the Holy Spirit works in every language, and God the Father receives praise from the lips of all of his people.

In Conclusion

So, let us praise our triune God for the gift of language by which we are able to know and glorify him. Despite our rebellion, God was rich in mercy and common grace at Babel, impeding our ability to unite with a common tongue to rebel, but allowing us to unite in praise of him.

And now we live in the light of Pentecost, where the Holy Spirit empowered the disciples to proclaim the gospel to the nations in their respective languages, preparing them to take the gospel to the nations.

May we seek to advance his Kingdom, in whatever way we are called, to whatever degree we are capable, with whatever language is on our lips, to the eternal praise of his glory.

Pentecost Then and Now, Part 1

Pentecost is remembered as the day the church was born. Yet Pentecost is much more, revealing what the church was, is, and will continue to be until all the redeemed are gathered in eternal praise around the throne of God.

In the events of that day, we see how the church is to proclaim the gospel: by the power of the Spirit, for the sake of the nations, and in the languages of the nations.

What Was Pentecost?

The second chapter of Acts opens with the disciples gathered on the day of Pentecost. Pentecost was a major festival in the Jewish religious calendar. The festival is called Pentecost in Greek based on the Greek word for fiftieth, referring to the fiftieth day after the second day of Passover. At Pentecost, pilgrims traveled to Jerusalem to present a free-will offering. This offering was to commemorate the completion of the grain harvest.

In the narrative in Acts, Jesus Christ tells his disciples to wait for the promised Holy Spirit in Jerusalem (Acts 1:4). He also says that when the Spirit came, they were to be his witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the remotest part of the earth (Acts 1:8). After telling his disciples these things, he ascended into heaven.

On the day of Pentecost, early in the morning, the disciples were gathered in a house, possibly the same house they had been in since the Passover. Likely they were all present—more than one hundred and twenty—to worship and observe the festival.

A New Pentecost

While they were sitting together, a sound like a rushing wind came down and filled the whole house. Tongues like fire appeared, resting above each of their heads. The Holy Spirit descended and was among them. Then the Spirit moved them to speak in languages they didn't know.

It appears that they moved from their house into the street and toward the temple, yet with a new kind of offering—an offering of praise and testimony about Jesus Christ. As they moved through the streets proclaiming the “mighty deeds of God,” pilgrims from various nations recognized that these Jews were speaking their own languages.

By the time they reached the temple, there was a great stir and much amazement. The pilgrims realized that the disciples were speaking the languages of the Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, referring to the languages of the Parthian Empire, such as Aramaic and Parthian. Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia, and Pamphylia are included. Pilgrims from these regions of modern-day Turkey may have spoken Greek, Galatian, and Armenian. And Rome, Cyrene, Egypt, and Arabia are also mentioned. Jews and converts alike come from these regions, probably speaking Latin, Greek, Coptic, and Arabic.

While the pilgrims were amazed to see such praise in their own languages from the lips of Jews who didn't belong to their groups, others mocked them.

A New Message at Pentecost

At this moment, Peter addressed the mockers, who were primarily Jews from Judea and Jerusalem. It's not surprising that these Jews were the most offended since they were used to pilgrims coming to celebrate in the language of Jerusalem, not the languages of the nations.

Peter first dismissed the charge that his fellow disciples were drunk by noting it was only 9:00 in the morning. He announced that the events of that morning were nothing less than the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

Then Peter launched into a message about Jesus Christ, calling the audience to repent and be baptized in his name. No doubt, the other disciples also exhorted the crowds to put their faith in Jesus. By the end of the day, approximately three thousand were baptized, and the church was born.

Reflecting on the events recorded in Acts 2, we can make three key observations about the church and the proclamation of the gospel.

1. The church proclaimed the gospel by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Before ascending to heaven, Jesus told his disciples to wait for the Spirit, and with the power of the Spirit, they would be his witnesses (Luke 24:49, Acts 1:8). The disciples are instructed not to attempt this task in their own strength, but to wait for the power of the Spirit.

On the day of Pentecost, Peter proclaimed in Acts 2:33 that he and his fellow disciples had “received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit” and that it was the Spirit that “poured forth this that you both see and hear.”

Peter also noted that the Spirit was giving all of the disciples, both men and women, the power to prophesy. To that end, he quoted the prophet Joel in Acts 2:17: “even upon my bond slaves, both men and women, I will in those days pour forth of my spirit and they shall prophesy.”

Peter understood that the Spirit brought about the events of that day. It was not their strength or planning, but the Spirit’s work as a fulfillment of Christ’s

promise. Peter also declares that Jesus Christ was exalted at the right hand of God the Father and received the promised Spirit, which he in turn poured out on his disciples that very day (Acts 2:32-33).

With the promised Spirit from the exalted Christ, the disciples had power, but not just any power. It was the power to prophesy. In this context, it was the power to preach salvation through Jesus Christ with boldness and confidence.

2. The church proclaimed the gospel to the nations.

Before returning to the Father, Jesus reminded the disciples that they would be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the remotest parts of the earth (Acts 1:4). In so doing, he was reiterating his directive for them to make all nations his disciples (Matthew 28:18-20).

A few weeks earlier, when Jesus appeared to his disciples on a mountain in Galilee, he declared that he had all authority in heaven and on earth. With that authority, he commissioned his disciples to go to the nations and make disciples from among all of them, both baptizing them and teaching them all that they had received from him (Matthew 28:18-20).

It is striking that Jesus sent the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, a festival when thousands of pilgrims would be in Jerusalem. The disciples would be able to proclaim the gospel to pilgrims who would, in turn, take the gospel message home to their respective corners of the Jewish diaspora. Moreover, Gentile converts to Judaism were among the pilgrims, especially from Rome (Acts 2:11). So on that day, the gospel was proclaimed to those who were outside ethnic Israel.

Thus, from the very beginning of the church, the disciples proclaimed the gospel to a diverse group of Jewish and Gentile pilgrims who, in turn, would assist in spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ beyond Jerusalem and Judea to the remotest corners of the earth.

3. The church proclaimed the gospel in the languages of the nations.

Among the miraculous events of Pentecost, the most misunderstood is the disciples' speaking in the languages of the nations. In Acts 2:4, the disciples spoke in "other languages," human languages that they didn't know. The Holy Spirit enabled them to do this, underscoring the miraculous nature of their speaking.

Furthermore, the pilgrims heard the disciples speaking their own languages (Acts 2:6). A pilgrim's eyewitness testimony is given in which he recounts twice that the disciples spoke in languages associated with various parts of the world, but not Galilee (Acts 2:7-11).

Bringing even more specificity to his account of the events, the eyewitness mentions the various regions that the pilgrims traveled from. Based on the list, it's possible that fifteen distinct languages may have been spoken by the disciples. Regardless of the number, the various groups of pilgrims were all hearing the mighty deeds of God proclaimed in their languages.

What were these "mighty deeds of God"? There were probably two key topics: the promised Spirit and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In fact, these are the two central topics of Peter's sermon. He defended everything that was happening as the work of the Spirit and as evidence that Christ was resurrected from the dead. Then Peter made his main point: because of the work of the Spirit and the resurrection of Christ, the crowds needed to repent, for they had nailed Christ to the cross and were utterly guilty.

Fascinatingly, this sermon—one of the greatest sermons of all time—was most likely delivered in Greek. Why would Peter have preached in Greek? It was, at the time, the language of the Jewish diaspora and much of the world as they knew it.

Ultimately, the Holy Spirit worked through Peter and the disciples in such a way that all those who were assembled heard the gospel in their own languages. It was good news for the nations, a message that the pilgrims were to hear and take back home with them to their own communities.

In Conclusion

On Pentecost, the Holy Spirit worked powerfully through the disciples. The Spirit empowered them to proclaim the gospel to the crowds in their own languages, including Latin, Arabic, Coptic, and many others.

The gospel was proclaimed in the languages of the nations so that they might understand and put their faith in Christ, and thousands did. By the end of the day, three thousand were baptized.

The implications of the events of that day reverberate to the present, and the last echoes will still be heard around the throne of God in the eternal praise of the nations.

Pentecost Then and Now, Part 2

On Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descended on the disciples in Jerusalem. They preached fearlessly, and by the end of the day, about three thousand people were baptized.

In the previous chapter, we looked at what Pentecost reveals about what the church was and will continue to be until gathered in eternal praise around the throne of God.

In this chapter, we'll focus on three implications, and especially the role of language. My hope is that you will also celebrate what happened on the day of Pentecost!

What Was Pentecost?

In the first chapter of Acts, Jesus Christ told his disciples to wait for the Holy Spirit in Jerusalem (Acts 1:4). Ten days later, on Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descended on the disciples, and they spoke in languages they didn't know. Peter preached a gospel message about Jesus Christ, calling the audience to repent and be baptized in his name. By the end of the day, approximately three thousand were baptized. On Pentecost, the church was born by the power of the Holy Spirit through the proclamation of the gospel.

Observations About the Church and the Gospel

As discussed in the previous chapter, the church proclaimed the gospel by the power of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, the church proclaimed the gospel to the nations. It is striking that Jesus sent the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, a

festival when thousands of pilgrims would be in Jerusalem from the Jewish diaspora.

Finally, the church proclaimed the gospel in the languages of the nations. The Holy Spirit worked through Peter and the disciples to proclaim the mighty deeds of God in the languages of the pilgrims.

3 Implications for Today

The events at Pentecost still have implications for today, especially regarding the mission of the church to take the gospel to the nations in their respective languages.

1. The gospel is to be proclaimed in the languages of the world.

When have you gone to church and heard the pastor read, teach, and preach in Latin? We accept it as normal that English-speaking churches worship in English. However, there was a time when English was forbidden in church.

John Wycliffe and his associates at Oxford University translated the first Bible in English, an incredible achievement in scholarship and faith. Over a ten-year period, approximately 1380-90, versions of their work appeared and were disseminated, copied by hand. However, their work was condemned, and by 1408 it was illegal to own a Wycliffe Bible as well as read, teach, or preach in English.

Wycliffe's followers, in a pamphlet titled *Wycliffe's Wicket*, argued that having the Scriptures in English couldn't be heretical because the Holy Spirit moved the apostles to preach in the languages of the nations. Why, then, should the Word of God in English be taken from them?

From the events on the day of Pentecost, they saw the clear implication that the gospel should go forth to the nations and in the languages of the nations. In their case, it was English instead of Latin.

Would you consider English a rude or inferior language, unworthy to convey the majestic truths of Scripture? In the days of William Tyndale, as he translated the New Testament from Greek into English, he encountered this argument from those who loved Latin more than English. However, the impact of the Bible in English over the centuries reveals that the Holy Spirit also works through preaching and translation in English. Moreover, the Spirit works through any and every language, and so the gospel is to be proclaimed in the languages of the nations!

2. The church is to preach and teach in the language of the local believers so everyone can fully comprehend the gospel of Christ.

The disciples declared the mighty deeds of God in the languages of the pilgrims. Then Peter preached powerfully in Greek, calling thousands to repent and believe in Jesus Christ.

Accordingly, the church should continue to preach and teach in the language of the local church and its community, so that everyone might fully comprehend, put their faith in Christ, and grow in their faith.

Some commentators view speaking in the languages of the nations as simply the means by which the Spirit gathered the crowds to the disciples. Speaking in their languages was an effective way to get their attention, but nothing more.

It's true that speaking to me in English would get my attention, especially if I thought you couldn't speak English! And if you stopped speaking English once you had my attention, what then? I would most definitely stop listening to you!

Rather than a crowd-gathering technique, the Spirit moved the disciples to miraculously speak in the languages of the Jewish and Gentile pilgrims to show all that the gospel is for all the nations and is to be preached and taught in their languages.

Furthermore, Peter apparently preached in Greek as he responded specifically to the Jews of Jerusalem and Judea (Act 2:14). He could have addressed this audience in Aramaic or even Hebrew if he wanted to emphasize his common Jewish heritage, as the Apostle Paul did in Acts 21:40. However, Peter defended his fellow disciples and then proclaimed the gospel to all those listening, so it was only appropriate that he used the language that would be the most widely understood—Greek.

It follows from these events that there must be consistent, clear, and full teaching in the language of every people group so they can grasp the gospel message and grow in their faith.

3. The proclamation of the gospel is to lead to the translation of the Scriptures.

Millions of Christians meet to worship today, praying to God and singing about their Savior Jesus Christ in their own language. They may even teach and preach in their own language. But when their pastors or leaders stand up to teach, they hold a Bible in their hands that isn't in their own language.

As noted earlier, for centuries this was the case in England. The first gatherings of monks and priests would read the Scriptures in Latin; as time passed, they began to translate into Old English. However, it wasn't until John Wycliffe and his colleagues at Oxford set about translating that we finally had the first English Bible. One of Wycliffe's fellow translators was John Trevisa. After being forced to leave Oxford, he wrote about the importance of translation.

Trevisa argued simply that if the church is to preach the gospel to the English people, it should preach in the English language. And if the gospel should be preached in English, then the Scriptures which contain the gospel should be translated into English. John Trevisa laid out the fullest implication of Pentecost for translation, based on the inevitable progression from gospel proclamation to translation.

Those who opposed Trevisa and Wycliffe insisted on using Latin. Yet, ironically, they likely did not realize that the Latin Scriptures arose from the same desires behind Wycliffe and Trevisa's English translations! The Scriptures in Latin didn't just appear. Latin didn't have an elevated status alongside Greek and Hebrew simply because, as some medieval scholars argued, the Latin language was on the sign above Jesus' head on the cross, along with Greek and Hebrew (John 19:20). The presence of Latin on the sign merely indicated that it was the language of the Romans, not one of three languages uniquely set apart by God. In fact, on Pentecost, Latin was one of the many languages spoken, alongside Arabic, Parthian, Coptic, and others.

After Pentecost, the gospel spread west to Rome and Carthage, a city situated in modern-day Tunisia. By 200, there was a strong, Latin-speaking church in Carthage. The best-known leader of the time was Tertullian. He wrote extensively in Latin, defended the Christian faith in Latin, and even quoted from the Scriptures in Latin. All in Latin!

In all likelihood, the first believers in Carthage were Jewish and spoke Greek. They were probably accustomed to reading the Scriptures in Greek. They may have received copies of Paul's Epistle to the Romans and then, in subsequent decades, other portions of the New Testament in Greek. But from these earliest days, they must have translated their sermons and teaching into Latin for those who didn't know Greek.

The second generation of the church probably set about writing down their teaching in Latin and even translating the Scriptures. Like other churches in

Europe, they may have developed the practice of reading the Scriptures in two languages during their services. They realized, no doubt, that effective ministry in their context required preaching, teaching, and even translation in the language of Carthage, that is, Latin.

By the third generation of the church in Carthage, knowledge of Greek appears to be largely in the background, with Latin used as the primary language in the churches. For example, Tertullian knew of the Bible in Greek and occasionally used Greek words in his writings, but he primarily worked in Latin. Being well-trained in Latin and understanding Roman culture, he was able to powerfully defend the church and the gospel in Latin.

So, to build up a group of believers, preaching and teaching in their language must lead to translation, whether into Latin in Carthage, into English at Oxford, or into one of the thousands of languages spoken around the world today that do not have Scripture.

In Conclusion

Let us celebrate what happened on the day of Pentecost! And praise the Lord that the gospel continues to be proclaimed and the mighty deeds of God are declared in the languages of those who don't know Christ.

Celebrating Pentecost should also lead to living with a focus on proclaiming the gospel to the ends of the earth. What the Spirit began on that day continues until Christ's return.

Many have yet to hear the gospel, and many who know Christ as their Lord and Savior have yet to see the Scriptures in their language. Let us pray for the advance of the gospel, both in preaching and translation, for the establishment of the church among all the ethnolinguistic groups!

The Role of the Holy Spirit in Translation, Part 1

It is essential to understand the ministry of the Holy Spirit in order to fully appreciate the importance of Bible translation.

God the Father works through the Holy Spirit to minister in each and every human language, communicating his truth to transform the hearts of God's people. It follows that the Holy Spirit is the power of the triune God ministering in our hearts through translation. In this chapter, we'll look at three aspects of the Holy Spirit's ministry, especially language and the Scriptures. In the following chapter, we'll look at the events of Pentecost and the continuing work of the Spirit in the languages of the nations.

May you be encouraged by the powerful workings of the Holy Spirit, who goes ahead of us, moving all hearts, despite the multitude of languages, to implant the singular truth of the gospel.

1. The Holy Spirit works through human language.

God's creation proclaims his glory, and his works reveal his power (Psalm 19:1-4).

God reveals his presence to humanity in various ways, from storms and earthquakes to plagues. After the first three plagues in Egypt, the Egyptian magicians called these events the "finger of God" (Exodus 8:19). They understood that the God of the Israelites was demonstrating his power, and they anticipated an even more powerful display.

However, when God works in the lives of his people, he works through the Holy Spirit to communicate propositional truth in their respective languages. The Spirit communicates the truth of the gospel, enabling believers to comprehend and learn from God in their own language (1 Corinthians 2:10-14). Furthermore, this work of the Spirit is a unique privilege for those who have been saved by grace through faith and have “a new heart” (Ezekiel 36:26-27; 1 Corinthians 2:12).

Jesus promised his disciples that after his death and resurrection, he would send the Holy Spirit to remind them of his teachings and to lead them into an even greater understanding of God’s purposes (John 14:26; 16:13-14).

Thus the Spirit works in every believer’s heart to convict and comfort. And this profound ministry to our soul is accomplished through our own language.

2. The Holy Spirit caused the Scriptures to be written in human language.

God worked by the Holy Spirit to enable his prophets to preserve his truth in written form. The apostle Peter wrote that the Holy Spirit empowered the prophets to write a message from God (2 Peter 1:21). In the Epistle to the Romans, the apostle Paul adds that the Jewish people were entrusted with “the actual words of God” (Romans 3:2).

When God directed Moses to write, the Spirit moved in his heart in Hebrew, leading him to write in Hebrew and not Egyptian or Midianite, two other languages he knew.

When the Spirit moved Daniel to write, he wrote his prophecies in two languages: Hebrew and Aramaic. The Spirit directed him to write in both languages, presumably because the Jews in Babylon spoke both languages.

Finally, when the Apostle John was on the Isle of Patmos, he was led to write an account of his visions in the Greek language. Greek was the language of the churches that John desired to encourage with his words.

There is one occasion when God communicated in writing, but not in a way that everyone could understand. When God wanted to announce his impending destruction of Babylon in Daniel 5, a hand wrote a message on the wall which the king and his officials could not comprehend. It was only Daniel, the prophet with the “spirit of the holy gods,” who could understand the message (Daniel 5:11). When Daniel was summoned by the king, he explained the message from God. The king eventually understood the message, but by the mouth of God’s prophet, highlighting God’s sovereignty over the king and all human kingdoms.

When God wants to bless his people, the Spirit guides his prophets to write in their respective languages, for them and their community to clearly comprehend.

3. The Holy Spirit creates a desire to know God and his Word.

When the Holy Spirit brings individuals to faith, the Spirit creates in them a desire to know God and the truths of Scripture. The prophet Jeremiah recounts God’s testimony to this spiritual rebirth in Jeremiah 24:7, “I will also give them a heart to know Me, for I am the LORD; and they will be My people, and I will be their God, for they will return to Me wholeheartedly.” The psalmist testifies to his longing to know God’s Word in Psalm 119:97: “Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day.” The psalmist is also aware of his inability to fully know and appreciate the Scriptures. In Psalm 119:18, he asks God, “Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law.”

The longing of the English people to know God and his Word was not met by the Latin Bible. In approximately 1370, John Wycliffe and his colleagues

at Oxford University began translating the Bible into English. They eventually produced the first complete English Bible around 1380.

In the [prologue to their translation](#), they noted that many who didn't know Latin were crying out for the Scriptures in their own language: "the commoners cry after holy writ, to know it, and keep it, with great cost and peril of their lives."

Their longing for the Scriptures in their own language, English, was an expression of the moving of the Spirit in their hearts, producing a desire to know God's Word that could only be satisfied by the translated Scriptures.

In Conclusion

The importance of the ministry of Bible translation cannot be fully appreciated unless we grasp its place within the broader work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit ministers in each and every language, whether through the spoken or written Word of God.

The Bible translator has a small but crucial part in the greater work of the Spirit, equipping the church with the written Word in response to the Spirit and advancing the work of the Spirit in the hearts of others.

In the next chapter, we'll look at the events of Pentecost and the continuing work of the Spirit in the languages of the nations. Thankfully, the Spirit not only works in our hearts regardless of our language, but also intercedes on our behalf before our heavenly Father with an intensity too profound to be expressed in human words (Romans 8:26)!

The Role of the Holy Spirit in Translation, Part 2

In the preceding chapter, I proposed that the importance of the ministry of Bible translation cannot be fully appreciated unless we grasp its relationship to the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit ministers in each and every language, both through the spoken and written Word of God.

Therefore, the translators of Scripture have a critical part in the greater work of the Spirit, equipping the church for the ministry of the written Word in response to the Spirit and advancing the work of the Spirit. In this chapter, we will continue to reflect on the Holy Spirit and the translation of the Bible into the languages of the nations.

1. The Holy Spirit empowers for ministry in the languages of the nations.

On Pentecost, the Holy Spirit miraculously empowered the disciples to declare the mighty deeds of God in the languages of the pilgrims in Jerusalem (Acts 2:1-12). Furthermore, when Peter preached the gospel to the crowds, he spoke in Greek, not Aramaic.

Peter could have preached easily in Aramaic, the primary language of the Jews. It was, no doubt, the principal language which Jesus used with Peter and the disciples, and the language in which Jesus did most of his teaching.

To put this in more context, remember that when Jesus spoke to Paul on the road to Damascus, he spoke in the “Hebrew dialect,” which refers to either Aramaic or Hebrew (Acts 26:14). Furthermore, when Paul spoke to the angry crowd in Jerusalem (Acts 21:40), he also spoke in the same “Hebrew dialect” to highlight the fact that he was a member of the Jewish community, one with the credibility to be heard after allegedly desecrating the Temple.

The fact that Jesus and his apostles would use one language among themselves, such as Aramaic, but use Greek with those outside their community reveals that they did not view their own language as the only appropriate language for proclaiming the gospel. And as the believers in Jerusalem traveled into the Greek-speaking world, they preached and taught increasingly in Greek.

Over the next few generations, as the church continued to spread, the preaching of the gospel led to Christian communities in areas where Greek was not well known. The believers in these areas began to translate the Scriptures into such languages as Latin, Syriac, Gothic, Armenian, and Coptic.

The miraculous outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost, which culminated in praise and proclamation in the languages of the pilgrims in Jerusalem, eventually led to countless churches across the known world. Moreover, these churches preached the Word and eventually translated the Scriptures into their respective languages.

2. The Holy Spirit guides the translation of the Word.

From Pentecost to today, the Spirit works in and through the church to proclaim the gospel in the languages of the nations. Furthermore, the Spirit moves in the hearts of believers to enable them to both believe spiritual truths and teach these truths to others. Even at the translation table, the

Spirit has a critical role in the hearts of translators as they work at his prompting.

On the night he was betrayed, Jesus encouraged his disciples with the promise that he was sending the Holy Spirit. He explained that the Spirit would convict the world of sin (John 16:8). The Spirit confronts us with an overwhelming realization of our guilt before a righteous Judge and the inescapability of judgment. The Spirit does this work in every heart and in every language.

Jesus also explained to the disciples that the Spirit would be a Helper, reminding them of what they had heard and teaching them what they would need to know (John 14:26). Several decades later, the apostle John extended the encouragement he and the other disciples had received, noting that the Holy Spirit continues to teach all believers (1 John 2:27).

The apostle Paul also wrote that the Holy Spirit enables believers to understand the gospel and even gives them the words to speak as they explain “spiritual truths” (1 Corinthians 2:12-13).

Finally, Jesus also told his disciples that the Holy Spirit would give them the words they needed when faced with persecution (Luke 12:12). Paul may have had this work of the Spirit in mind when he asked for prayer that he might be given the words to say as he proclaimed the gospel (Ephesians 6:19).

It follows that the Spirit who works to both bring believers to a profound knowledge of the truths of God and provide the words to express the glorious gospel of Christ would also answer the simple prayers of translators as they seek to make the mysteries of the Word shine forth in a new language and community.

3. The Holy Spirit builds up the Church through the translated Word.

As the church grew and the gospel spread beyond Jerusalem, Christians began to translate the words of Christ so they could declare his wondrous works and the salvation found in him.

As noted earlier, when Jesus spoke to Saul on the road to Damascus, he spoke in Aramaic. Paul later recounted his encounter with his risen Savior in Greek (Acts 22:7; 26:14-15). In Galatians 1:10-17, Paul also explains that he received further revelation from Jesus, which formed the basis of what he taught. This revelation may also have been in Aramaic, but Paul communicated what he learned in Greek.

Similarly, the apostles Matthew and John were Aramaic-speaking Jews. They probably interacted with Jesus primarily in Aramaic. However, the Holy Spirit moved them as well as Mark to write their gospel accounts in Greek, with only an occasional Aramaic word or phrase.

We don't know why the Holy Spirit moved the writers of the New Testament to write primarily in Greek. However, Paul's teaching in his first letter to the Corinthians may provide some insights.

In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul rebuked the believers in Corinth because of how they spent their time in corporate worship. He noted that some of the believers spoke in languages that no one else understood, without any attempt to interpret what they said for the rest of the congregation. He condemned this practice, saying he would rather speak five words that were understood than ten thousand words that no one understood because he might be able to teach with those five words (1 Corinthians 14:19).

The apostle insisted that everything should be interpreted for the benefit of those present. Believers were edified when they comprehended the message. Furthermore, any unbelievers who might be attending would also

comprehend the gospel and come to faith in Christ. On the contrary, if no one interpreted what was said, the congregation would not be edified and those who were visiting would consider the group out of their minds.

Similarly, the Spirit builds the church through the translated Word because the Spirit works in our hearts as we comprehend and, based on our comprehension, respond in faith to spiritual truth.

In Conclusion

God reigns in the hearts of his redeemed as the Holy Spirit works through the Word—the spoken Word, the written Word, and the translated Word. The Spirit moves in the hearts of a given ethnicity and ministers to them in their own language, bringing them to faith and placing a desire in their hearts for the written Word.

When someone desires to have the Scriptures in their language, shouldn't we encourage and pray for their efforts, recognizing that the Holy Spirit puts a love for the Word in our hearts?

Let us remember to pray for those translating God's Word. May God the Father work in and through them by the power of the Spirit, allowing them to grasp more fully and communicate more powerfully the glorious truths of the Word.

May translators find comfort and strength to persevere as they remember that the Spirit can use their efforts to accomplish more than they could ever hope or imagine, to the glory of our triune God. May we all be encouraged by the power of the Holy Spirit to communicate and transform hearts, even our own, with spiritual truths, to the glory of God the Father and Jesus Christ our Lord.

SECTION IV

How do we translate for the glory of our triune God? It has to begin with what God says about himself, language, and the Scriptures in the languages of the redeemed.

In section four, I lay out a biblical theology of language and translation. I also examine the concept of authority and its implications for Bible translation. I conclude with ten affirmations relating to translation. These reflections on Scripture are significant because of the generally accepted view that God does not address the task of translation in his Word.

To the extent that we understand God's purposes as revealed in Scripture, we can engage in Bible translation for the glory of our triune God. Without the teaching of the Word, we risk translating for the glory of another.

12 Steps Toward a Theology of Translation

We must have a biblically-based theology of Bible translation in order to correctly understand the importance of the task, its place in the purposes of God for humanity, and its ultimate potential to give glory to God.

As a preliminary step in developing such a theology, I offer twelve propositions that provide a scriptural basis for reflecting on the translation of Scripture.

Following the chronology of Scripture, these propositions address the creation and purpose of human language in the broader context of redemptive history, concluding with the apostle John's visions of the throne of God in Revelation, which provide further insights into the place of language in the purposes of God.

1. God Created Human Language

God created mankind in his own image, endowing humans with the ability to communicate with language (Genesis 1:26). Furthermore, God intended human language as the means to communicate propositional truth to individuals and, by the working of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of believers, to reign in their hearts and through them to accomplish his purposes.

When God created Adam and Eve, his first recorded action was to pronounce a blessing and then instruct them on their responsibilities to be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, subdue the earth, and have dominion over the other creatures (Genesis 1:28).

In the account of Adam's creation from the dust of the earth, God's first words to Adam were a command to not eat from a specific tree (Genesis 2:16-17). God used language as the means for exercising his sovereign rule over Adam.

Similarly, when God directed Adam to name animals, he was directing Adam to exercise his authority over the animals through the act of speaking and, specifically, by giving a name to the animals that he saw (Genesis 2:19-20).

The Fall did not change the divine purpose of human language, but it adversely affected the ability of humanity to use language to glorify God and advance his purposes.

2. Babel and Linguistic Diversity

At the tower of Babel, God changed a monolingual community into several linguistically distinct groups who could no longer communicate with each other, thereby impeding their rebellious plans (Genesis 11:1-9).

Still, God ensured that humans could learn multiple languages, instead of each language community being unable to learn the language of another group and thus being permanently separated.

It is significant that God dispersed the people at Babel over the face of the earth (Genesis 11:9). Geographic isolation ensured that they did not reunite and choose one language out of several to be their new language of diplomacy and rebellion.

Nonetheless, God preserved the original purpose of language as a means for him to communicate propositional truth with humanity and for humans to communicate with each other. The confusion and dispersion of the peoples

at Babel will continue until the final reunion of the redeemed in the new Jerusalem (Revelation 20).

3. God Speaks All Languages

God does not communicate with a single human language but rather communicates with individuals and communities in their respective languages, whether Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, or another language.

Furthermore, conversations recorded in Scripture that were presumably in a language the people of God did not comprehend were communicated in translation so that the community receiving divine revelation could understand.

For example, Pharaoh's conversation with Joseph was presumably in Egyptian, but was recorded in Hebrew (Genesis 41:39). Similarly, Moses and Pharaoh may have spoken entirely in Egyptian, but their interactions were recorded for the people of Israel in Hebrew (Exodus 5:1-5).

It follows that there is not one single language uniquely reserved for God, given that God communicates in every language. Nor should we have any reservations about translation since God directed his prophets to record translated information.

On the contrary, God communicates in the language of every language community to accomplish his purposes by the power of the Holy Spirit as people comprehend and respond according to his will.

4. Translation to Equip the Church

From Mount Sinai to the Isle of Patmos, God's revelation was preserved in writing so that God's people in every generation may know the Word of God and respond in obedience (Romans 15:4).

Furthermore, God has commanded his people to read the Scriptures and then to exhort and teach others to respond in obedience and faith (1 Timothy 4:13).

The Scriptures are to be translated for the church so they can be read, preached, and taught by the church, corporately and individually, in order for believers to grow in their faith and for non-believers to be called to repentance. With the Scriptures, believers are fully equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

Therefore, the ultimate purpose of translating Scripture is to equip the church to minister with the written Word, corporately and individually. To the extent that the believers are faithful to the Word, they will also have an impact on their language community.

5. Translation for the Nations

Following Christ's commands to preach the gospel to every creature and all nations, the church is to proclaim the gospel and teach the truths of Scripture to every ethnolinguistic group with the goal of establishing the church among the redeemed who have been purchased by Christ for the glory of God (Mark 16:15; Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8; Matthew 28:18-20).

On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit enabled the believers in Jerusalem to proclaim the "mighty works of God" in the languages of the crowds, affirming that their languages and, by extension, all human languages, are capable of expressing the truths of the gospel message (Acts 2:1-11).

The proclamation and teaching of the gospel message in the language of a Bibleless people should be accompanied by the translation of the Scriptures so that the church in every ethnolinguistic group is established and fully equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

6. Translation and the Holy Spirit

As the Scriptures are read in a specific language, the Holy Spirit moves in the hearts of listeners and ministers to them in their own language.

The Spirit communicates the truth of the gospel, granting to believers conviction for their sins and comprehension to learn from God in their own language (1 Corinthians 2:10-14).

However, when the gospel is not proclaimed in a language and the Scriptures are not translated and read aloud in corporate worship for a language community, the Holy Spirit does not work in their hearts through the Word.

In 1535, John Calvin wrote a preface in Latin for a new translation of the Bible in French. He noted in his preface that a right view and respect for the Holy Spirit should lead to providing God's people with the Scriptures in a language they understand.

If we truly believe that the Spirit works through the Scriptures, we must be committed to seeing the Scriptures translated.

7. Translation for Evangelism

The Holy Spirit works through the Scriptures and communicates truths that bring people to conviction and repentance and, ultimately, spiritual growth as believers.

To be faithful to the purpose of the Scriptures, a translation should not be made which is intended only for evangelism and not for the edification of believers. Nor should a translation be made for the edification of a limited group of believers and not the church at large and those outside the Christian community.

The claim that a translation serves only a specific purpose is dubious, given that it is the Holy Spirit who works in the hearts of readers and listeners according to the will of God, whether to save, sanctify, or confound.

Furthermore, a translation of Scripture is not greater than the source. If the Scriptures have several beneficial uses (2 Timothy 3:16), on what grounds are translators allowed to produce a translation with a limited function?

8. Translation and the Audience

The Scriptures were given to the people of God over the centuries in very different circumstances and with widely divergent audiences (Hebrews 1:1-2). Regardless of the nature of the audience, it remains that God intends his people to read, preach, and teach the Scriptures both as a part of corporate worship and outside of worship.

The church has leaders with the spiritual gift of teaching to ensure that the whole congregation benefits from the Scriptures, regardless of their age, educational background, or proficiency in the language.

As a result, diversity in a language community is not sufficient justification for multiple translations. On the contrary, resources for teaching should be developed to assist the Christian community in making the Scriptures as accessible as possible. It should only be the exceptional case that requires a new translation for a specific segment of a language community.

In order for a single translation to serve a language community over a long period of time, it is essential to regularly revise the translation. If the translation is not revised, subsequent generations who use it regularly may continue to understand it, but with steadily increasing difficulty. However, those outside the Christian community who are not familiar with the language of the organized church may not comprehend the text at all.

When such situations persist, the first translation is less and less effective outside local churches, and the desire for a second translation grows.

9. Translations Are Not Perfect

A translation is not a perfect reproduction of the source text in every facet of meaning and structure. Nonetheless, a faithful translation sets forth the essential truths of Scripture. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit works through the translated Word to bring people to faith in Christ and grow them in their faith.

The church should have the Scriptures in their own language as well as the ability to study the Scriptures in the original languages to ensure the accuracy of their translation and prepare for future revisions, since any given translation is not inspired and is only as trustworthy as it is faithful to the source.

10. Translators As Servants

Translators are servants of the Word, producing an equivalent text which faithfully communicates the glorious truths of our triune God. Translators should also be servants of the church, globally and locally, equipping believers with the Word so that translators and the church alike can read, preach, and teach the Scriptures and thereby grow in their faith while calling their community to repentance.

Translators are servants of Jesus Christ, responding in obedience to their Savior, working by the power of the Holy Spirit, and seeking in everything they do to glorify the Father.

Translators should work as a team, bringing their unique skills and gifts to the work. It is not uncommon for some members of a translation project to not be servants of the Word, the church, or Jesus Christ, since they do not

profess faith in Christ. Thus, it is important to exercise wisdom in balancing the contributions of these individuals while ensuring the faithfulness of the work and the acceptability of the final translation from the vantage point of the local churches.

11. Translation and the Church

The church, globally and in every language community, has been entrusted with the ministry of the Word of God. The church is to minister the Word, so local churches in every language community must be equipped to read, preach, and teach the Scriptures in their own languages in obedience to the Scriptures.

It is imperative that churches recognize their unique role in the ministry of Bible translation. They should guard the Scripture from faulty translation practices while supporting and affirming laborers for faithful translation ministries.

12. Translation Fades Into Eternal Praise

In Revelation 5, Jesus Christ, as the Lamb of God, receives praise for completing his mission of redeeming his elect from every ethnolinguistic group. By implication, the church has succeeded in proclaiming the gospel and teaching the commands of Christ in the languages of the redeemed.

In Revelation 20, the redeemed are gathered in eternal worship around the throne in the New Jerusalem, demonstrating the reversal of effects of the Fall and the scattering and linguistic barriers that followed the events at Babel. These barriers fade from view in the eternal and perfect praise of heaven.

In Conclusion

These propositions on language and translation underscore the importance of the task of Bible translation in accomplishing the purpose of the church, as empowered by the Holy Spirit, for the praise of the Lamb and the eternal worship of the Father around the throne.

Even though we recognize the dignity of every language and ethnolinguistic group, the ultimate purpose of translation isn't found in such affirmations. Nor is the purpose of translation found in the beauty of the Word or its status as a cultural heritage. Not even the need for individuals to hear the gospel and put their faith in Christ is the fundamental reason for translating the Bible.

Viewed through the perspective of the Scriptures themselves, Bible translation is one part of the great redemptive work of God, which culminates in eternal worship in the language of heaven around his throne.

Toward a Theology of Translation, Part 1

Bible translation is about far more than choosing a version. With so many Bible translations in English, it's not surprising that our first question is often about which translation is best. Yet many ethnic groups don't even have a first translation in their language.

For many, the thought of Bible translation evokes images of missionaries in a remote corner of the world. But the translation of the Scriptures involves more than accomplishing the Great Commission.

We must step back and see the translation of the Bible in a broader light. Hence, we have to set aside questions about versions and statistics about the number of languages in the world. Instead, we need to thoughtfully examine the Scriptures themselves.

Let's consider what the Scriptures say about God, his Word, and his gospel. I have formulated five propositions drawn from the Scriptures to guide us in our study. In this chapter, I will present the first two.

These propositions lead us to see that the translation of the Word of God into a new language and cultural context is another advance in God's eternal design to reign in the hearts and lives of his people through his Word for their good and his glory. In short, God reigns, and through translation, his reign advances.

1. God Reigns

Throughout the Scriptures, we read the refrain, “The LORD reigns!” In Psalm 93:1, the psalmist proclaims, “The LORD reigns! He is robed in majesty; The LORD has clothed and armed himself with strength. The world indeed is firmly established; it cannot be moved.” In Exodus 15:18, Moses declares in his song of praise, “The LORD will reign forever and ever.”

We also hear that the Lord reigns in the praises around the throne in heaven. In Revelation 19:6, John records, “And I heard a sound like the roar of a great multitude, like the rushing of many waters, and like a mighty rumbling of thunder, crying out: ‘Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns.’”

God reigns in many ways, but one unique aspect of his reign is expressed through language—specifically, his spoken Word.

We read in Psalm 33:8-9, “Let all the earth fear the LORD; let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him! For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm.” God exercises his authority by simply speaking, creating by a mere command. He speaks, and the heavens and all their stars come into existence.

The psalmist calls to our attention that the first recorded words of God were words used in creation. In Genesis 1:3, God says, “Let there be light.” Here, God exercises his ultimate authority over creation by creating light, and he does so by commanding something to come from nothing. God has all power.

Furthermore, when God speaks to Adam and Eve, he reveals himself to them as their sovereign who has all authority over their lives. In Genesis 1:28, he commands them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it.”

God reigns, and he reigns by his Word.

2. God Reveals Himself by His Word

God reigns and expresses his reign in various ways, including by his spoken Word. Yet God doesn't speak simply to exercise his authority. God speaks to reveal himself in the context of a covenant relationship.

When God created the first couple, he intended for them to have a unique relationship with him, knowing him and worshiping him as no other part of creation could. In the context of this relationship, we read in Genesis 1:28 that God blessed them and instructed them to be fruitful and multiply.

As God spoke to Adam and Eve, he was revealing himself to them as their God while communicating that they were his people who lived under his blessing and according to his purposes.

Similarly, in the days of Noah, God spoke to him and directed him to save himself and his family from the coming judgment. After the flood, God spoke to them again and established a covenant. In these events from the life of Noah, God communicates in a personal yet powerful and authoritative way with his people, directing them by his Word.

Later, God revealed himself by the spoken word to Abram and commanded him to take his family to Canaan.

And when God decided to bring his people out of Egypt and establish a new covenant with them, he spoke to Moses through the burning bush. God directed Moses' each step until Moses returned to Mount Sinai with the entire nation of Israel. In Exodus 19, God tells Moses that he wants the whole nation of Israel to hear his voice and hear for themselves that he speaks to Moses.

Then, in Exodus 20, God speaks from Mount Sinai to the people and declares that he is the Lord their God who brought them out of Egypt. When the Israelites see the power of God on display, they draw back in fear. Yet Moses reassures them that God's display of power is for their good, saying in verse 20, "Do not be afraid. . . . For God has come to test you, so that the fear of him may be before you, to keep you from sinning."

From Sinai to the Isle of Patmos, Scripture testifies that God reveals himself to his covenant people by his Word. Yet God wanted to give his people something more than his spoken word.

In Conclusion

God communicates, and he communicates in the context of his sovereign reign over creation. He speaks with the intention of exercising his authority in the lives of his covenant people. In short, God speaks because he reigns.

God reigns, and God reigns in our hearts as he reveals himself and his purposes to us, including calling us to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. He reigns and directs our lives as we live in submission to him and all that he reveals in the Scriptures.

Based on these truths of Scripture, we translate the Scriptures and proclaim the gospel in the languages of the nations because our God reigns.

Let us rejoice with the multitudes in Revelation 19:6 and declare, "Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns."

Toward a Theology of Translation, Part 2

In the previous chapter, we considered two propositions derived from the Scriptures. First, God reigns. Second, God speaks to reveal himself in the context of a covenant relationship. God communicates in the context of his sovereign reign over creation. He speaks with the intention of exercising his authority in the lives of his covenant people. In short, God speaks because he reigns.

This chapter presents two more propositions about the Scriptures to advance our theology of translation.

3. God entrusted the Scriptures to His people

For centuries God was pleased to communicate directly with his people, whether in the garden with Adam and Eve or at the worksite with Noah. God spoke with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. When God called Moses to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt, he spoke from the burning bush.

After Moses led the people into the wilderness, and they defeated the Amalekites, God instructed Moses to record an account of the events as well as God's promise to eventually destroy this enemy (Exodus 17:14). God's instruction to Moses suggests that he might have already been writing down a record. If not, he seemingly started at this point as God directed him to write.

When Moses and the Israelites reached Mount Sinai, God spoke to them directly from the mountain, causing terror among the Israelites. They were

overwhelmed with fear as God spoke to them in an awesome display of his power. Moses attempted to calm the people by telling them that God only wanted to instill a deep fear and reverence that would guard them from sinning against him (Exodus 20:20-21).

Then Moses wrote down God's instructions for the sake of the people. When he read it to them, they affirmed their commitment to live in obedience to what they heard. In Exodus 24:7, we read, "Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people, who replied, 'All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.'"

When Moses ascended the mountain again, God supernaturally inscribed the Ten Commandments on two tablets of stone. Moses described the inscription as being written "by the finger of God" (Deuteronomy 9:10). These tablets were preserved in the Ark of the Covenant, no doubt a reminder that the law of God was written by God himself for the people of Israel.

It's noteworthy that the writings of Moses were not only for the people of Israel in the wilderness, but also for future people of God. In 1 Corinthians 10:11, the apostle Paul writes, "Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come."

Paul asserts that the Scriptures, as God's Word, are for all of God's people, even those living at the end of the age. In these passages, we see that God entrusted his written Word, the Scriptures, to his people through his prophets.

4. God commands his people to read, preach, and teach the Scriptures

No sooner had Moses written down the instructions of God, he also read it to the people at the foot of Mount Sinai. Through Moses, God instructed his people to read the Scriptures. For instance, in Deuteronomy 31:9-13, Moses writes that the Levites and elders of Israel were to read the law aloud at the Festival of Booths, every seven years.

Furthermore, in Deuteronomy 17:18-20, Moses writes that the future kings of the people of Israel, when they ascended to the throne, were to make a personal copy of the Law, keeping it with them and reading it regularly.

Through the centuries, the public reading of the Scriptures followed by exhortation and instruction continued. In fact, in 1 Timothy 4:13, the apostle Paul exhorts Timothy to be devoted to this practice at the church in Ephesus: “Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching.”

From the first century churches until today, God’s people have read the Scriptures corporately, followed by preaching and teaching. Public reading, preaching, and teaching also reinforce and encourage reading as a family and individually.

Before Moses had even finished writing the Scriptures, he exhorted the people to teach them at home. In Deuteronomy 4:6-7, we read, “These words I am commanding you today are to be upon your hearts. And you shall teach them diligently to your children and speak of them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.”

So God intends that his people know him and live in an obedient relationship with him. He has instructed his people to read, preach, and teach the Scriptures, corporately in worship as well as at home.

Furthermore, the command to read the Scriptures aloud as part of corporate worship is the foundational reason for translating the Scriptures. When believers gather for worship, they must have the Scriptures in their own language if they are to read them aloud for the edification of the people of God.

In Conclusion

God communicates, and he communicates in the context of his sovereign reign over creation and with the intention of exercising his authority in the lives of his covenant people. Furthermore, God entrusted his Word to his people through his prophets, so that his people might read, preach, and teach them.

Based on these truths of Scripture, we translate the Scriptures so that the people of God from every language group might read, preach, and teach the Word.

Toward a Theology of Translation, Part 3

In the first and second essays on this topic, we discussed four propositions derived from Scripture relating to Bible translation. In this third part, we will consider the fifth and final proposition.

5. God Commands His People to Proclaim the Gospel to the Nations in Their Own Languages

In Mark 16:15, Jesus tells his disciples, “Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation.” When Jesus met with his disciples in Galilee, he commissioned them, pronouncing what has become known as the Great Commission. In Matthew 28:19-20, he says, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

While discussing the Holy Spirit in Acts 1:8, Jesus mentions again that his disciples are to proclaim the gospel as his witnesses: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Jesus commanded his disciple to proclaim the gospel, but he didn’t specifically address the issue of language. Should they proclaim the gospel in Aramaic and Greek? Should they also proclaim it in other languages?

When the promised Holy Spirit descended as recorded in Acts 2, the disciples were empowered to speak in different languages. In Acts 2:1-13, the Holy Spirit descends on the disciples in Jerusalem at Pentecost. The disciples were given the miraculous ability to proclaim the mighty works of God in the languages of the various pilgrim groups visiting Jerusalem. From that day until today, the gospel has been proclaimed to the “nations,” that is, to the distinct ethnic and linguistic groups across the globe, in their respective languages.

And in order for the gospel to be faithfully and accurately proclaimed and for believers to grow in their faith through the public reading of Scripture followed by exhortation and teaching, the Scriptures must be translated.

The public reading of Scripture is the foundational reason for translation. The Great Commission and the task of reaching all language groups define the scope of translation.

Unfortunately, considering the history of the church, a significant obstacle to Bible translation has been the view that one translation is sufficient for various language groups and, consequently, those languages have no need of their own translations. In our own time, it is not uncommon for some to still suggest that one translation, usually their own, would suffice for those without a translation.

It is important to recognize the scope of the task of translation, extending to all believers in all languages. Furthermore, it is essential to distinguish the scope of the task from the purpose of the task. As noted above, the purpose of translation is to equip the believers in a given language to read, exhort, and teach in their own language and cultural context, in their own generation and subsequent ones.

In Conclusion

These five propositions drawn from the Scriptures provide a framework for understanding the importance of Bible translation and its place in the purposes of God for his people.

God reigns over his people through his Word, spoken and written. Furthermore, God reigns in our hearts as he reveals himself and his purposes to us, including calling us to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. He reigns and directs our lives as we live in submission to his Scriptures—reading, preaching, and teaching them.

It is essential to bear in mind that God's purposes are greater than our own language and our preferred version of the Bible. Jesus Christ has redeemed a people for God from every tribe, language, people, and nation (Revelation 5:9). He is building them into his people, his bride, the church.

Therefore, the proclamation of the gospel to the nations should be accompanied by the translation of the Scriptures, so that believers can know the Scriptures and live in obedience to them, regularly reading, exhorting, and teaching them in their corporate worship.

Yet Bible translation is not just a part of missions. The people of God in every language group, from English and other world languages to the most marginalized people groups, have a need for a translation of Scripture. Furthermore, every translation should be regularly revised. So, translation is a ministry on behalf of the church in every language and every generation.

Ultimately, we translate for the good of God's people and for the glory of our God, advancing his reign, a reign that extends even to the depths of our hearts as he speaks by the Holy Spirit and builds up those redeemed by the Lamb.

The Concept of Authority in Scripture and Translation

The Scriptures are authoritative, but does their authority have any significance for their translation?

Many Bible translators today affirm the authority of the Bible in their doctrinal statement, saying, for instance, that “they are of supreme and final authority in faith and life” or that they speak “with supreme authority in all matters of belief and practice.”

How do these doctrinal affirmations impact the task of Bible translation?

Translators who don't reflect seriously on the topic of authority risk assuming more authority than they should and inadvertently detracting from the authority of God. In fact, some current approaches to Bible translation present translation teams, translation consultants, and even Bible translation organizations as authoritative. But how much authority should they assume?

What is an authoritative text?

An authoritative text is a text with authority. Consider a stop sign. On the red sign is a single word: STOP. Though a single word, this is an authoritative message for drivers.

The authority of a text comes from the author or source of the text. The authority of a stop sign derives from the government, which has authority over how citizens drive on public roads. Furthermore, the government created the language on the stop sign for the purpose of exercising its authority. The government wants every driver to stop at the location indicated by the authoritative text.

It's also noteworthy that an authoritative text is intended for those under the authority of the author. The government intends for licensed drivers to stop at the sign. It would be a comical sight for pedestrians and their pets to gather around a stop sign and discuss when they might continue their strolls. No, the government created the authoritative text for drivers and communicates the importance of obeying traffic signs in their training to receive a license.

But more than a text for drivers, the authoritative text is a means to actually exercise authority over the audience. When the intended audience reads and comprehends an authoritative text, the authority of the author extends to the reader at that moment through the written word. The driver recognizes that it is not a word from just anyone, but from the government and, as such, it is a command to be obeyed.

Finally, the intended audience is expected to affirm the authoritative text as an expression of the authority of the author and respond in agreement with the authority's intentions. And so, when drivers come to a stop sign, they recognize the word on the sign as an expression of the authority of the government and, by stopping, affirm the authority of the government according to the government's intentions.

Is the Bible an authoritative text?

The Bible is an authoritative text because it is a text with authority. The authority of Scripture rests in the author of Scripture, the triune God who has all authority in heaven and on earth. Furthermore, God intended his Word for his people, with whom he has an exclusive covenant relationship as their Sovereign, Savior, and Judge.

In Exodus 19, Moses and the Israelites reach the mountain of Sinai. God tells Moses that he has brought them out of Egypt and to himself at Sinai because they are to be his "treasured possession" and a "holy nation," unique among the peoples of the earth (Exodus 19:4-6). However, this exalted status is only possible if the Israelites obey God's voice and remain faithful to the covenant he establishes with them.

In Exodus 20-23, God speaks to the entire nation of Israel from the mountain. In Exodus 24, Moses repeats for the people what they had heard from God, and the people agree to obey everything that God had spoken. Then Moses writes down everything that he had heard from God and reads the document to the people the next day (Exodus 24:4, 7).

The Israelites at Mount Sinai understood that their God had all authority and, moreover, that he spoke authoritatively through the writings of Moses. Their authoritative text had authority over them and their children and grandchildren. It also had authority over non-Israelites who decided to submit to the God of Israel. In short, it had authority over all whom God brought and continues to bring into his people.

How is an authoritative text translated?

Returning to our example of the stop sign, how would such an authoritative piece of legal text be translated? Such a translation project would fall under the category of a legal translation.

In legal translation, it is essential to have the approval of the relevant authority for the translation. If I want a stop sign on my wall with the word “stop” in 50 languages, I could produce such a work on my own authority. However, if I want stop signs in my community or state to be bilingual, I have no authority to produce and install such signs.

Furthermore, the state does not only grant permission for translation, it also approves the translated text as an authentic legal text with the same status as other stop signs. The state commits to enforce the driving code with the newly translated signs.

Translators who want to serve a language community with bilingual road signs should not produce signs on their own initiative. Nor is it sufficient to have the language community organized and supportive of the initiative. It is essential to have the relevant governmental body approve such a project and recognize the translated texts as equally authentic legal texts.

Legal texts have more in common with Scripture than many realize today.

How do we translate Scripture as authoritative?

If Bible translators affirm that the Bible is an authoritative text and, moreover, that the authority originates from the triune God who reveals himself in his Word, several significant implications follow for Bible translation.

First, translators must have God's approval to translate his Word. An appropriate first step is to establish that God actually wills that Scripture be translated and that God wills for a particular individual to engage in the task.

Over the last 50 years, the focus in translation has moved from God as Author to the needs of the audience. With this shift, the rationale for Bible translation has shifted from obedience to God and Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior to imparting a blessing to the intended readers and their entire community.

However, if we truly recognize the authority of God and his Word, we must affirm translation as an act of humble obedience for the glory of the Author.

Second, it is essential to have some grounds for believing that God will honor the translation and work through it by the power of the Holy Spirit to accomplish his purposes. If we have confidence that it is God's will that his Word be translated, we can have confidence that the Holy Spirit will minister through the Word in translation.

However, if we believe that translation is by our own initiative and for the benefit of those we serve with our work, how do we know that God will actually speak by the Holy Spirit and bring life through the lifeless ink on the page?

Third, translators must respect the authorial intent with regards to the purpose of Scripture. For example, God intended that his Word be read aloud to his people (Deuteronomy 31:10-11; 1 Timothy 4:13). Furthermore, the people of

God are to teach from Scripture (1 Timothy 4:13; Matthew 28:19; Colossians 3:16). It follows that Bible translations should be intended for corporate reading and teaching.

Unfortunately, there is a growing movement to translate according to the perceived needs of specific audiences, regardless of the intended purpose. One example of this trend is Muslim Idiom translations with an emphasis on personal reading.

Fourth, translators should translate in a manner that respects the intended audience. From the first writings by Moses to the final words of the apostle John, the Word of God intends the people of God to be its primary audience.

It is also true that the New Testament contains the good news of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. This gospel message has been given to the church to proclaim to everyone. So we can say that the Scriptures are for the church with a message for the world.

Unfortunately, some have turned these two truths around, proposing that the Scriptures are for everyone and that whoever reads Scripture should be able to comprehend the gospel and put their faith in Jesus Christ, apart from any interaction with Christians.

This view was well articulated by William Wonderly and his colleagues at the American Bible Society in the 1960s. They sought to produce simplified translations intended for those with the least knowledge of English and the Bible. Their approach laid the foundation for Bible translations intended for an audience other than the church. Regrettably, this approach to translation lowers the Scriptures to the status of an evangelistic tract, ill-suited for preaching and teaching in the church.

Why affirm the Scriptures as authoritative?

Many who are involved in Bible translation today would not adhere to the authoritative status of Scripture. Others may agree that Scripture is authoritative, but would also add that the authority of Scripture comes from those who attempt to live in obedience to it. That is to say, the Bible is not the authoritative Word of God because God is authoritative in and of himself, but rather it is authoritative because we view it as such.

Most Bible translators, however, would accept that the Bible is the authoritative Word of the authoritative, triune God of Scripture. Therefore it is important to carefully and prayerfully consider the implications of authority for the task of translation.

In the last twenty years, a new approach to Bible translation has emerged called [functionalism](#). According to functionalism, the author and source text are no longer authoritative. The translator and those involved with the translation determine what to translate, the function and audience of their work, and the ultimate indicators of success. They are encouraged to outline their plans in a document called a “translation brief.” This document is the only authoritative text in view, given that the source text has been “dethroned.”

In Conclusion

The concept of authority is fundamental to Bible translation, now more than ever.

The translator does more than studying a source text in order to produce a translation. As translators study and understand the Bible, they are increasingly under the authority of the Author and accountable for what he has said to them. Moreover, as they understand the relationship between God and his creation, they are accountable to deliver his Word to his audience—the church—for his glory and not their own.

However, if translators reject the authority of God, they inevitably attribute authority to others or even themselves. Recently, an increasing number of translators subscribe to [functionalism](#) and receive permission to engage in Bible translation according to their own plans and desires.

If you are a Bible translator, I encourage you to prayerfully consider how much authority you should assume for yourself before you are detracting from God's. A translation brief is a useful tool as long as it does not hold more authority than the Scriptures. Most concerning of all, while adopting functionalism gives you the freedom to do what you want, it comes at a price. According to functionalism, there is no longer truth or falsehood in translation, only suggestions for how to make a translation better according to its own standards of success as outlined in its translation brief.

Finally, note that the debate about how to translate, whether more literal or more dynamic, has faded into the past. Major Bible translation organizations are moving on to functionalism. With this move has come an explosion of new kinds of activities. It is essential that you learn more about these developments so you can understand what is happening and respond wisely.

10 Affirmations about Bible Translation

The field of Bible translation is filled with theories, principles, frames, and frameworks. Yet when it comes to the relevance of the Scriptures themselves for the task of translation, little is heard beyond references to the Great Commission.

What follows are ten affirmations about Bible translation drawn in large part from the Scriptures, with the conviction that the Bible should be translated in a manner that respects its authority, sufficiency, and perspicuity.

If you are new to the field of translation, I hope these affirmations encourage you to reflect more deeply about Bible translation. Unfortunately, most of these affirmations are rejected by many who are currently involved in Bible translation.

If you are a translator, I hope you will be challenged by these affirmations and consider how your theology and practice align with the Word. I realize that these statements may disagree with your deeply held convictions about Bible translation. I once held some of these convictions myself. Yet careful study of the Scriptures and prayerful reflection on the history of various theories have led me to formulate the following statements.

I have used the plural pronoun “we” because I hope that you and others will join in affirming some, if not all, of these statements.

1. For the Glory of God

We translate for the glory of our triune God (1 Corinthians 10:31, 1 Peter 4:11). We translate for God the Father, who reigns in every heart by communicating his propositional truth in the language of every person and receives praise in every language (Psalm 96:10, Romans 15:9-12).

We translate in obedience to Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, who has redeemed a people for God the Father from every language community and is building them up by his Word (Revelation 5:9-10). His commission to the church includes teaching (Matthew 28:18-20), which necessitates the translation of the Scriptures into the language of local churches.

We translate by the power of the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus Christ sent to empower the church to proclaim the gospel and teach the truths of Scripture in the languages of the redeemed as they prayerfully seek the divine strength and direction that the Spirit provides (Acts 2:1-11; 1 John 2:27; Ephesians 6:19).

2. As Servants of the Word

We translate the Scriptures as servants of the Word, affirming the Scriptures as inspired, inerrant, authoritative, sufficient, and perspicuous (2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:20-21). We recognize that the authority and sufficiency of the Scriptures extend to the task of translation.

If the source is authoritative, translators should respect the stated functions of the source and not translate with the intent to add or subtract from its intended functions.

3. For the Church

We translate for the church as the primary audience, both for the local expression of the church in specific language communities and for the universal church that has been entrusted with the Scriptures (Psalm 102:18; Romans 15:4; Hebrews 1:1).

We desire that both those inside and outside the church read and listen to translations, but we do not translate for audiences other than the church.

As noted earlier, given that the source is authoritative, translators should respect the stated audience of the source and not translate with the intent to add or subtract from its audience (Deuteronomy 4:2).

The standard view that there are multiple audiences in need of distinct translations may have its origin in the American Bible Society and their development of common language translations. To learn more about William Wonderly and his influential book [*Bible Translations for Popular Use*](#), read the chapter in Section V on the concept of the audience in translation.

4. For Public Reading

We translate for the public reading of Scripture in corporate worship, in conjunction with the preaching and teaching of the Word (1 Timothy 4:13; Deuteronomy 17:19; Joshua 1:8).

We strongly encourage private reading as well as corporate reading (Psalm 1:2-3; 119:11). However, we do not accept the translation of Scripture primarily or exclusively for private reading.

5. With Notes

We translate the meaning of the text and address potential reader misunderstandings in supplemental materials.

We prefer to use footnotes, glossaries, and other supplemental resources instead of adding explanatory information in the text of Scripture. Such supplemental materials preserve the distinction between revelation from God and instruction for the reader.

6. With Accuracy

We translate with a primary focus on accuracy (Deuteronomy 4:2, 12:32; Proverbs 30:6; Revelation 22:18-19).

We prioritize accuracy over comprehension or clarity. Furthermore, we consider comprehension more important than naturalness and acceptability.

7. With Consistency

We translate key theological terms consistently, with appropriate attention to precedence in translation.

Consistency is not necessarily uniformity; some terms may be translated differently when distinct meanings are justified by the context and affirmed by precedence.

8. To Be Read Multiple Times

We translate with the expectation that readers will interact with the translation multiple times, giving them opportunities to grow in their

understanding and appreciation of the Scriptures (Psalm 119:15; 2 Timothy 3:15).

We should not decide how to translate a word or verse based on the assumption that readers will have only one opportunity to understand it. Furthermore, we should not raise the unrealistic fear that someone who doesn't understand immediately will stop reading the Bible and never pick up a copy again.

9. For More Than Communication

We believe that the Scriptures are intended to instruct readers and equip them to preach and teach as well (Romans 15:4; 1 Corinthians 10:11; 1 Timothy 3:16). Consequently, we do not accept the view of translation as communication of the basic “message” of the Bible.

The view of “translation as communication” attempts to produce a text that the intended audience can read with minimal effort. Hence, the resulting translation “communicates” in contrast to a translation that instructs or even challenges readers to reflect and learn.

We believe that a translation should communicate without being overly simplified. It is appropriate for a translation to educate readers on theological concepts not previously known in their own culture.

10. The Full Counsel of God

We seek to translate the entire Bible, not just the New Testament, since the Old Testament was written for New Testament believers as well (Romans 15:4; Hebrews 1:1).

We also affirm the importance of translation over the summarizing and storying of passages of Scripture since we want to see the church fully equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16).

In Conclusion

I hope these affirmations lead you to reflect more deeply on what the Scriptures reveal about God's purposes for his Word, his church, and the translation of the Scriptures.

It is essential for translators to view the Author and source text—the Scriptures—in their proper light. A translation should attempt to be no more or less than the source text, whether in terms of the meaning, audience, or function.

Translators should not view themselves as more or less than stewards and messengers charged with being faithful in their ministry on behalf of the church for the glory of God.

In an era of innovation and calls for bold creativity, I hope you will consider the Scriptures in a new light and ask the Holy Spirit to guide you to a more profound understanding of how this crucial task and your part in it might bring him greater glory.

SECTION V

How do we translate for the glory of our triune God? Translation for God's glory must include more than our motivation and focus in ministry. It must also impact how we translate. Our greatest desire should be to translate in a manner that accomplishes his purposes for his Word and his people.

In this section I examine in greater depth the concept of the audience in Bible translation and its relationship to the purpose of translation. The Scriptures define the audience for Bible translation as the church. Therefore, the ultimate purpose of Bible translation is equipping the church for the reading, preaching, and teaching of Scripture in the context of corporate worship.

To the extent that we translate God's Word for God's people, the church, we glorify our triune God and enable others, through their translations, to see the glory of our God in Christ and experience the powerful working of the Spirit.

Why Translate for the Church?

Should we translate for the world, the languages of the world, or the church?

The ultimate purpose of Bible translation is to equip the church to read, preach, and teach the Word in the languages of the nations, to the glory of our triune God.

But why highlight the church? Isn't the Bible for everyone? Why not translate for the whole language community? And what if there are no churches in a language community? To answer these questions, let's begin by considering what the Scriptures are.

What are the Scriptures?

The Scriptures are the Word of God, a message from God himself. In 2 Timothy 3:16, the apostle Paul describes the Word as “God-breathed,” which is also translated as “breathed out by God” or “inspired by God.”

God's Word has its source in God, just as our breath and words originate in us. Because the Scriptures are God's Word, they have the qualities of God—they are inerrant, infallible, authoritative, and eternal.

The Scriptures are a message from God, delivered to and through his spokesmen, whether prophets, apostles, and even Jesus Christ, God's Son and the Word in flesh (2 Peter 1:20-21).

It's important to note that the Word of God is for God's people, while the gospel is a message that his people are to declare to the nations. The Bible contains countless commands to proclaim the gospel to all creation, but not one verse commands that the Scriptures be given to the nations.

What is the church in relation to the Scriptures?

The church is made up of the people of God, redeemed by Christ and commanded to meet regularly around the Scriptures. In 1 Timothy 4:13, Paul reminds Timothy that he is to read the Scriptures aloud to his congregation, preach to them, and teach them. Timothy was, in short, to devote himself to the ministry of the Word.

The importance of the ministry of the Word is highlighted in Acts 6:1-7. In the early days of the church in Jerusalem, the apostles had to resolve a complaint about the daily distribution of food to the widows. They decided that seven men would oversee the distribution, but insisted that they couldn't do it themselves. The apostles stated twice that they had to devote themselves to the ministry of the Word.

For a group of believers to live in obedience to the Scriptures and for their leaders to follow the example of the apostles, they must have the Scriptures in a language they understand. With the Scriptures, they are to regularly minister to their fellow brothers and sisters in the faith and to their community at large.

It follows that translating for the church is essential to equipping the church and enabling believers to read the Scriptures, preach the truths contained in them, and teach the faithful so they can steadily grow in their faith. The Scriptures also equip them to proclaim the gospel message in their own community and beyond.

What about translating for the larger community?

It's not uncommon for translators to say they are translating for a language community. In many cases, they are expressing their vision for the translation to be a blessing to the whole community, not just the local believers. For such translators, the phrase "for the church" might be taken to mean only for the church and not for anyone else.

However, I have found that when asked about the members of their translation team, many of them are pastors and leaders in the local churches. Furthermore, when asked how their work is impacting the community, they might share about a translator reading a draft to a church group and receiving an overwhelming response. Or they might share about a believer who is using a newly translated passage in evangelism.

In other words, believers are building others up in their faith with the translated Word. Beyond the Christian community, the truths of Scripture are being shared with those who have yet to put their faith in Christ.

These translators are seeking to bless the whole language community. However, to the extent that this is happening, it's because they are equipping individual believers with the Word. Their translation is equipping the church to minister with Scripture.

What about a language community without churches?

By highlighting the place of the church, are we suggesting that there is no need for Bible translation on behalf of unreached ethnic groups? Not at all.

But the importance of the church does affect how translation in unreached groups progresses.

In many translation projects among unreached groups, church-planting efforts take the lead, with the translation work following in support.

However, other translation organizations work as specialists who focus primarily on translation. In their case, they proceed with translation regardless of an existing church or even any church-planting activities. In many cases, these translators complete significant portions of Scripture without any believers in the group. They may ask other missions or national churches to assist in reaching the language group with the gospel.

However, if we view the ultimate purpose of Bible translation as equipping the church, we should integrate church-planting and translation efforts so that the translated Scriptures support a growing church.

How does this relate to you?

It's important to have a clearer understanding of the purpose of Bible translation, and especially the relationship between translation and the church. With a more in-depth understanding of these issues, you can be more informed as you pray and support missions work.

In fact, the Christian community, especially in North America, has supported many translations undertaken without any supporting church-planting work. Unfortunately, boxes of unused New Testaments too often sit as a silent testimony to the need for change.

We need to encourage active translators to prayerfully consider how they can strengthen existing churches or support pioneering church-planting efforts so that their work is received by believers eager to use it in ministry.

Finally, we need to be wary of exaggerated claims of what the church can do when unleashed and put in the translator's seat. New strategies that put "church" in their name may not always have the church in the right place.

With a firmer grasp of the issues surrounding Bible translation, may we bring greater glory to God as we seek to advance his Word by lifting up his servants and church in prayer!

Who is the “audience” in Bible translation?

Who is the Bible for? Who are the intended readers of a Bible translation? To use a more technical term, who is the “audience” in translation?

For centuries, it was generally believed that one translation was sufficient for the entire church and, by extension, an entire Christian nation.

Yet today, we have hundreds of translations of the Scriptures in the English language. Furthermore, there is a growing perspective that one translation is never sufficient, given the diversity in modern societies and the different audiences that exist.

How did this view arise? What is the audience, and why do some think there are many audiences in Bible translation?

I would like to introduce you to an often-overlooked book that was very significant in the development of the concept of multiple audiences—William Wonderly’s *Bible Translation for Popular Use*.

Wonderly and a New Audience

Wonderly’s work was published in 1968. Just two years before, the American Bible Society had published the *Today’s English Version: New Testament*. In this context, Wonderly’s book is both an extended argument for a new kind of English Bible and an in-depth explanation on producing a “common language” translation.

This work and the subsequent *Good News Bible* are commonly referred to as “dynamic equivalent” translations, also referred to as “common language” translations. Despite the evolving terms, Wonderly gives a detailed explanation of an approach that is still relevant today.

According to Wonderly, a growing readership in English would benefit from an English Bible in “common language” as opposed to archaic language or contemporary but overly formal language.

He argues that standard English Bibles such as the *King James Version* and the *Revised Standard Version* are inaccessible because of their archaic language. The *New English Bible* and *Jerusalem Bible*, translations in contemporary English, serve educated readers, but he suggests that their language is still too formal for the least educated readers. As a result, a new translation is needed for a new and previously neglected audience: the “common language” translation.

Wonderly’s work is worth reading because he carefully explains the steps to produce the “common” or simplified English that best communicates to the least educated readership.

Furthermore, he clarifies the purpose of Bible translation as communicating in the most basic language so readers are not required to learn special vocabulary. The translation communicates without educating. The key to this kind of translation is to use language that the reader is already familiar with. The ultimate goal of such a translation is to communicate the gospel to readers while requiring as little instruction in the language of the text as possible, especially not introducing theological terms unfamiliar to them.

Three Kinds of Translations and Audiences

At the time that Wonderly published his work in 1968, he and his colleagues at the American Bible Society were promoting “common language” translations. Wonderly argues for this new approach to

translation on the basis of the needs of a specific segment of English readers, that is, based on the intended audience.

To highlight the need of the least educated, he argued that the English translations available at the time served the higher “socio-educational” levels of society, but not the least educated.

He classifies the translations of his day into three versions. First, the “traditional church version” refers to the *King James Version* and the *Revised Standard Version*. These versions use the upper socio-educational levels of English and language familiar only to Christians.

The second group of translations is referred to as a “literary language version” and includes *The New English Bible* and the *Jerusalem Bible* as examples. These translations use contemporary language but might be more formal.

The third group is the “common language” version, exemplified by the *Today’s English Version*. It uses more casual contemporary language and does not use terms only known inside Christian circles. This version uses language that non-Christians would generally use and understand.

Response to Wonderly’s Classification

Wonderly’s classification of translations is very insightful. It’s important to recognize that major revisions in English, such as the *Revised Standard Version*, employ more archaic language, while modern translations, such as the *New English Bible*, employ more contemporary English.

Furthermore, Wonderly makes a strong argument for the “common language” version since it is for those not well served by existing translations, especially those with less education.

However, while Wonderly appears to be very concerned about the least educated, he doesn't seem as concerned that they learn the more formal language of contemporary versions. He is even opposed to readers learning the traditional Christian language of the Bible, as from his perspective, theological terms found in Scripture are of limited value, except for conversing with theologians.

Wonderly wants to translate with a variety of English that the least educated will understand, but is opposed to improving their level of education. In fact, the concept of translation as communication is expressly in opposition to translation for education.

Finally, Wonderly organizes existing translations into three groups with distinct socio-educational levels of English for their readers. Yet these versions were not created primarily or exclusively for the most educated readers. In fact, it would be very unlikely that the translators of traditional and modern versions didn't want all people to read their work. Even Wonderly suggests that more educated English readers might still want to read a common language translation, even though the target audience for this kind of translation is the least educated. Although the level of English in different English translations can be associated with different levels of education, it doesn't follow that distinct socio-educational levels would benefit from unique translations.

Legacy of Wonderly's Audiences

A significant point that Wonderly illustrates through his work without explicitly discussing is that translators and their respective organizations have the right to define their own audience. Regardless of the grounds for this position, it has been accepted without much discussion.

Furthermore, he has contributed to the view that there are multiple, distinct audiences and, as a result, a need for a variety of distinct English Bible translations.

Wonderly's work and the broader efforts at the American Bible Society have contributed to the following widely-accepted views on audience:

- There are multiple audiences in Bible translation.
- The translators define the audience for their translation.
- The translators may define the audience according to the function of the translation, the needs of a specific linguistic group, or a combination of both.
- The best translation is the one that benefits the less educated, especially those who have the least knowledge of the Christian faith.

In Conclusion

To return to our original question of how many translations of the English Bible we need, many believe we need as many as there are distinct audiences with unmet needs. As long as translators approach the question from this perspective, the number of translations will continue to grow.

What if we look to the Scriptures themselves to ask how many distinct translations of the Bible are needed?

How many versions of the Law did Moses receive at Sinai? How many versions of the Gospel of John were written by the aging apostle for the early church?

How many centuries did the English-speaking church rely primarily on one translation? Even today, how many language communities have a single translation? The vast majority!

More importantly, what is the role of the local church and the preaching and teaching of Scripture? Could the Christian community be more central to addressing the needs of those who struggle to understand Scripture? It is

essential to realize that the church is the primary audience—both the local expression of the church in specific language communities and the universal church that has been entrusted with the Scriptures (Psalm 102:18; Romans 15:4; Hebrews 1:1).

If we view the Scriptures as authoritative, it follows that the Author of Scripture should determine the number of translations needed. Moreover, it appears that there is no justification for multiple translations in any given language.

What is the Ultimate Purpose of Bible Translation?

Why translate the Bible? What is the ultimate purpose of translating the Scriptures into a given language? If we can't answer this question, we risk misunderstanding the whole endeavor.

Some say the purpose is to provide a language community with the Scriptures. That explains the task to a certain extent but doesn't say anything about the unique character of the Bible or the relationship between God and humanity.

A more biblically-grounded statement might include providing believers with the Scriptures in their own language so they can grow in their faith and witness to others.

This explanation moves in the right direction by acknowledging that the translation of God's Word is for strengthening believers and equipping them to witness in their community. Yet more clarity is needed. To best understand the purpose of translation, we need to ask the following questions.

1. What is the relationship of God to the translation of the Bible?

It is possible to view translation as a technical exercise—taking a text in one language and producing a corresponding text in another language. However, it is important to remember that the text is God's text and not our own. The message of the Bible, moreover, must go to other communities because of God's stated design, not ours nor theirs.

Furthermore, we need to reflect on these truths because we want to honor God in this endeavor. As the Apostle Paul reminds us, we are to do everything for the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31). In other words, we are to do everything with a view toward pleasing God and accomplishing his purposes. So, we must first recognize *the glory of God* as the overarching purpose of translation.

2. What is the place of the church in translation?

If you were to translate chemistry textbooks, you might say the purpose of your work is to further the education of students in chemistry. You hope students will use the textbooks and enjoy learning about chemistry. In a similar way, Bible translators want to see Christians reading and learning from their translations.

However, churches in a language community are more than an audience. They are more than the consumers of a product. They have an integral part in the process. When local churches take part in the process of translation, from drafting to checking and eventually to using the first published portions in their teaching and preaching, their faith grows stronger. They have a greater commitment to the actual task of translation as well. And some who were attending church and never fully understood the gospel message come to faith in Christ!

Furthermore, translations produced in partnership with churches are often of a higher quality because translators and churches interact more as the work is carried out. When local churches are not an integral part of the process, cartons of unused New Testaments often go straight into storage and never get opened! So, the church must be at the center of translation.

3. What is the purpose of the Scriptures, and how does it influence translation?

The purpose of Bible translation must keep in view the purpose of the Scriptures themselves. The Scriptures are entrusted to the people of God to be read and used in exhortation and teaching (1 Timothy 4:13).

When a translation is read in a local church, the teaching and preaching of the Scriptures lead to the edification of the believers and the salvation of the lost.

For a translation to be used in teaching and preaching, it must be received by the churches of the language community as acceptable for that purpose. It follows that those involved in the translation must work with that goal in mind. Unfortunately, some translations are produced with the goal of leading someone who doesn't attend church or know anything about the Christian faith to a saving faith in Christ apart from the local church.

In other words, the translation is a tract for unbelievers, not the Scriptures that the local church could use to reach the lost with the gospel and lead them to maturity in Christ. Such a view of translation reveals too narrow an understanding of the purpose of the Word. Furthermore, such translations tend to fall into disuse since Christians prefer to evangelize with the same translation they use.

4. Does the purpose extend beyond one language community?

Look at the history of Bible translation. Time and again, Christians with the Bible in their own language have not translated the Scriptures for those without a translation, who are often referred to as the Bibleless.

However, if the gospel is to go to the nations, it must be preached in their languages. And preaching and teaching require translation.

On the day of Pentecost, when the Spirit descended on the disciples, they declared the mighty deeds of God in the languages of the crowds in Jerusalem. In so doing, the Spirit moved the church to minister to the nations in their own languages. And the preaching, teaching, and translation of the gospel have continued over the centuries.

As we formulate the purpose of Bible translation, we should not neglect the scene of the triumphant worship of Christ around the throne in Revelation 5. Christ is worthy of all praise because he has redeemed people from “every tribe and tongue and people and nation” (Revelation 5:9).

So, the scope of translation includes more than our own language but the languages of all the ethnolinguistic groups who will ultimately be united in praise around the throne!

What is the ultimate purpose of Bible translation?

Taking all that we have discussed, we can formulate the ultimate purpose of translation as the following:

To equip the church in every language community to read, preach, and teach the Scriptures in their own language for the glory of our triune God.

May our hearts be gripped by the realization that we, individually and together, can participate in glorifying God among the nations by the translation of the Scriptures!

10 Reasons to Read the Bible Aloud in Church

Why do we read the Scriptures aloud as part of our worship services? Is it just tradition? Is it part of preparing the congregation for the sermon? Or is it more?

I would like to present ten reasons for reading the Bible aloud as part of congregational worship, starting with the commands of Scripture and finishing with the benefits of obedience. I hope that we will view this practice as more than tradition or than a preparatory step for the sermon, but as a central part of worship.

1. The Command to Read Aloud

In 1 Timothy 4:13, the apostle Paul commands Timothy to devote himself to the public reading of the Scriptures, preaching, and teaching. In the context of this epistle, Paul is referring to reading the Word of God aloud to the believers gathered for corporate worship.

Long before Paul and Timothy, Moses was the first to instruct the people of God to read the Scriptures aloud as part of worship. In Deuteronomy 31:9-13, he wrote that the Levites and elders of Israel were to read the law of Moses aloud at the Festival of Booths, every seven years.

The law of Moses was likely read aloud on a regular basis, not just once every seven years. In fact, as we will see, the people of God started reading the Scriptures as often as they met.

2. The Example of Reading Aloud in the Scriptures

Paul's exhortation to Timothy was not a new command. It was a reminder to Timothy to do what he had seen and engaged in for most of his life.

When the Jews met for worship in the synagogue, it was the practice to read the Scriptures aloud. In Luke 4:16-30, we read of Jesus attending the synagogue in Nazareth. As was the custom, he stood to read from the Scriptures and then sat down to explain the significance of the passage.

In a similar manner, Paul and Barnabas attended a synagogue in Pisidian Antioch in Acts 13:14-42. The leaders of the synagogue read aloud from the Law and the Prophets to the congregation. Afterwards, they invited Paul to share a word of encouragement. Paul proceeded to preach the gospel and spoke more after the meeting with those interested in learning about Christ.

3. The Example of Reading Aloud in the Early Church

In the generations that followed Paul and Timothy, the early church followed the practice of reading the Scriptures aloud. Justin Martyr wrote about the practices of the early Christians in his *First Apology* around 150 AD.

In chapter 67, he wrote, "And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things."

4. The Blessing of Reading Aloud

The book of Revelation opens with a blessing on the one who reads the prophecy of John aloud, a blessing which is extended to those who hear the reading (Revelation 1:3). The apostle John, as he was guided by the Holy

Spirit, pronounces a blessing on those who participate in the public reading of Scripture, both the reader and the listeners.

It is not surprising that John would write such a blessing, given that his prophecy included letters for specific churches and for believers across the centuries. He wanted the leaders of the churches to read his prophecy aloud to their congregations and for them to respond in obedience. By blessing the one who reads aloud, John was highlighting the practice of public reading and indirectly exhorting the believers to read.

Also of note, the apostle Paul directly instructed his churches to read his letters aloud when they met together (Colossians 4:16; 1 Thessalonians 5:27).

5. The Working of the Spirit through the Word

In addition to these commands and blessings, another reason to read the Scriptures aloud as part of worship is that the Holy Spirit works in the hearts of those who hear the Word.

In 2 Kings 22:8-13, King Josiah is presented with scrolls that had been found in the temple in Jerusalem. King Josiah had never heard the Law of Moses. When it was read aloud to him, he tore his clothes and humbled himself before the Lord. The Holy Spirit worked powerfully in his heart, apart from any exhortation or instruction.

The reading of the Scriptures is more than a step to prepare the congregation for the preaching. It's more than the first part of a sermon. Reading the Scriptures alone is enough for the Spirit to work in a person's heart.

6. The Public Affirmation of the Supremacy of Scripture

When the leaders of a church commit to publicly read the Bible, they are also affirming that they and their whole congregation are under the authority of the Word of God.

Only one group of people in the Old Testament was commanded to make a personal copy of the Scriptures and read it regularly. In Deuteronomy 17:18-20, Moses writes that the future kings of the people of Israel were to make a personal copy of the Law of Moses, keep it with them, and read it regularly. Moses notes that this practice will keep them from elevating themselves above their fellow Israelites and encourage them to live in obedience to God.

In a similar manner, no one should elevate themselves above their fellow believers in the church, but everyone should humble themselves under God's Word. The reading of the Scriptures by the leaders of a congregation is a public reminder of the authority of God and his Word.

7. The Public Affirmation of the Importance of Reading

The question of whether you read the Scriptures in worship or not has implications beyond your church walls. The regular, reverent reading of the Scriptures in church encourages the reading of God's Word in other meetings and, more importantly, serves as a reminder for families and individuals to read at home.

Paul often encouraged others to follow his example. In Philippians 4:9, for instance, he writes, "What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you."

If we want to encourage the reading of God's Word through the week, how much more should we read it aloud as part of corporate worship on Sunday?

8. Increased Knowledge of Scripture

When the Scriptures are read aloud, a congregation learns more than if they were asked to read a passage to themselves silently.

[Research on the practice of reading](#) shows that when we read a passage aloud, we remember more of it than if we read it silently. Furthermore, when students listen to a story read aloud, they remember more of the story than when they read it silently by themselves.

Personally, when I read the Scriptures aloud, I can focus more on the passage. In the case of poetry, such as we find in the Psalms, reading aloud often moves my heart more, especially if I start to capture the rhythm and emotion of the passage as I read. (To read more about the benefits of reading aloud in general, check out [this article](#).)

9. Greater Sense of Community

The corporate reading of Scripture may also increase the sense of community in a church. The more the congregation takes part in the act of reading, the more potential there is for increased community. For instance, rising together or taking part in responsive reading makes the moment a shared one. Furthermore, if the leaders of the congregation take turns reading each week, it allows for more involvement.

[Research has found that reading aloud](#) creates a shared experience and a greater sense of community among students. How much more could it add to the sense of community among believers?

10. Increased Spiritual Growth and Blessing

After the death of Moses, God instructed Joshua to keep the Law of Moses on his lips, meditate on it day and night, and carefully obey it. If he did this, God promised to bless him with prosperity and success (Joshua 1:8).

In a similar way, we must put the Scriptures in their proper place, corporately and privately. The public reading of Scripture must be accompanied by the preaching and teaching of God's Word. When we follow the teaching of

Scripture and strive to live in obedience, will not the Lord also bless us by the working of the Holy Spirit with all his spiritual blessings in Christ?

A congregation that faithfully reads the Scriptures and seeks to live in obedience should experience these same blessings, not as a reward but as the gracious working of our heavenly Father who moves in our hearts by the Holy Spirit as we hear and comprehend his Word.

In Conclusion

The instructions that Paul gave to Timothy in 1 Timothy 4:13 are sufficient reason to publicly read the Scriptures as part of corporate worship. When we research the topic more thoroughly, however, we find even more reasons to respond in obedience to this verse.

I hope you and your church will look at the public reading of Scriptures in a fresh light as well as consider the benefits of reading aloud as a family or in your personal devotions.

May the Word of Christ be on our lips and reverberate in our midst, with exhortation and teaching, to the glory of our triune God.

SECTION VI

Several trends in Bible translation may detract from the glory of God by overemphasizing the role of translators in defining the task of translation, the value of translation, and even the concept of accuracy. As translators take new directions with a newfound freedom, it is essential to ask whether they are translating for God's glory or not.

This section contains five essays responding to current developments in the field of Bible translation. They consider how the definitions of accuracy and value are being expanded, as well as how the product of the translation process is being broadened to include abridged works, oral summaries, and other non-literal works. I also introduce the topic of Muslim Idiom Translation. The section concludes with a book review of Mark Strauss's *40 Questions About Bible Translation*.

5 Views of Accuracy in Bible Translation

More and more Bible translations are being produced in English, and every one is “accurate” and “faithful” to the source. Even translations that are the most free or paraphrastic still claim to be faithful to the original languages. No translation describes itself as inaccurate or less than faithful.

It appears that accuracy is highly valued but also increasingly elusive. With so many different ways to accurately translate the Bible, how are we to understand the differences we find?

There are several distinct views on what accuracy is in Bible translation. It’s essential for you to understand these distinct perspectives in order to better understand what different translators mean and what they value.

1. Accuracy is Essential

The traditional view of accuracy is that it is at the heart of translation. A translation must be accurate, faithful, and, to use a more technical term, equivalent. When I read a translation, I expect to read a text in English that is equivalent or identical to the source text.

In 1535, Myles Coverdale produced the first complete English Bible of the Reformation era, the Coverdale Bible. [In the preface](#), he wrote the following about his efforts to be accurate:

I have never wrested nor altered so much as one word for the maintenance of any manner of sect: but have with a clear conscience purely and faithfully translated this out of five sundry interpreters, having only the manifest truth of the scripture before mine eyes, trusting in the goodness of God, that it shall be unto his worship.

Coverdale attempted to translate accurately without bias, consulting five translations in the process and trusting God to help him produce a work that would lead readers to worship God.

The Forum of Bible Agencies International [states as their first principle in translation the following commitment](#):

To translate the Scriptures accurately, without loss, change, distortion or embellishment of the meaning of the original text. Accuracy in Bible translation is the faithful communication, as exactly as possible, of that meaning, determined according to sound principles of exegesis.

These international Bible organizations are not the only ones who value accuracy in translation. The [Chicago Statement on Inerrancy](#) states that accuracy is essential for a translation to claim to be the Word of God in a particular language: “We further affirm that copies and translations of Scripture are the Word of God to the extent that they faithfully represent the original.”

With such an emphasis placed on accuracy, it is not surprising that every translation describes itself as accurate or at least faithful. It is even more striking to see the variety of ways a given verse may be translated, all purportedly “faithful.”

2. Accuracy is Important

A prominent view today considers accuracy to be very important, but among one of three important qualities in a translation. The best translation is not only accurate but also clear and natural.

The idea of being clear refers to clarity or comprehensibility. In short, readers should be able to understand what they are reading. Being natural refers to sounding like natural or normal English, not like another language with its words swapped out for English words.

In his book *Bible Translating*, Eugene Nida referred to these three qualities as the basic requirements for a translation (13). Nida first introduced this concept in his 1947 book, but over the decades, this view has become the standard among Bible translators.

Furthermore, most Bible translators today, especially those working in a missionary context, present these three qualities of accuracy, clarity, and naturalness as working in harmony to produce a faithful translation. For example, translators might say they first produce a translation of a verse in the Bible that is accurate and then adjust it to be more comprehensible and finally adjust it a little more to be more natural in the target language. In short, the three work together harmoniously to produce the best translation.

In reality, however, translators have to find the right balance between these often competing demands. Even Nida eventually decided that although all three qualities are important, comprehension or understandability is more important.

3. Accuracy is Secondary to Comprehension

Translators realize that it is not always possible to be as accurate to the source text as they would like and still be as intelligible and as natural as they would prefer. One quality in the translation has to give way.

Many translators today affirm the importance of accuracy while giving priority to comprehension in many contexts. This view has its origins with Nida, who argued that a translation that cannot be understood and leads the readers to an inaccurate understanding is no longer accurate.

For the purpose of illustration, let's consider the translation of John 1:1-2 in different English translations. These verses as traditionally translated: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God" (John 1:1-2).

The importance of comprehension, even at the expense of accuracy, can be seen in several translations of John 1:1-2 produced by Nida and the American Bible Society:

In the beginning the Word already existed; the Word was with God, and the Word was God. From the very beginning the Word was with God. (John 1:1-2; Good News Translation)

In the beginning was the one who is called the Word. The Word was with God and was truly God. From the very beginning the Word was with God. (John 1:1-2; Contemporary English Version)

Note that these translations consider the first statement about the Word potentially difficult to understand, but in different ways. The Good News Translation uses "already existed" to make it more clear that the Word existed before creation. The Contemporary English Version inserts "the one

who is called” to address possible confusion about the identity of the Word. Both works insert “very” in the second verse to bring out more clearly the idea that the Word existed before creation.

These translations focus on comprehension or understandability. The translators of the Contemporary English Version, for instance, prioritized being “understood by all” and are confident that their work is characterized by “accuracy, integrity and trustworthiness.”

Yet it is key to realize that translators have different definitions of accuracy and different priorities as it relates to comprehension.

It took me years to finally understand that when some translators say their work is accurate, but it is clearly not what I would consider accurate, it is because they mean their work helps the reader have an accurate understanding of what the original audience would have understood.

So, for many translators, adding “very” to John 1:2 not only makes the verse more clear or comprehensible, but also makes it more accurate in the sense that the reader has a greater chance of arriving at an accurate understanding of what was originally understood. These translators would never accept that they are making the verse less accurate by their addition of an adverb.

4. Accuracy is Secondary to Impact

There are an increasing number of Bible translators who have a specific purpose in mind for their work and a special audience that they hope to benefit. Their translations are not concerned with the source text as much as producing an impact on the readers of their work.

These works still describe themselves as translations which are accurate or faithful. Yet they also emphasize their benefit to a specific group of readers. Two examples of this approach are The First Nation Version and The Passion Translation.

Let's consider how these works handle John 1:1-2.

Long ago, in the time before all days, before the creation of all things, the one who is known as the Word was there face to face with the Great Spirit. This Word fully represents Creator and shows us who he is and what he is like. He has always been there from the beginning, for the Word and Creator are one and the same. ([John 1:1-2; First Nation Version](#))

The First Nation Version describes itself as being “[faithful to the original language of the New Testament](#).” However “faithful” they claim to be, it is clear that this translation is very free and adds more explanatory information than previous dynamic or functional equivalent translations such as seen above. For instance, “in the beginning” is expressed three different ways in the lengthy phrase “Long ago, in the time before all days, before the creation of all things.”

Here is The Passion Translation:

“In the beginning the Living Expression was already there. And the Living Expression was with God, yet fully God. They were together—*face-to-face*, in the very beginning” ([John 1:1-2; The Passion Translation](#))

The Passion Translation is also “[faithful to the original biblical languages](#)” while bringing out the essential meaning in the source in a “fresh” and “fiery” translation. This work is not as expansive as the First Nation Version,

but is also free and adds information such as “face-to-face” and “they were together” in John 1:2 in place of “he was with God.”

Note that these works, and others like them, claim to be dynamic equivalent translations which are faithful to the original. But they are better described as free translations or even adaptations.

5. Accuracy Is Fiction

In his book *Exploring Translation Theories*, Anthony Pym describes equivalence as a “fiction, a lie, a belief-structure necessary for the workings of economies and the survival of societies” (37).

It is not surprising that secular scholars who reject objective truth, not to mention faith in Jesus Christ, would arrive at the conclusion that there is no such thing as equivalence and, consequently, accuracy.

Yet, instead of abandoning translation, they engage in it all the more. If there is no accuracy, faithfulness, or equivalence in translation, that does not remove the value of the endeavor but rather frees the translator to experiment and produce works that move further and further from the source.

In his book *The Word: How We Translate the Bible—and Why It Matters*, John Barton, an Oxford professor emeritus and Anglican priest, proposes that the concept of accuracy is not as important as purpose and audience. Following the [functionalist approach to translation](#), he claims that translators are to determine the purpose and audience for their Bible translation. Their translations should be evaluated according to the adequacy of the work—no need for disagreements about accuracy or debates about how to best translate a verse (282-83).

In Conclusion

For many years, I assumed everyone valued accuracy and understood it essentially the same way. However, studying Muslim Idiom Translations and similar works forced me to realize that not every claim to accuracy has the same merit.

The concept of accuracy in Bible translation has significantly changed over the last century. Translations continue to be described as accurate or faithful, but few explain on what grounds they are accurate.

The inevitable conclusion of a careful study of many English translations is that there are many inaccurate and unfaithful renderings of the source. Many new works, especially the free or paraphrastic works like those discussed above, have little to offer the reader.

Not every translation can be accurate and faithful. Fewer still have any value to offer modern readers. It is essential to have a clear understanding of accuracy and not simply accept every claim to be accurate.

Does Every Bible Translation Have Value?

It's not uncommon to hear today that all Bible translations have value. They should even be accepted and used by everyone. Some claim it is divisive to say otherwise.

What does it mean for every English version to have value? In short, every translation offers something of value to the readers, especially something lacking in another Bible. A new insight. A new level of comprehension. Even a fresh breath of relevance that leads you to read more!

What Is the Value of Accuracy?

What about accuracy? Is every Bible translation valuable as well as accurate? One might think that the most valuable translation is the one that is most accurate.

From time immemorial, translators have viewed their work as valuable because it seeks to be an accurate representation of the source text. In the first complete English Bible of the Reformation era, the *Coverdale Bible* of 1535, Myles Coverdale wrote the following [in the preface](#) about his efforts to avoid bias and be faithful and accurate:

I have never wrested nor altered so much as one word for the maintenance of any manner of sect: but have with a clear conscience purely and faithfully translated this out of five sundry interpreters, having only the manifest truth of the scripture

before mine eyes, trusting in the goodness of God, that it shall be unto his worship.

Coverdale attempted to translate accurately without bias, consulting five translations in the process and trusting God to help him produce a work that would lead people to worship God.

The Forum of Bible Agencies International [states as their first principle in translation the following commitment:](#)

To translate the Scriptures accurately, without loss, change, distortion or embellishment of the meaning of the original text. Accuracy in Bible translation is the faithful communication, as exactly as possible, of that meaning, determined according to sound principles of exegesis.

Given the importance given to accuracy by these international Bible organizations, you might think that everyone agrees on what accuracy is and why it is needed. But that is not the case.

Do We Need a New Kind of Accuracy?

In the 1960s, some translators pioneered a new approach to translation. This approach focused on providing the least educated with a unique Bible translation aimed at increased comprehension. The translation only used words in widespread use, and as a result, traditional theological terms were omitted in favor of modern terms that intended readers would understand more readily.

This translation was called a “common language” translation. (To learn more about this approach and William Wonderly’s contribution, read the chapter on Wonderly and the concept of audience.) These translations

eventually became better known as “dynamic equivalent” or “functional equivalent” translations.

The common language or dynamic equivalent translations have an admirable goal. We should want more people to comprehend and love the Scriptures. However, this approach has led to simplified texts as the means to that end. They describe these works as “accurate” and “faithful” translations, yet from their first appearance to today, their striking difference from traditional translations is obvious.

How can very different translations both be faithful to the same source?

To understand this apparent difference, it is essential to recognize that common language translators expand the concept of accuracy. According to their approach, accuracy is not only in reference to the original but also in reference to the reader’s understanding or comprehension.

In a book titled *Good News For Everyone: How to Use the Good News Bible (Today’s English Version)*, Nida discusses this new view of accuracy in translation: “accuracy in translation cannot be reckoned merely in terms of corresponding words but on the basis of what the new readers actually understand” (13). The new definition of accuracy allows for new ways of translation.

How Do You Translate *the Jews*, *justification*, and *jasper*?

When the definition of accuracy is expanded to focus on the reader’s comprehension, how does it affect the translation?

The apostle John often uses the expression *the Jews* in reference to the religious authorities, such as in John 1:19. The Good New Bible and other dynamic equivalent translations render *the Jews* as “the Jewish authorities”

or “the religious authorities” to more clearly communicate the meaning of the expression.

The main concern is that a reader, especially one new to the Bible, may not realize the true meaning of the expression; according to their view, the traditional, literal rendering *the Jews* could result in an inaccurate understanding. Hence, it is more accurate to translate it as “the Jewish authorities” because the new reader has a greater chance of arriving at the specific intended meaning—or the “accurate” meaning.

In a similar line of reasoning, the term *justification* is considered too specialized for the average reader, leading to an inaccurate understanding or no understanding at all. As a result, in Romans 4:25, *our justification* is translated as “to put us right with God.”

However, not every specialized term is translated by an explanatory phrase. In Revelations 21:19, we read about the precious stones that form the foundations of the city walls of the new Jerusalem. The gem jasper is mentioned along with other precious minerals such as sapphire, onyx and beryl. One might assume that one or more of these terms would be explained or translated with a phrase like a “red precious stone.” But interestingly, the Good New Bible and other translations in this tradition have retained these technical terms.

Is Accuracy No Longer Essential?

In a well-written work on translation titled *How to Choose a Translation for All Its Worth*, Gordon Fee and Mark Strauss discuss the debate about accuracy among translations. They consider all translations accurate, though literal translations may suffer from inaccuracy whereas dynamic or idiomatic translations may show a loss of nuance in meaning (34).

Fee and Strauss don't discuss the topic of accuracy in significant detail. Rather, they affirm that all translations have value, such as in the following quote about translations for children:

some people reject the use of easy-to-read versions because they claim that some of the meaning of the original texts is inevitably lost. The point, as we have seen, is debatable, and it could be argued that idiomatic versions are actually more accurate. But allowing for the moment that some versions oversimplify the text and thereby miss some of the meaning, does this really negate their value? (41)

Note that Fee and Strauss are aware of the concern that meaning is lost in a simplified translation such as an easy-to-read version. However, they dismiss the point and offer the counter argument that idiomatic or dynamic equivalent translations are more accurate. They appeal to the idea of accuracy with regard to the reader's understanding. Focused on the reader, they end by asking if it matters if some of the Scripture's meaning is lost when the reader gains something.

In a very engaging work on Bible translation in English, *One Bible, Many Versions: Are All Translations Created Equal?*, Dave Brunn takes the topic of accuracy a little further. Brunn notes that accuracy is a standard for translation but that the Scriptures don't say that we must translate accurately (20). In fact, the careful analysis of how Jesus and the apostle Paul quoted from the Old Testament suggests that we have more latitude in translation than previously realized (150-55).

In Revelation 22:18-19, the apostle John warns against adding to or taking away from the words that he just wrote. Brunn notes that some have referred to these verses in support of a more literal translation of Scripture. Brunn skillfully explains how this verse shouldn't be used to argue that the best translation of a verse is the one with the same number of words as the

source. I fully agree that we shouldn't be evaluating translations based on word counts. Yet Brunn doesn't explore any positive implications of this verse for translation (80-82).

Like Fee and Strauss, Brunn believes that all translations have value. The various English Bibles represent a sacred trust to believers (192-93). Brunn suggests that it is unwise and unhelpful to focus on differences in translation. Instead, we should use all translations, recognizing that none are perfect and each has something to offer the discerning reader (188-91).

As the concept of accuracy becomes broader and broader, the door is opened for more and more approaches to translating the English Bible, each "accurate" and "valuable" in their own way.

In Conclusion

With each passing year, more and more English Bible translations appear. How should we respond to these new works? Is every translation valuable?

A growing number of voices promote the view that all translations have value. As we consider the topic of value, it is important to consider the question of accuracy. As we discussed above, the definition of accuracy has been expanded to include the accurate comprehension of the text. This view of accuracy rests on the reader's comprehension and, as a result, audience has become very important.

This view of accuracy allows for more ways to translate and, more importantly, for these various English translations to be valuable in their own way. The proponents of this view inevitably place on readers the task of comparing translations and gleaning value from them. If readers are unsure of why the translations differ or what the purported value may be, they just don't understand enough about translation.

When you hear next that all translations have something to offer you, remember that the value of a translation is linked to its accuracy. That is the greatest value a translation has to offer.

Where Have All the Bible Translators Gone?

Today, fewer and fewer Bible translators are translating the Bible.

What are they doing instead? They are producing written summaries and paraphrastic or free renderings of Scripture. Many are also producing audio retellings of the Bible.

These works may have great benefit to those with and without Scripture in their language, but are they Bible translations?

What is “Bible translation”?

If you have a Bible on your desk or on your phone, you have a tangible example of Bible translation. We all understand what a Bible translation in our own language is. Yes, some are able to read the Scriptures in their original languages and, as a result, do not have a translation. But most believers read the Scriptures in translation.

For centuries, if not millennia, it was understood that a Bible translation was a written text equivalent to the original texts. There has been much debate about the kind of equivalence and the value of different kinds of translations, but no debate about the fact that translation produces a written text which corresponds to the source texts in the biblical languages.

It should follow that a Bible translation organization in general and translators in particular would be producing such Bible translations.

However, that is increasingly not the case. In fact, many Bible translation organizations are producing at least three kinds of works that are not traditional translations. These include Scripture products, oral Bible stories, and oral retellings of Scripture or “oral Bible translation.”

What is a “Scripture product”?

Bible translation organizations are increasingly producing “Scripture products.” A Scripture product is not Scripture but contains much of the information found in different portions of Scripture.

For example, if I wanted to produce a booklet containing the teachings of Jesus Christ in a given language, that could be called a Scripture product. If I wanted to produce a summary of the Bible, that might also be called a Scripture product.

What is new in this situation is not producing summaries and collections of passages, but that Bible translators are producing these *instead of* Scripture.

The concept of Scripture products came to my attention during the Son of God controversy. I learned that some translators wanted to produce translations of Scripture that were not offensive to Muslim readers, known as Muslim Idiom Translations.

However, they were restricted by guidelines that prohibited translating Scripture without the traditional renderings of “Son of God” and “Father.” In response, some translators focused their attention on producing Scripture products instead of actual translations. Since Scripture products are not classified as Scripture translations, “Son of God” can be left out.

I recently heard a missionary Bible translator share about his ministry and the Scripture products he was involved with. I doubt few in the audience understood the difference between Scripture and a Scripture product. I don't fault the missionary for not explaining it in depth. Nonetheless, it is important for you to understand the difference.

What is “Oral Bible Storying”?

Unlike Scripture products, which are not often discussed, much attention has been given to Oral Bible Storying.

Oral Bible Storying involves producing an oral rendering of Scripture in a summarized form. It focuses on key narrative passages in Scripture, not all of Scripture.

Why would a Bible translation organization produce such oral retellings and not actual paper translations? Well, in some cases it is seen as preparing the way for actual Bible translation work. It is also seen as a way to teach some basic methods of translation and get some Bible content out into the community.

Oral Bible Storying could be an effective method as long as there is a strong commitment to actual Bible translation. However, we must not assume that a Bible translation organization producing stories will actually produce a translation.

In fact, some Bible translation organizations rightly speak of the benefits of storying for training translators. They may also mention that their strategy could help the language community interact more with Scripture and share with others what they are learning. But note that some organizations mention these further activities as possible benefits. It takes a discerning

eye to distinguish what an organization intends to do and what they hope will be done.

What is “Oral Bible Translation”?

Given the apparent success of Oral Bible Storying, some have moved on to producing oral renderings of larger portions of Scripture. An [oral Bible translation](#) is just that—an oral retelling of larger portions of the Bible.

My main concerns with “Oral Bible Translation” are that it is not the whole Bible and it is not a traditional translation. Although some claim that Oral Bible Translation is subject to the same quality checks as written Scripture, what I have seen thus far suggests that these works are still fairly free renderings of Scripture.

What I find interesting is that Oral Bible Translation is being presented as an alternative to traditional Bible translation for the sake of oral cultures with no Bible. We no longer need to develop alphabets and teach reading. No, just listen, interpret what we hear, and record the result. We’ll call it an oral Bible and then move on to another of the countless communities with no Scripture.

In fact, some organizations even claim that the oral retellings they produce are just as effective or more so because they overcome inherent barriers with written texts. Such claims lead me to ask, *why did God give his people a written text in the first place?*

If an oral retelling is truly effective in ministry, it might be because the Holy Spirit moves in hearts as the Scriptures are read, preached, and taught. Isn’t the person doing an Oral Bible initially reading it in another language and then retelling it in a fairly free or paraphrastic manner in his own language? What he is doing is not much different from what many Bible

teachers do on a regular basis, reading Scripture and then retelling it in the context of preaching and teaching.

With the growing commitment to Oral Bible Translation, it's important that you understand this strategy. It might be called "[cutting-edge](#)" and be described as having "[great impact potential.](#)" It might even be "[accepted by the worldwide translation community.](#)" But it is still not a Bible translation in the traditional sense. Nor is it a recording of a Bible translation. It is a recording of a loose rendering of Scripture, focused on quickly getting Bible knowledge into the community. It must be followed by an actual written translation.

In Conclusion

More and more missionaries involved in the ministry of Bible translation are producing various products first instead of starting with the translation of written Scripture.

In some cases, this could be a good development, especially when an Oral Bible or series of biblical stories leads to actual translation. Yet it is important for church leaders and missionaries, not to mention those who support Bible translation, to understand the proliferation of products that are not Scripture.

If you give a group of Christians a Bible in their own language, they will eventually be able to read, preach, and teach the Scriptures in obedience to the apostle Paul's injunction (1 Timothy 4:13). Furthermore, they could produce as many summaries and retellings as they like.

However, if you give the same group of Christians an oral retelling or a set of oral stories, they can not read the Scriptures or teach them as faithfully

as they are commanded to do (1 Timothy 4:13; Matthew 28:20). They still need the Bible in their language to live out their faith in Jesus Christ.

A pastor in a remote corner of Africa is presently producing Bible stories in his own language. He would actually like to be translating Scripture, not stories. But the Bible translation organization assisting him will not allow that. When I heard about his situation, I wanted others to know about these trends in Bible translation and what is and isn't being done in the name of translating the Scriptures.

Where have all the Bible translators gone? To new strategies, every one. When will they ever learn?

10 Unanswered Questions about Muslim Idiom Translations of the Bible

I recently purchased a New Testament that was newly translated for a people group with no Scriptures in their language. It was exciting to see the culmination of so many years of work.

My heart sank, though, when I turned to the Gospel of John and saw that it was the Gospel of Yaaya. Who is Yaaya? Could this be yet another Muslim Idiom Translation?

1. What is a Muslim Idiom Translation?

A Muslim Idiom Translation is a translation specifically for Muslim readers. The translators produce this kind of translation with the goal that Muslim readers might learn more than they would from traditional Bibles and, eventually, come to faith in Jesus Christ through their own, personal reading.

What is unique about these translations is that the translators are very much aware of the fact that many Muslims are not comfortable reading the Bible because it conflicts with their beliefs and includes blasphemous concepts and expressions. Translators address this challenge directly in the translation in innovative ways not seen in traditional Bible translations.

In this chapter, I will provide examples from a Muslim Idiom Translation available in English, [The Holy Injil in Modern English](#). You can learn more about this work and read it online at [their website](#).

I am defining this approach based on what has been done in the past, but what remains unanswered is what the proponents of this approach are doing now and what they will do in the future as their approach grows.

2. What is removed in a Muslim Idiom Translation?

Muslim Idiom Translations often translate *Son of God* in innovative ways to reduce the possible concern of readers. One approach is to replace *Son* with other terms for Jesus Christ, such as “Messiah” or “Beloved.” Some even use “Caliph,” resulting in Jesus being referred to as “God’s Caliph.”

Another approach is to replace the term *God* with a synonym such as “Most High,” resulting in “Son of the Most High” instead of “Son of God” as in Luke 1:35 and 4:3 in [The Holy Injil in Modern English](#). In fact, the expression *Son of God* doesn’t occur at all in this work.

In some cases, the word *son* is simply not used in the translation as would be seen in traditional translations. In Luke 3:38, the reference to Adam as a “son of God” is not found in [The Holy Injil in Modern English](#). The verse reads “of Enosh of Seth of Adam of Allah.”

To listen to some of these works, you might want to check out [this website](#) offering “stories” from Scripture.

These works differ from traditional translations in how they handle controversial terms for God the Father and Jesus the Son. What they share in common, however, is a willingness to adapt new renderings that differ from traditional translations and are subject to the assessment of being mistranslations.

Furthermore, as this approach is applied more and more to the Old Testament, we have yet to see how proponents of Muslim Idiom Translations will translate in novel ways. But we have some hints as we will discuss next.

3. What is added in a Muslim Idiom Translation?

Muslim Idiom Translations often employ place names and personal names from the Qur'an for the benefit of Muslim readers. For example, in [The Holy Injil in Modern English](#), the place name *Jerusalem* is translated as "al-Quds."

Furthermore, *Jesus* is "Isa," *Mary* is "Maryam," *John the Baptist* is "Yahya," and *Satan* is "Iblis."

Muslim Idiom Translations in Arabic have also added the Islamic profession of faith to Scripture. The first statement of the Shahada is "There is no god but Allah/God." In 1 Corinthians 8:4, the apostle Paul writes, "there is no God but one." Several translations have taken the similarity between what Paul wrote and the Muslim profession and translated 1 Corinthians 8:4 as "there is no god but Allah/God" in Arabic.

To learn more about this issue and see examples from several works, you might want to read the article, "[Making the Bible More Islamic Than the Qur'an Through the First Half of the Islamic Creed \(the Shahada\).](#)"

4. How does this relate to the "Son of God" controversy?

Many heard of Muslim Idiom Translations for the first time around 2011 as part of the "Son of God" controversy. For decades, these topics had been discussed and debated among Bible translators, but sending churches and donors were not aware of the issues in any significant way.

In 2011, however, a series of articles in well-known Christian publications brought greater attention to the issue. Churches began to respond by investigating the Muslim Idiom Translations and declaring them unfaithful.

Some organizations such as Frontiers did not change their approach in any way in response to the criticism and, to this day, continue producing these translations. Wycliffe Bible Translators, however, eventually agreed to a set of guidelines that appeared to bring an end to this method of Bible translation. These guidelines were set out by the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA), and so they are often referred to as the WEA conventions.

However, the WEA conventions were not the end of Muslim Idiom Translations. It primarily served to drive the proponents of this strategy underground. They now work in strict secrecy, as hidden as possible while publishing and distributing their work.

5. What is the history behind these translations?

In the 1970s, Charles Kraft, a professor of missions at Fuller Theological Seminary, started teaching that new approaches to missions and Bible translation were needed. He and his students laid the foundation for a movement called the [Insider Movement](#).

One of Kraft's students was David Owen, who produced a summary of the gospels in a Qur'an style. Another Fuller graduate was Sobhi Malek, who translated the Al-Injeel Al-Shareef (The Noble Gospel), now known as the [Sharif Bible](#). This work is a highly contextualized translation for Muslim readers, employing terms and names from the Qur'an. It also serves as a resource and model for those doing Muslim Idiom Translations today.

Refer to the tenth question if you are interested in reading more about the history of this strategy.

6. Do we need special translations for evangelism?

Proponents of Muslim Idiom Translations believe that a single translation of the Bible cannot adequately serve the distinct audiences that exist in Muslim contexts and the distinct functions that the Bible should serve.

In particular, they claim a Muslim audience needs a translation specifically for them, designed to meet them where they are in their cultural and religious context. It is only when they have such a translation that they will be able to truly understand the truths of Scripture from their own vantage point. Such a translation is presented as a more effective tool for evangelism.

It is important to bear in mind that many proponents of these translations adhere to the [Insider Movement](#). According to this approach to ministry to Muslims, the missionary is more of a facilitator than a teacher. Therefore, the translation has to do the explaining, and it is appropriate to add explanatory information to the text and remove language that might offend readers and discourage them from proceeding.

Yet contrary to these assumptions, the Scriptures are for more than evangelism. The Bible is God's Word for his church, for public reading as well as for preaching and teaching. It follows that this approach is not based on a proper bibliology.

7. Why are Muslim Idiom Translations no longer openly discussed?

After Wycliffe Bible Translators agreed to the WEA Conventions in 2013, the leadership of Wycliffe and SIL International wanted to move past this controversial topic. Wycliffe missionaries who supported Muslim Idiom Translations such as Rick Brown stopped publishing articles and promoting the topic. Even Wycliffe missionaries who opposed these translations such as David Abernathy went silent.

Furthermore, Rick Brown and others in Wycliffe and related organizations stopped referring to their work as Muslim Idiom Translations. Note that Rick Brown, John Penny, and Leith Gray [first proposed the name “Muslim Idiom Translation”](#) prior to the controversy; they didn’t agree with other proposed terms, such as “Muslim compliant translations.”

As the proponents of Muslim Idiom Translations stopped using the very term they coined, the term “religious idiom translation” started to be used. More recently, translators and consultants with Wycliffe Bible Translators and SIL International have started using the term “contextualized” as a new term to refer to Muslim Idiom Translations as well as other translations.

There is some disagreement about whether the term Muslim Idiom Translation should still be used, but there is no disagreement that this approach is expanding and is already accepted by the major Bible translation organizations.

8. Why are more Muslim Idiom Translations being produced?

The major proponents of Muslim Idiom Translations may have paused in response to the WEA conventions in 2013, but they then proceeded with the general approach.

Many viewed the WEA conventions as a rejection of Muslim Idiom Translations in a broader sense. However, a significant number of Bible translators didn’t see it this way. In fact, those who agreed to the conventions appear to have interpreted them in the narrowest way, as simply referring to the translation of *Son of God* and *the Father* in Scripture, but no more than that.

Bear in mind that the WEA conventions only apply to Scripture. When missionaries produce stories, oral stories, and Scripture-based products, they are free to follow the Muslim Idiom Translation approach.

Wycliffe Bible Translators and SIL International continued to promote the method through their primary training program at Dallas International University and even created the Abraham Center as part of their efforts to train missionaries for work in Muslim contexts. The Abraham Center was recently disbanded, but the faculty associated with the center continues to teach and promote the Insider Movement and Muslim Idiom Translation through their [MA in Abrahamic Studies](#).

A couple generations of Bible translators are firmly committed to Muslim Idiom Translations. As a result, they will continue to produce these kinds of works and describe them as “accurate” reproductions of Scripture—as the Holy Injil in Modern English and the Sharif Bible—even if not the best kind of translation for ministry in a Muslim context.

9. Who promotes Muslim Idiom Translations?

One of the distinctives of the proponents of Muslim Idiom Translations and the related [Insider Movement](#) is discretion and even secrecy. They are very careful in how they present their translation work. Furthermore, some Bible translators are not allowed to discuss their work with anyone outside their organization.

If you want to see how careful these translators are, just look at the welcome to the [Holy Injil in Modern English](#). If you find out who the translators are for this work, please let me know.

No matter how much these translators want to keep their methods from any scrutiny, they eventually publish a translation and make it available in print and online. The careful examination of their translations is the best method to determine who promotes Muslim Idiom Translations.

When it comes to publicly referring to Muslim Idiom Translations, on February 8, 2024, the journal [The Bible Translator](#) published a special edition focused on Muslim Idiom Translation, edited by Dr. Andy Warren Rothlin. You can read his introduction to the edition [here](#).

This edition is significant because Dr. Warren-Rothlin broke over ten years of silence. His statement as editor and his article present the latest thinking in support of this strategy. Dr. Warren-Rothlin is a consultant with the United Bible Society and serves on the board of SIL International. He is a leading advocate for Muslim Idiom Translation through his research, writing, and consulting.

The major proponents of Muslim Idiom Translations have not changed significantly over the years. The most supportive Bible translation ministries continue to be Frontiers, Frontier Ventures International, Wycliffe Bible Translators, SIL International, the American Bible Society, and the United Bible Society. Fuller Theological Seminary and Dallas International University provide training and support these approaches on an academic level, undergirding practitioners on the field.

10. How can I learn more about Muslim Idiom Translations?

To learn more about this topic and the latest developments, I suggest reading a recent article titled “[‘Son of God’ Unresolved: Ten Years After a Landmark Petition, Translators Continue to Remove ‘Son of God’ and Insert Islamic Teaching into New Translations.](#)” While at the Biblical Missiology website, check out the other articles on Bible translation.

Another helpful resource on the web is the [Arlington Statement on Bible Translation](#). This statement was written in response to the growing influence of Muslim Idiom Translations. It is signed by a number of theologians, translators, pastors, and missionaries.

Michael Marlowe has several useful resources available on his website under [The 'Muslim Idiom Translation' Controversy](#).

Three significant books have been written in response to the [Insider Movement](#) and Muslim Idiom Translations. The first is [Chrislam: How Missionaries are Promoting an Islamized Gospel](#). This book contains 25 chapters addressing the Insider Movement and Muslim Idiom Translations.

It was the first major work to respond to these issues from a conservative, biblical perspective.

In 2018, a second book was published by a group of scholars and practitioners which included many authors from the earlier work: *Muslim Conversions to Christ: A Critique of Insider Movements in Islamic Contexts*. This work includes 31 chapters as well as an epilogue and appendix. One especially noteworthy aspect of this work is that it includes chapters from proponents of Muslim Idiom Translations. This volume addresses the Muslim Idiom Translations in more depth, even discussing the ethical issue of raising funds while not fully disclosing to donors in language that the donors will understand the kind of translation the funds are being used to produce.

The third book was published in 2023: *Islam and the Bible: Questioning Muslim Idiom Translations*. This work significantly advances the conservative response to the *Insider Movement* and Muslim Idiom Translations. This collection of articles focuses more in depth on the translation issues, especially establishing that the movement is growing in number and influence. The editors of this latest volume invited proponents of Muslim Idiom Translations to contribute chapters. They received chapters from a few but lamented that the largest Bible translation organization did not allow its members to engage in this scholarly exchange. Several leading scholars from the Middle East also contributed, allowing us to hear from the perspective of Arab Christians as well as those from the West.

In Conclusion

I hope you will take the time to learn more about this important topic and join those who want to see the Scriptures translated accurately.

If you know a Bible translator or even support one, I would appreciate it if you would forward this article to them and ask for their response.

If you know someone who is planning to be a Bible translator, please bring this topic to their attention. It's a painful process to join a mission agency and then have to leave because you didn't know the extent of their involvement in the [Insider Movement](#) and Muslim Idiom Translations.

The Muslim Idiom Translations will continue to be produced, and the essential question is not how to slow or stop this movement. The most important question is how to contribute to the production and use of faithful and accurate translations, translations that equip believers to worship God the Father as well as witness to their Muslim neighbors.

May the Lord continue to raise up faithful servants who will translate for the glory of our triune God as they equip the church, Christ's bride, to take the gospel to every tribe, language, people, and nation.

A Book Review of Mark Strauss's *40 Questions About Bible Translation*

Mark Strauss's *40 Questions About Bible Translation* is an excellent addition to the 40 Questions Series by Kregel Academic. Strauss, a New Testament scholar and experienced Bible translator, approaches the topic of Bible translation by way of 40 questions organized into six general categories.

In the first section, Strauss addresses introductory topics such as the need for Bible translation and the goals of translation. He surveys the major methods of translation, noting their strengths and weaknesses, and concludes with some of the latest research on translation, considering whether these approaches go beyond the accepted boundaries.

The second section looks in more detail at some more technical questions that translators consider in preparation for a translation, including which books to include, which manuscripts to follow, and which audience and reading level to focus on.

The third section of the book, "Challenges for Translators," is the longest and most in depth. Strauss walks the readers through different challenging topics in translation such as lexical issues including collocations, figurative language, cultural differences, and gender. He also notes issues related to determining chapter, verse, paragraph, and section breaks. Finally, he introduces readers to several challenges related specifically to the translation of terms for God and manners of referring to God.

The fourth section shifts from topics in translation to the history of Bible translation, focused primarily on English. Strauss begins with the first translations of Scripture and then works forward, noting the contributions of John Wycliffe and his colleagues at Oxford, William Tyndale and his associates Myles Coverdale and John Rogers, and the translators who produced the King James Version. He surveys the revisions of the King James Version up to the present as well as modern translations which are outside that tradition, including major Roman Catholic translations. Finally, he notes early attempts at “natural-language” versions.

In the fifth part, Strauss shifts from history to the current Bible translation scene. He discusses the most popular or noteworthy translations in five categories. First, he considers formal equivalent translations. He then turns to functional equivalent versions. The third category is mediating versions, which stand between formal and functional (such as the New International Version). He then introduces amplified and expanded translations, which “blur” the line between translation and commentary. He concludes with a survey of several “radically recontextualized” Bibles, that is, translations that change the cultural background of Scripture.

In the sixth and final section of the book, Strauss considers the work of Bible translation beyond English, or in his words, “international” Bible translation. Strauss surveys the major world’s languages and their translations. He notes the need for Bible translation that still exists in many languages of the world, and the work of mission organizations like Wycliffe Bible Translators and the Bible Societies in meeting these needs. In addition to some of the unique challenges of translating outside the English-speaking world, he discusses one of the most controversial topics in Bible translation—the replacement of “Son of God” in translations for Muslims.

Strauss's *40 Questions About Bible Translation* is a valuable contribution to the literature on Bible translation oriented to a general audience. He skillfully introduces the readers to the history of Bible translation, modern

English versions, the challenges of translation, and the incredible need for Bible translation beyond English. The book ends with a list of resources for further study and a Scripture index.

One of the strong points of Strauss's work is his recognition of the strengths and weaknesses of the major approaches of translation. Although Strauss favors the mediating translations and especially the New International Version, he recognizes value in formal equivalence translations.

Furthermore, Strauss is not averse to noting the shortcomings of works that move beyond translation into commentary and cultural adaptation. He reminds readers of the dangers of cultural adaptation, as seen in Muslim Idiom translations in his discussion of the "Son of God" controversy.

Another strong point is the rationale for Bible translation. Strauss notes that the Bible is God's Word. Furthermore, it is for Christians today (15). In short, we translate for the visible church so that believers are able to use the Word of God, whether in public reading, preaching, or teaching.

Strauss provides a helpful definition of accuracy in translation: "reproducing the meaning of the source text in the receptor language in a way that preserves, as much as possible, the author's intention" (23). Strauss's discussion of accuracy is noteworthy because an ever-increasing number of Bible translators consider accuracy to be either only one of several important qualities in translation or a secondary quality, with impact on the readership being the most important feature of translation.

Unfortunately, Strauss sets aside his impartial presentation of translation methods and describes formal equivalence in an unusually negative light at several points. For instance, he states that formal equivalence fails as a consistent method of translation (43). He also states that formal equivalence translations introduce inaccuracy to the extent that obscure language may lead the reader to misunderstand the intended meaning (42). He also states that the New American Standard Bible is "plagued by faulty linguistic assumptions" (290).

Even though he implies that expanded translations and cultural adaptations are problematic, he doesn't speak as directly and forcefully against them as he does the formal equivalent translations. For instance, after a survey of works that "radically recontextualize" the Bible, Strauss simply states that they prioritize relevance rather than historical and cultural accuracy (310).

It is important to note that Strauss defines functional equivalence translations as translations that focus on translating the meaning (29). Formal equivalence translations, by contrast, focus on the form (29). Strauss does not provide the classic definition of functional equivalency as focused on translating the meaning of **the message of the text**.

The distinction between formal and functional is not a difference between form and meaning but between the relative importance of the meaning. All translations focus on meaning. In the case of formal translations, they render the meaning at the lexical and sentential level. Functional equivalent translations, however, focus on providing the meaning that the translators consider the most beneficial to the intended readers. As a result, implicit information may be added. Meaning in the text may be removed if it is not considered beneficial. To explain the more open or free approach to the text, proponents of functional translations claim that they are focused on the meaning of the entire text as opposed to the meaning of a word or sentence.

Furthermore, Strauss fails to note that one striking feature of functional translations is the avoidance of traditional biblical expressions and theological terms. Interestingly, he does note this topic in the context of explaining how the New International Version gained a larger readership than the Good News Bible and other non-formal equivalence translations (292).

Finally, he does not mention that functional equivalent translations are intended for people outside the organized church and with a limited knowledge of the Bible. In fact, he puts on the lips of "stuffy biblical scholars" the claim that non-literal translations are not suited for serious

study (291). In so doing, he fails to note that the translators who originally produced functional equivalence translations were the first to defend their work by claiming that their translations were primarily for evangelism and not for serious biblical study.

These are significant features of the functional equivalence translations which should be explained to readers so they might understand more fully the differences between formal, mediating, and functional translations.

Unfortunately, readers are left with the impression that formal equivalence translations are significantly distinct from the mediating translations and especially the New International Version. Strauss even describes the New International Version as having a "modified dynamic/functional equivalent translation philosophy" (291). As a result, the similarities between formal and mediating translations are easily overlooked, such as targeting Christians as the primary audience, prioritizing preaching and teaching as the uses of the translation, employing traditional theological terms in the translation, and being endorsed by conservative denominations and pastors.

A helpful feature of the book is that every chapter ends with reflection questions. In order to make the book more suited for teaching, an index of topics addressed in the book would have been a helpful addition. A glossary of technical terms would also have been useful, given the introductory nature of the work and the breadth and complexity of the topics addressed.

I highly recommend Strauss's introduction to Bible translation. He skillfully introduces the readers to a broader range of topics in this field, drawing on his own expertise and involvement as an experienced translator. He also writes in a style accessible to a general audience and, as a result, this work should be a valuable resource in the classroom as well as for personal study.

Strauss, Mark L. *40 Questions About Bible Translation*. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2023. 368 pp. Paperback. Price: \$24.99. ISBN: 9780825447501

SECTION VII

This final section focuses on three men who defended Bible translation for the glory of God. I consider John Calvin's involvement in supporting the translation and dissemination of the Bible in French, along with quotes from Calvin on the topics of Christ and Scripture. I introduce an English theologian and churchman, William Whitaker, who wrote in defense of Bible translation during the second generation of the English Reformation. I also consider how Whitaker's writings influenced the Westminster Confession. I then provide a collection of quotes from Whitaker. Lastly, I share quotes from Myles Coverdale, an English reformer and Bible translator, together with a book review of a recent biography of this significant figure in the history of the English Bible.

John Calvin on Christ and the Scriptures in Translation

John Calvin was one of the most influential leaders of the Protestant Reformation. In 1536, he published his most significant work, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. He continued to revise and expand this book over the course of his life. However, a year before its publication, Calvin wrote a concise statement about Christ and the Scriptures, which appeared as a preface in the French Bible produced by his cousin, Robert Pierre Olivétan.

In this article, we examine this early writing and Calvin's view of the central place of Christ in the Scriptures and in the life of Christians. We will see from this brief study that Calvin's high view of Christ and the Scriptures led to a high view of the translation of the Scriptures for the sake of the church.

The French Bible of Olivétan

Robert Pierre Olivétan was a French reformer and cousin of John Calvin. He studied in Paris and embraced the Reformation before his younger cousin. He then fled France and joined the Reformation movement in Switzerland.

In 1532, Olivétan was asked to translate the Bible into French on behalf of the Waldenses churches. He worked in Neuchâtel, Switzerland, and his work has been referred to as the [Neuchâtel Bible](#), or the [Olivétan Bible](#).

As was customary at the time, Olivétan wrote a preface to his translation. He dedicated his work to “the poor church to whom nothing is given,” a reference to the Waldenses churches and the countless French-speaking

Christians who had no access to the Scriptures in their own language. He also discussed some of the issues he faced as he struggled to bring the beauty of Hebrew and Greek into his French translation.

An intriguing aspect of his work is that his young cousin, John Calvin, wrote two prefaces for the Bible. Calvin had only joined the Reformation movement a year before working with his Olivétan.

Calvin wrote the first preface in Latin, which appears at the beginning of the Bible. He wrote the second preface in French, and it serves as an introduction to the New Testament. This [second preface](#) will be the focus of our discussion.

John Calvin's Preface to the New Testament

John Calvin's [preface](#) is a carefully reasoned overview of the Scriptures that focuses on Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of the Old Testament and center of the New Testament. Calvin writes with theological precision but also regularly exhorts his reader to embrace the truths of Scripture with a pastor's heart.

From Creation to Christ

After Calvin greets those who love Christ and his gospel, he immediately takes the reader to Genesis and the creation of mankind: God the Creator created mankind, but Adam exalted himself in pride and lost all that God had given him. Humanity became displeasing to God. Yet God did not stop showing his common grace. God places witnesses to his glory in creation that draw us to seek him.

Calvin notes that God desired to show his goodness and kindness more fully, and so he revealed himself to Abraham and established a covenant with the people of Israel. Nonetheless, the disobedience of Israel revealed

the need for a new covenant and a new mediator. Calvin concludes that only our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ could be such a mediator.

Calvin then pauses in his progression across redemptive history and returns to Genesis. He explains that from the beginning, there was a promise of a deliverer who would undo the work of Satan. He seems to want to make clear in the reader's mind that Christ the Mediator was not a response to Israel's failure, a change in God's plan. Jesus was not an alternate plan. Rather, God's plan from the beginning was to provide a deliverer.

Calvin discusses the promise to Eve of one who will crush the head of Satan, the promise to Abraham that all the nations would be blessed through his seed, and the prophecies of a coming Messiah found in the prophets. Then he explains to the reader that at the perfect time, established by God, Jesus Christ came as the fulfillment of the promised Messiah and Mediator to redeem and save us. Calvin finally draws the reader's attention to the book in their hands: the New Testament clearly sets forth all these truths about Jesus Christ.

Here Calvin adds that the New Testament was translated faithfully from Greek into French so that all Christians might read it and understand and affirm "the law they ought to obey and the faith they ought to follow."

Christ our Savior and the New Testament

Calvin then focuses the reader's attention on Jesus Christ, our only Savior. He is the Mediator of the New Testament, which is new and eternal, ratified and confirmed by Jesus' death. He also notes that the gospel is new and joyful news. The events of Jesus' life illustrate that He is the promised Messiah. Furthermore, the testimony of the angels at his birth, of John the Baptist, and of the apostles all confirm him as the promised Messiah. Calvin summarizes this section by noting that there is nothing in heaven or on earth that has not bore witness to Jesus Christ as God, Lord, Master,

and Savior, whom the Father sent to us to accomplish the salvation of humanity. Again, he draws the reader's attention to the New Testament before them. All these truths about Jesus Christ are "announced, manifested, written, and signed" in the New Testament.

Calvin also reminds the reader that Jesus Christ has made us his heirs and declared to us his will, and, consequently, we are all called to this inheritance. We are all called to Christ "without respect for persons." He exhorts readers to not dishonor or conceal this new covenant.

Without this redemptive relationship to God through Christ, we could not know God, what He commands, or what the gospel is. Furthermore, without the gospel, "everything is useless and vain." A series of concise yet profound statements about the gospel culminate in a blessing on those who hear and keep the gospel and a curse on those who reject it.

Seek Christ in the Scriptures

In the final section of the preface, Calvin addresses three specific groups—the Christian population in general, the secular authorities, and the religious authorities.

Calvin exhorts the Christians in the broadest sense, both "men and women," to listen and learn. He writes that they have no hope apart from the gospel and hence should listen to the gospel, read the Scriptures, and guard these truths in their hearts.

He encourages the readers not to be concerned about harm, curses, or disgrace that might follow reading the Scriptures as Jesus left an example of suffering as the way to glory. He also reminds them that they cannot experience anything so accursed that Jesus Christ can't turn it into a blessing.

Finally, Calvin reminds the reader that there will be a final judgment, at which all wrongs will be set right. Those who are despised and condemned before men for the sake of Christ will be crowned with Christ in eternity. He presses again the value of knowing Christ and the great spiritual riches that believers have through him, including eternal life. He compares Christ to different figures in the Old Testament, including Isaac, Melchizedek, David, and Solomon. Each person, in their very best qualities and accomplishments, pictures what Christ is for believers of the new covenant.

Yet Christ Jesus is even higher in praise. Every good thing we could think of or even desire is found only in Jesus Christ. Calvin provides a lengthy list of things that Christ did on our behalf, including being sold to buy us back, being marred so that we may be made fair, and dying so that we may have life. He reminds the reader that Jesus Christ is our boast. We live in Christ, and so we are content in all things and comforted in all tribulations.

Reaching this peak of praise of Christ, Calvin ends with a cautionary note. He reminds the reader not to seek other wisdom in the Scripture or mix anything else with the gospel. He warns that those who teach one syllable beyond what is in the Scriptures are cursed before God.

Publish and Teach This Sacred Doctrine

After his lengthy and pastoral appeal to a broad Christian audience, Calvin turns his attention to the secular authorities. He does not offer any gracious words but simply reminds them that God has ordained them to uphold the good and punish the wicked.

He then asserts in a clear and direct manner that it is the responsibility of the secular authorities to have “this sacred doctrine” published and taught throughout their jurisdictions so that all many understand it.

Calvin believes that the secular authorities have an obligation to magnify God by ruling in humility and seeking to advance his glory. It follows that they should make the Scriptures freely available to all under their rule.

Feed the Sheep of Jesus Christ

Finally, Calvin addresses the religious authorities. As with the secular authorities, Calvin has no pleasantries to offer. He appeals to them to feed the sheep of Jesus Christ with their proper pasture, referring to the Word of God, and asks them to ensure that the Scriptures in French can be freely read, discussed, and interpreted by any Christian.

Knowing that the Roman Catholic Church has no interest in the Scriptures being translated for the laity, Calvin strengthens his appeals by stating that it is the will of God and the command of Jesus Christ that French-speaking believers have the Scriptures in their own language.

Calvin expounds Christ's command by noting that Jesus sent his apostles and followers to the whole world. Furthermore, they received grace to speak in all languages so that they might "in every language preach to every creature." He then exhorts the church leaders to follow the example of the apostles and seek to instruct everyone with the Word of God "by every possible means," a reference to using the French Bible to instruct the French-speaking laity.

According to his line of argumentation, Calvin thought that the command to preach the gospel to all nations provided sufficient justification to preach to the French in the French language. Furthermore, preaching in French validates teaching, studying, and even translating the Scriptures in French.

In other words, Calvin sees no justifiable alternative to reading, preaching, and teaching in French. He writes that the church leaders who refuse to use the French Bible will be guilty before God for the fate of the sheep in

their care, the sheep who will starve because they are denied their proper pasture.

In Conclusion

For John Calvin, the Scriptures are all about Christ, and Christ is all that we need from the Scriptures.

Furthermore, Christ's command to preach to the nations implies that preaching, teaching, and even the study of the Scriptures is necessary in the languages of the nations so that everyone, regardless of their language, might know him and grow in their faith. All of Christ's sheep need good pasture.

With these convictions, it should not be surprising that Calvin wrote two [prefaces](#) in support of his cousin's work. Calvin's involvement with the French Bible increased over the decades. With the untimely death of Olivétan, Calvin took responsibility for ensuring that his cousin's work was revised and expanded. In fact, Geneva became a center of biblical scholarship and Bible translation in the decades that followed.

May the Lord continue to bless the church with servants of Christ and his Word like Robert Pierre Olivétan and John Calvin, who are committed to equipping "the poor church to whom nothing is given" with the Scriptures in their own language.

When John Calvin Went Public

In 1534, John Calvin embraced the Reformation and experienced salvation by grace through faith in Christ alone. In response to rising persecution, Calvin fled France and sought refuge in Basel, Switzerland, arriving in January 1535.

While in Basel, Calvin took on a pseudonym and sought out other French reformers. It is very likely that he met his cousin Pierre Robert Olivétan. Olivétan was translating the first French Bible to be used by the Protestants, a project initiated and overseen by two other reformers, Guillaume Farrell and Pierre Viret.

It is possible that Calvin met all three of these reformers while in Basel. Regardless of who exactly he met, Calvin was asked to assist with the project by writing two prefaces for the Bible, the first in Latin and the second in French.

In this chapter, I would like to introduce you to Calvin's first preface. It was written in Latin and defended the French Bible against various objections of the day. Calvin also used the preface to publicly align himself with the Reformation by defending translation and those involved in the endeavor.

“John Calvin to all Emperors...”

It is noteworthy that the first two words of the French Bible, after the title page, are *Joannes Caluinus*, “John Calvin.” Calvin was in hiding, moving around Basel under the pseudonym of Martinus Lucianus. Yet in the French Bible, he wanted his actual name to be seen. He wanted to address, by name, the emperors, kings, princes, and religious leaders who would open the Bible. He was publicly announcing his adherence to the Reformation.

Permission to Publish

After his initial greeting, Calvin launches into a discussion of granting permission to print books. Calvin was, no doubt, aware that the French Bible was being printed by Pierre de Vingle.

De Vingle had printed numerous books and Scripture in support of the Reformation, usually without any official approval. In fact, he printed the French Bible of 1535 outside Neuchâtel, in the neighboring hamlet of Serrières, after failing to receive permission to print in Geneva and being exiled from Bern.

After admitting the benefits of gaining permission to print a book, Calvin argues that such regulations do not apply to Scripture. Given that the Scriptures are the truth and oracles of God, God is the “guarantor of the privileges” to publish Scripture. It also follows for Calvin that the Scriptures should be “publicly and privately received with the highest reverence by all peoples.”

Translations Are Not for All

Calvin then turns to the first of three objections against translating and disseminating the Word of God. He notes that some “ungodly voices” object to allowing “the simple common people” to have access to the Bible. Calvin boldly states that his only desire is that “the faithful people be permitted to hear their God speaking and to learn from [Him] teaching.”

Jesus taught the common people and was pleased that God revealed truth to children (Matthew 11:25). He was pleased that the gospel was preached to all, including the poor (Matthew 11:5).

Calvin also reminds the reader of several church fathers who urged the common people to read the Scriptures. For instance, Chrysostom argued

that it was more important for the average person in church to read the Scriptures than it was for the monks.

Despite a decline over the centuries in the reading of the Scriptures on the part of the laity, he contends that it is cruelty on the part of pastors, who are called to feed their sheep, to “snatch the fodder of life” from those in their spiritual care.

Translations Lead to Error

Calvin then turns to the claim that those who read the Bible in their own language fall into error because they are not well instructed. He responds by reminding the reader that the gospel is the power of God unto salvation for all who believe (1 Corinthians 1:18, 24). Jesus Christ is both eternal life (John 14:6) and a stumbling block (1 Corinthians 1:23).

He mentions the church fathers Chrysostom and Augustine, who urged their congregations to study the Scriptures and doctrine in order to be strengthened against heresy. For Calvin, reading the Scriptures is the means to fortify believers and give them the resources they need to discern truth from error. It is the remedy for error, not the source of error.

Translations Lead to Pride

Calvin then takes up a third objection. Some religious leaders claimed that those who read the Scriptures become proud and easily angered. At this point, Calvin clearly reveals the target of his criticism. It is “the Roman Pontiff and his priestlings,” who are set on maintaining their power. They want to keep people in darkness to profit from their ignorance.

Calvin does not muster a scriptural response to this topic or cite the church fathers. He simply states that it is better for the erroneous practices of the Roman Church to be exposed and ridiculed.

Latin Should Satisfy All

After responding to three objections to the translated Scriptures being available to the people, Calvin addresses the argument that a French translation was not necessary because the Latin Bible, the Vulgate, is adequate.

Calvin responds by asserting that the Vulgate is not easily understood, except by the most learned, and that it is not an accurate translation. A right view and respect for the Holy Spirit should lead us to recognize the importance of having language that everyone understands and, as a result, leads to the edification of the church (1 Corinthians 12:10).

Commending His Cousin

Calvin concludes the preface with a few words of commendation for the translator, Olivétan, a relative of his with whom he has “an old friendship.” He writes that Olivétan is highly educated and intelligent and has gained his highest trust as a translator. He asks readers not to be too critical or “ungrateful to our Robert.” In fact, Olivétan was so modest that he did not want to undertake the translation project, but the reformers Guillaume Farrell and Pierre Viret eventually persuaded him.

Calvin concludes this section by warning against criticizing the work and slandering the translator: “Men are ready to criticize everything, but not to strive to excel the same.” He closes with an abrupt, “Farewell.”

In Conclusion

John Calvin’s Latin preface is significant because the young reformer, hiding in Basel, used this publication as an opportunity to publicly announce to the French-speaking world that he had joined the Reformation. With the same strokes of his pen, he publicly supported his

fellow reformers involved in the project, especially Olivétan. He defended the importance of the Bible in French and, in the process, clearly condemned the Pope and the religious leaders for the darkness in the church and the lack of spiritual food for the sheep.

In keeping with his public support of the Reformation, Calvin has a more polemic and pointed tone, calling the religious leaders as “ungodly” for snatching spiritual food from the laity. Furthermore, he focuses his comments on these religious leaders. By contrast, in the second preface, he addresses common Christians at greater length. When he does address the religious leaders in the second preface, it is more respectful.

This Latin preface was a bold, public statement by Calvin, but its relevance waned over time. It is not surprising that it did not appear in later editions of the French Bible. Regardless, it was a significant step for him and stands as a reminder and challenge for each of us. We must always be ready to publicly declare our faith in Christ and defend his Scriptures, especially the translation of the Word for those without spiritual food.

John Calvin on Bible Translation

In 1535, John Calvin wrote two prefaces for the newly translated French Bible, a work of his cousin Pierre Robert Olivetan. The first preface was in Latin and appeared at the front of the Bible; the second preface was in French and appeared at the beginning of the New Testament.

In the second preface, Calvin introduces the reader to the New Testament and the centrality of Jesus Christ. The final section exhorts all Christians to read the Scriptures and especially appeals to those in positions of authority to allow everyone to read, study, and truly understand the Word of God.

In this chapter, I present Calvin's principal thoughts on the translation of the Scriptures as found in the French preface to the New Testament. First, we will discuss the reason given for translating the Bible into French. We will then consider the arguments that Calvin provides for reading the Scriptures in translation. Finally, we will consider how Calvin approaches translation from a pastoral position by exhorting his readers to respond to the French Bible in a manner that will lead to understanding the gospel, strengthening the church, and magnifying God.

Reason for the Translation

Calvin states the reason for the French translation in the second section of the preface: "that all Christians who know the French language, men and women, are able to understand and acknowledge the law they ought to obey and the faith they ought to follow."

For Calvin, the reason to translate is so that all French-speaking Christians may comprehend the Scriptures and respond in faith. Furthermore, he

hopes they will acknowledge the true faith as a result of their study of the Scriptures.

His reference to “men and women” reveals that he did not agree with the position of many in the Roman Catholic Church that women could not read the Scriptures. In fact, he mentions women at other points in the preface to highlight that they should read and study the Scriptures.

The Importance of Reading a Translation

In the third section of the preface, Calvin exhorts everyone to read the translation and appeals to the authorities to approve and support such reading. He specifically addresses the religious authorities in the Roman Catholic Church and asks them not to forbid the reading and studying of the Scriptures.

Calvin provides two reasons for Christians to read the Scriptures in their own language. First, it is the will of God and the command of Jesus Christ. Jesus sent his apostles and disciples throughout the whole world to preach to every creature (Mark 16:15). Paul, in Romans 1:14, writes that he is a debtor to Greeks and barbarians, wise and simple. From these passages, Calvin concludes that Christians should preach and teach the gospel message to every ethnicity. Furthermore, if every ethnic group should hear the gospel, they should also read and study the Scriptures, which contain the gospel and the means for them to grow in their faith. Put another way, if the essential message of the gospel is to be communicated, the whole counsel of God should also be communicated.

Second, Calvin notes that the apostles and disciples were given the “grace” or “gift” of speaking in all languages so they could preach the gospel “in every language to every creature.” Calvin probably had the events of the day of Pentecost in view (Acts 2:1-13). On Pentecost, the apostles and the other believers in Jerusalem were empowered by the Holy Spirit to speak in the languages of the pilgrims who were celebrating the feast in the city.

Jesus told his followers to remain in Jerusalem until they would receive a gift from the Father (Luke 24:29; Acts 1:4). Calvin associates the promised gift of the Holy Spirit with the ability to speak in the languages of the various ethnic and linguistic groups present at Pentecost. The apostles' miraculous speaking in foreign languages was for the purpose of proclaiming the gospel to the pilgrims in their respective languages.

Calvin views the events of Pentecost as the establishment of a precedent that the gospel is to be proclaimed in the languages of the nations. If the Spirit directed the first believers to preach in the languages of the nations, the language groups of the world should also receive the gospel in translation so that they might grow in grace.

Taken together with the preceding argument, Calvin determines that the gospel and the Scriptures that contain the gospel message should be available to every ethnicity in their respective languages.

At the close of the third section, Calvin writes that it is the will of God for "His truth to reign over all peoples and nations" through the gospel and by the Holy Spirit. He returns to his earlier thought that it is the will of God for everyone to read the Scriptures in their respective languages. If God wills to reign over all nations through the truth and, specifically, the truth of the gospel and by the Holy Spirit, it is God's will that every ethnicity comprehends the gospel in their respective languages. Furthermore, for God's truth to fully reign over all peoples and in every heart, God's Word should be translated into the language of every ethnicity.

Pastoral Exhortations

To orient readers to the importance of the work in their hands, Calvin devotes the first section of his preface to explaining how Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the Old Testament. In the second section, he exhorts readers to recognize Christ as their Savior and Comforter in their present trials and persecutions.

In the third section, he exhorts readers to read, understand, and live in obedience to the Word. In a similar manner, Calvin specifically appeals to the secular leaders to allow the Scriptures in French to be openly read and taught so that the people living in their jurisdiction might understand the truths of Scripture, which will magnify God and exalt his gospel. He also reminds them that God has a right to their obedience and humble service.

Calvin's final exhortation is to the religious authorities. He reminds them that they are accountable for the spiritual well-being of their sheep. In particular, he states that God will hold them personally accountable for the spiritual state of those who are denied proper spiritual food—the Scriptures in translation. He exhorts them to follow the example of the apostles and employ every means possible to train everyone up in their faith in Jesus Christ, particularly allowing everyone to read and study the Scriptures in French.

In Conclusion

Calvin approached the topic of translation from a pastoral and theological perspective. As a young reformer concerned with the spiritual conditions in France, he seeks to advance the translation of the Scriptures in French by exhorting everyone to read the Scriptures and use their position and authority to encourage others to do the same. Furthermore, his exhortation to read is presented in the context of grasping fully the greatness of Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, Calvin defends translation by placing it in a larger theological context. It is the will of God that the people of God have the Scriptures in their respective languages. Jesus Christ also commands that the church endeavor to proclaim the gospel and translate the Word in every language for every ethnic group.

Calvin does not discuss the importance of translating itself but rather argues for the importance of the activity which translation makes possible:

reading the Scriptures in one's own language. In other words, the importance of translation for Calvin is found in what it makes possible—the equipping of believers to read, teach, and preach, in obedience to Christ, to the glory of our triune God.

20 John Calvin Quotes on Christ and Scripture

John Calvin is known as a theologian and influential Protestant reformer, but he is less often described as a passionate preacher who longed to see the French-speaking world know Christ as Lord and Savior.

After joining the Reformation movement, Calvin wrote a [preface](#) to the New Testament in French. This preface begins with an overview of the Scriptures, focusing on Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of the Old Testament and center of the New Testament.

Calvin then exhorts the French-speaking laity to read, study, and learn from the Scriptures. With a pastor's heart, he encourages his readers to embrace the truths of Scripture. He also urges the secular and religious leaders to allow the laity to have the true food of the Word by granting them access to the Bible in French.

I'd like to introduce you to this young, zealous John Calvin by way of 20 quotes from his preface to the French New Testament of 1535.

I hope you will be encouraged by the words of a theologian, pastor, and translator who loved his Lord and the Scriptures enough to write this preface and devote his life to feed the flock with the Word.

“When the fullness of time had come and the period foreordained by God was ended, this great Messiah, so promised and awaited, came. He was perfect and accomplished all that was necessary to redeem and save us.”

“Thus, He is our only Savior. We owe our redemption, peace, righteousness, sanctification, salvation, and life to Him. He died for our sins and rose again for our justification. He ascended to heaven and opened a way for us to enter as well, taking possession of a heavenly place on our behalf and preparing us a home there.”

“In short, the elements and all created things gave glory to Jesus Christ. At His command, the winds ceased, the raging sea became peaceful, and the fish brought a four-drachma coin in its stomach.”

“All these things are announced to us, demonstrated for us, written for us in this New Testament, and ratified for us by the new covenant. By the new covenant Jesus Christ makes us His heirs in the kingdom of God His Father.”

“Now we are called to this heritage without respect for persons: male or female, small or great, servant or lord, master or disciple, cleric or layman, Hebrew or Greek, French or Latin.”

“Without the gospel, everything would be useless and vain.”

“But by knowing the gospel, we are made children of God, brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ, fellow townsmen with the saints, citizens of the kingdom of heaven and heirs of God with Jesus Christ. By Jesus Christ the poor are made rich, the feeble powerful, and the foolish wise. By Him sinners are justified, the afflicted are comforted, doubters become confident, and slaves are set free.”

“Without the gospel, all wealth would be poverty, all wisdom would be folly before God, strength would be weakness, and all the justice of man would be under the condemnation of God.”

“The gospel is the Word of life and truth.”

“Blessed are all who hear the gospel and keep it; for in this way they show that they are the children of God. Cursed are those who will not hear it and follow it; for they are children of the devil.”

“There is only one way to life and salvation—faith and certainty in the promises of God which can only be had through the gospel. God grants a living faith to those who hear and grasp this gospel. He also grants us a sure hope and perfect love for Him and a fervent love for our neighbors.”

“Where is your hope to be found if you regard this Holy Gospel with contempt and scorn the thought of listening to it, looking at it, reading it and holding it tight?”

“We must accept being despised, mocked, humiliated and rejected by others, because we then have the promise of being honored, prized, glorified and exalted at the judgment of God.”

“Will there be affliction, imprisonment, torture and torment? But the example of Jesus Christ teaches us that this is the way to reach glory.”

“In short, if we have Jesus Christ with us, we will not encounter anything so cursed that he will not turn it into a blessing, nothing so desecrated that He will not make it holy, and nothing so evil that He will not make it good.”

“And when we turn our eyes away from this whole world and set aside all that we can see before us to wait with patience for the great judgment of God, we have an even better and firmer consolation. At the great judgment, God will strike down all the machinations of mankind in an instant, reducing them to nothing, completely overturning them.”

“Eternal life is knowing the only true God and the One that He sent, Jesus Christ. God has established in Jesus Christ the beginning, middle and culmination of our salvation.”

“And all you who call yourselves bishops and pastors of the poor, ensure that the sheep of Jesus Christ are not deprived of their proper food. And ensure that no Christian is kept from or forbidden to read, study and understand this Holy Gospel in his own language, given that this is the will of God and the command of Jesus Christ.”

“The Scriptures also refer to the New Testament as the gospel, that is, new and joyful news, because in the New Testament it is declared that Christ, the only true and eternal Son of the living God, was made man to make us children of God by adoption.”

“This book we have translated as faithfully as we were able according to the truth and the style of the Greek language, to enable all Christians, men and women, who know the French language, to understand and acknowledge the law they ought to obey and the faith they ought to follow.”

William Whitaker and the Defense of Bible Translation, Part 1

When was the last time you stopped and thanked the Lord for your Bible? If you're like me, you're more likely to think about which one to pull off the shelf! Looking back over the history of our English Bible, we are indebted to men like William Tyndale, John Rogers, and Myles Coverdale. They devoted their lives to producing the first English translations at the beginning of the English Reformation. We also have a debt to those who defended the English Bible in the generation that followed.

A year after the death of King Henry VIII, William Whitaker was born near Burnley, England. He became a prominent theologian and defender of the Bible. In his most influential work, he defended the Bible in translation against the Roman Catholic views put forth after the Council of Trent.

His writings had a significant influence in his day and in subsequent generations, but his arguments in support of Bible translation have been largely forgotten. In this chapter, I would like to introduce this forgotten champion of Bible translation with overview of his life and his rise to one of the highest positions at Cambridge University, his most enduring piece of scholarship, which won him the respect of his fellow reformers and his opponents alike, and his statement of the Reformation's position on Bible translation. The next chapter will consider his arguments for Bible translation in greater depth. The third chapter will examine Whitaker's legacy, especially as seen in the Westminster Confession and the enduring commitment of English-speaking Christians to Bible translation.

William Whitaker

William Whitaker was born near Burnley, England, in 1547, a year after the death of Henry VIII. Growing up in a relatively remote corner of Lancashire, it appears that Whitaker and his family were not directly impacted by the tumultuous events of the period. They were, no doubt, aware that King Henry VIII's son, King Edward VI, continued the reforms of his father until his death in 1553. Then King Edward's half-sister, Mary, ascended to the throne after a short political struggle to become Queen Mary I in 1553. Queen Mary set about restoring the Roman Catholic faith in England and forbidding the use of the English Bible.

During Mary's reign, many English Protestants fled to the Continent. Among these exiles was Whitaker's uncle, Alexander Nowell. He was a leader in the church and had also been a member of Parliament. When the queen died in 1558, her half-sister, Queen Elizabeth I, came to the throne and restored the Protestant church. Whitaker's uncle returned to London and was appointed the Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral.

In 1559, when Whitaker was twelve years old, his uncle arranged for him to come to London and study in preparation for serving in the church. In 1564, at age sixteen, Whitaker enrolled at Trinity College, Cambridge. He excelled in his studies and was eventually appointed Regius Professor of Divinity at Cambridge in 1580, at the age of 33.

Queen Elizabeth appointed Whitaker to the post of Master of St. John's College, Cambridge, in 1586, and he was awarded the Doctor of Divinity the following year. He served in this position until his early death at age 47, reportedly due to fatigue and exposure to extreme winter weather while traveling from London to Cambridge.

Whitaker was an influential leader in the church and a prolific scholar. He taught, preached, and wrote extensively, with a special focus on defending the Reformation positions against the latest arguments of Jesuit scholars.

He published several books, including his most well-known, *A Disputation on Holy Scripture, Against the Papists, Especially Bellarmine and Stapleton*, referred to most often as *A Disputation on Holy Scripture*.

A Disputation on Holy Scripture

In 1588, Whitaker published a defense of the Reformation views on Scripture. In the Preface, he explained that he was compelled to defend the Scriptures from a new generation of Roman Catholic scholars.

Whitaker addresses six general topics related to the Scriptures, setting out the different positions, refuting the Roman Catholic arguments, and finally, defending the reformers' doctrines of *sola Scriptura* from Scripture.

Whitaker uses a rigorous approach but pauses at times to speak pastorally to his reader. In the opening pages of the 700-page volume, he writes, "Be ye, therefore, of good cheer. We have a cause, believe me, good, firm, invincible. We fight against men, and we have Christ on our side; nor can we possibly be vanquished, unless we are the most slothful and dastardly of all cowards."

Whitaker's first topic of controversy is the number of canonical books. After addressing the canon, he turns to the issue of what is the authentic and divinely inspired edition of Scripture: the Latin Bible or the Scriptures in Hebrew and Greek.

This second section is one of the longest and most in-depth, refuting the Catholic view of the Latin Bible and defending the place of Bibles in vernacular languages.

He then proceeds to address the authority, perspicuity, and interpretation of the Scriptures. The sixth and final section defends the perfection of Scripture, especially in light of the Roman Catholic view of tradition.

Reformation Position on Bible Translation

Whitaker's treatment of Bible translation begins by setting out the Roman Catholic position as found in the Council of Trent. In short, while not forbidding translation, the authorities of the Roman Catholic Church placed numerous obstacles between the translated Word and the hands of their parishioners. Whitaker methodically examines their arguments and demonstrates their errors from the Scriptures.

He then presents the view of Bible translation that he defends: "I have to prove the scriptures are to be set forth before all Christians in their vernacular tongues, so as that every individual may be enabled to read them." Whitaker frames the issue of Bible translation in the context of the ministry of the Word in the church. He asserts that it is the right of every individual believer to possess and read the Scriptures in their own language. In his carefully reasoned style, Whitaker proceeds to develop six arguments that support and build on his position that Christians should be able to freely read the Scriptures in their own languages.

Whitaker concludes this section with arguments in support of the church worshipping in the vernacular and not in Latin or any other language unknown to a congregation. For Whitaker, the edification of the believers requires the use of their own language in every aspect of worship, from reading and teaching the Scriptures to offering prayers and blessings on behalf of the congregation.

In Conclusion

We need to cultivate our gratitude for the Bible in English. Our gratitude for the Scriptures will not be complete without reflecting on what the Lord did through those who went before us to translate and defend our Bible. Among those who defended our Bible stands William Whitaker. Whitaker's life as a pastor and theologian is a reminder of the importance of defending the truths of Scripture and elevating the place of the Word in the church.

In every generation, we need to affirm and defend our beliefs about the translation of God's Word. We are not alone as we defend Scripture and our Bible in English. Whitaker's arguments are just as forceful today as they were when he first penned them. In the following chapters, we'll look in more depth at Whitaker's arguments for Bible translation and the legacy of his life and writings.

May we remember the words of Whitaker, that we have a cause good, firm, and invincible. We have Christ on our side as we humbly submit ourselves to the Lord for the advance of his kingdom and the praise of his glory!

William Whitaker and the Defense of Bible Translation, Part 2

No one would suggest that we don't need a Bible in English. However, our English Bible was not always considered a book to be held and read by all.

Reflecting on the history of our English Bible, we have a debt of gratitude to men like William Whitaker. Although he is a largely forgotten champion of Bible translation, we benefit from his defense of our English Bible.

In the previous chapter, I presented an overview of Whitaker's life, noting his rise as a scholar and churchman at Cambridge University. We also examined his most enduring piece of scholarship, a 700-page volume titled *A Disputation on Holy Scripture*.

In this chapter, we will look in more depth at his arguments for Bible translation. In the final installment in this series, we will consider Whitaker's legacy, especially as seen in the Westminster Confession and the enduring commitment of English-speaking Christians to Bible translation.

Reformation Position on Bible Translation

In *A Disputation on Holy Scripture*, Whitaker begins his discussion of Bible translation by presenting the Roman Catholic position as found in the Council of Trent. He then proceeds with his view of Bible translation: "...the scriptures are to be set forth before all Christians in their vernacular tongues, so as that every individual may be enabled to read them." In his

carefully reasoned style, Whitaker proceeds to develop six arguments that support and build on his position that Christians should be able to freely read the Scriptures in their own languages.

Whitaker's Six Arguments

Given his view of the sufficiency of Scripture, Whitaker argues for translation directly from the Scriptures. Whitaker's first and third arguments, which we will present together, argue that the public reading of Scripture is essential, and so is translation, since not every Christian is able to read the Word of God in its original languages.

In his fourth argument, he argues that the teaching of Scripture is also essential. For every Christian to be instructed in the Word, it is essential that they be able to read and study the Bible. Therefore, the Scriptures must be translated into the languages of the church.

Whitaker's second argument differs from these three mentioned in that he argues for the importance of Bible translation based on the benefit of the translated Word for believers. He contends that Christians should not be deprived of the means for refuting Satan: "For without the protection of scripture the people must necessarily fall under all temptations" (237).

Whitaker's final two arguments move from arguments based on the explicit commands of Scripture to arguments based on historical precedence. In his fifth argument, he notes that Jesus and his disciples taught and preached in the language of those they were ministering to. From these examples, he concludes that the glories of the gospel are not contaminated when presented in another language. It follows that the Scriptures can be translated and read in other languages as well.

In his sixth and final argument, Whitaker reviews the early history of the church and notes that the Scriptures were translated into numerous languages, including Latin, Syriac, Gothic, and Coptic. Furthermore, the

early church fathers exhorted their congregations to read these translations. It follows for Whitaker that the Scriptures should continue to be translated and made readily available for all to read.

Translation and the Reading of Scripture

In Whitaker's arguments for translation and especially the importance of reading the Scriptures, he contends that the Scriptures are to be read by all of God's people for the spiritual benefit of the reader and, in the context of public reading as part of corporate worship, for the audience as well.

To support his position, Whitaker turns to three passages in Deuteronomy. In Deuteronomy 31:11-13, Moses commands the priests to read the Mosaic Law to the people of Israel every seven years, at the Feast of Tabernacles. In Deuteronomy 17:18-20, future kings of Israel are commanded to make their own copies of the Mosaic Law by personally writing it out by hand. They are also instructed to read it to fear God, obey the Law, and treat their fellow Israelites justly. Finally, in Deuteronomy 6:6-9, the people of Israel are commanded to have the Mosaic Law in their hearts. They are to teach it, discuss it regularly, and even write it on the doorposts of their homes. Whitaker concludes from these passages that God revealed his Word to his people, the Israelites, for them to know and obey it. It was written so that they might read it—everyone, from the king and priests to the heads of households who were to teach their own children.

Turning to the New Testament, Whitaker considers Jesus' words in John 5:39 to "search the Scriptures." Whitaker views these words of our Lord as more than an invitation to educated scholars, like the scribes and Pharisees, to study the Word. The uneducated and illiterate are equally welcome to learn and study the Scriptures because they are seeking salvation and the kingdom of God. Jesus' words "search the Scriptures" in John 5:39 are central to Whitaker's entire work. He begins his 700-page work with a discussion of these words and returns to them 24 times. In

these three words, Whitaker finds an admonition to esteem God's Word highly and study it deeply.

In Whitaker's third argument, he builds on his first argument by developing the point that reading Scripture is only beneficial if understood. He notes that Paul argued in 1 Corinthians 14:1-33 that believers are to worship together in a common language so that everyone is edified. Whitaker then argues that the reading of the Scriptures in public must be done in the language of the believers to bring a spiritual benefit in keeping with 1 Corinthians 14.

Based on these two points, Whitaker concludes that the Scriptures must be set forth in translation so that believers can freely read the Scriptures, whether corporately, as a family, or individually.

Whitaker's Contribution

In laying out his six arguments for Bible translation, Whitaker provided the most exhaustive and influential defense of translation to that time and possibly since.

Whitaker set out essentially three lines of defense of Bible translation grounded in the Scripture. First, he provides arguments for translation based on the commands of Scripture regarding the Word itself. The Scriptures are to be read and taught. In this context, it is intriguing that Whitaker does not argue for translation based on the commands to preach the Word or proclaim the gospel to the nations. Second, he presents a single argument based on the intended use of Scripture by believers, namely, to resist temptation. Whitaker could have added additional uses of Scripture, such as correcting and training in righteousness as seen in 2 Timothy 3:16. However, he apparently considered the single issue of resisting temptation sufficient. Finally, Whitaker argues from the precedent found in the New Testament and the first centuries of the church. These arguments have frequently appeared in the history of Bible translation. For

Whitaker, they are not his first arguments, presumably because he is building on the explicit commands of Scripture; yet he still appeals to them.

In Conclusion

William Whitaker committed his life to defending the truths of Scripture and elevating the place of the Word in the church. He understood that he must defend the translation of the Scriptures so that believers might have the freedom to own and read their own Bibles.

In our own generation, we must remember Whitaker's defense and sharpen the arguments he set forth. We must recognize that the Scriptures in translation are essential for the church to live in obedience to the commands to read, preach, and teach the Word.

Without a right view of translation rooted in a proper view of the Word, we could elevate the languages of the world or the needs of readers, unwittingly removing the Scriptures and the church from their proper place. May we defend the translation of the Bible as an act of obedience to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, on behalf of his bride, the church, equipping every believer to read, preach, and teach the Word to the glory of our triune God!

William Whitaker and the Defense of Bible Translation, Part 3

With his final breath, William Whitaker told those with him, “I desire not to live, but only so far as I may do God and his church service.” Whitaker died after a short illness at age 47, but he had already served the church in significant ways as a professor at Cambridge. Moreover, no one could have anticipated the impact of his life and scholarship over the subsequent century.

In the first part of this section, I introduced William Whitaker, noting his rise as a scholar and churchman at the University of Cambridge. In the second part, we looked in more depth at his arguments for Bible translation. Whitaker presented six arguments in defense of Bible translation, building on the importance of reading and studying the Scriptures in one’s own language. In this final installment, we will consider Whitaker’s legacy, especially as seen in the Westminster Confession.

Whitaker’s Influence on the Doctrine of the Word

During the first decades of the Protestant Reformation, the reformers set forth several views about the Word of God, especially arguing for the authority of Scripture over the church. Many of the reformers were involved in translation work but did not focus on the theological underpinning for Bible translation in these theological discussions.

After the Council of Trent, however, the Roman Catholic Church took a firm position against the reading of Scripture by the laity, reserving such a

privilege for the clergy. Furthermore, they argued that Scripture could be translated but contended that translations had no practical benefit for the laity and should be undertaken with extreme caution.

One of the earliest theologians to address translation in the context of a systematic treatment of theology was Theodore Beza. Beza taught theology alongside John Calvin in Geneva, Switzerland, and eventually became Calvin's successor. Beza's lectures on systematic theology were collected and published in 1591 as *Propositions and principles of diuinitie propounded and disputed in the vniuersitie of Geneua*. In his discussion of the doctrines of the Word, Beza defends the Protestant position that everyone should read the Scriptures. He notes that the Scriptures in the biblical languages are not accessible to those without advanced studies, and, as a result, it is necessary to translate the Scriptures into the languages of all Christian peoples.

Around this same period, the theologian Girolamo Zanchi was lecturing in theology in Strasbourg and Heidelberg. In 1585, he published a systematic theology, titled *Confession of the Christian Religion*, that included a brief note on Bible translation. Like the other reformers, he affirms the importance of all believers reading the Scriptures. He remarks that God always spoke in the language of those He addresses because He intends for his audience to understand. Zanchi then infers that God wants the Scriptures translated into the languages of every nation so everyone can read, understand, and find salvation.

While Beza and Zanchi were lecturing and writing on the Continent, Whitaker was starting his studies at the University of Cambridge. When he published *A Disputation on Holy Scripture* in 1588, he was, no doubt, aware of these scholars and their writings. Like them, Whitaker argued for translation based on the command for believers to read the Scriptures. However, he significantly expanded and supported from Scripture the argument for translation based on the mandate to read. He then developed additional arguments as outlined in the previous chapter.

In the decades following Whitaker, the topic of translation began to appear in theological works in England. For instance, in 1622, John Yates noted in his systematic theology, *A Modell of Divinitie*, that translations are to be received and used for private and public reading. Similarly, in 1623, William Ames affirmed that translations should be made available for the general use of the church in his theological work, *The Marrow of Sacred Divinity*. Another influential theologian and church leader, James Ussher, included a statement that the Scriptures should be translated in his *Body of Divinity*, published in 1645.

Whitaker's defense of Bible translation led to the most developed statement on the place and importance of translation in the theology of the Word. However, Whitaker's contributions would probably have been largely forgotten if not for the next development.

Whitaker's Influence on the Irish Articles and Westminster Confession

When Whitaker set forth his classic defense of Scripture in 1588, he presented the most comprehensive argument for the translation of the Scriptures to date. At the time, the primary statement on the beliefs and practices of the Church of England was known as the *Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion*. These articles presented the Reformed view on Scripture but said nothing about translation.

In 1615, church leaders in Ireland met in Dublin to draft their own articles. Bishop James Ussher published the resulting *Irish Articles of Religion*. One noteworthy development in these articles is the first explicit statement on Bible translation. Section 4 states, "The Scriptures ought to be translated out of the original tongues into all languages for the common use of all men."

The statement does not offer any Scriptural arguments in favor of translation but does affirm the importance of reading the Scriptures with

comprehension: “neither is any person to be discouraged from reading the Bible in such a language as he doth understand, but seriously exhorted to read the same with great humility and reverence, as a special means to bring him to the true knowledge of God and of his own duty.”

In 1643, the Parliament in England called for an assembly of church leaders to meet and address various issues related to the Church of England. These meetings culminated in the [Westminster Confession](#) in 1646. Like the Irish Articles, the Westminster Confession affirmed the importance of Bible translation. However, the Westminster Divines drew on the wording and argumentation of William Whitaker.

In Chapter 1, section 8, the confession states that the people of God are commanded to “read and search” the Scriptures and, consequently, the Scriptures are to be translated. This rationale for translation comes directly from Whitaker’s argument for translation based on the scriptural mandate for all God’s people to read the Scriptures and specifically Christ’s statement to “search the Scriptures” from John 5:39. The confession continues by noting that believers have hope through the patience and comfort they receive from the Word in their own language, citing Romans 15:4. This argument follows Whitaker’s concluding point to his first argument, where he cites Romans 15:4 to note that without the Scriptures there is no hope since comfort and patience come from the Word.

In the same section, the Westminster Confession also states that Christians have an “interest in” the Scriptures, referring to a spiritual benefit from being able to read and live according to them. This rationale follows closely with Whitaker’s second argument for translation, which focuses on the benefit of the Scriptures in resisting temptation.

The Westminster Divines also drew on Beza’s argument that those without access to biblical languages should have a translation in their own language. They stated that the people of God have a right to the Scriptures,

but do not know the original languages; hence, the Scriptures are to be translated.

The reasoning for translation set forth in the Westminster Confession reveals the influence of Whitaker's arguments laid out many decades earlier. Moreover, the affirmation of Bible translation in these two confessions shows how firmly the leaders of the church believed in the importance of translating the Bible. The unique commitment of the Church of England to translation is underscored by the fact that these confessions were the only ones of the Reformation era to affirm Bible translation.

In Conclusion

William Whitaker lived during a tumultuous time in English history. During the first twelve years of his life, the English Reformation was overturned and then reinstated. The English Bible was, at various times, freely available or condemned. Thousands fled England during the reign of Queen Mary I, including Whitaker's uncle.

With these events shaping Whitaker's life, it is not surprising that he defended the truths of Scripture and the place of the Word in the church with such commitment. Whitaker would probably never have imagined that subsequent generations of church leaders would value translation so highly and seek to guard it so securely that they would affirm it in their confessions. Nor would he have imagined that generations of pastors and missionaries would devote themselves to translation, affirming and living out their belief that the Bible should be translated for every language and read by every believer. And he would not have envisioned a day when every English-speaking Christian who wanted a Bible could have one, with the Bible in English being the most widely disseminated and read book in history.

We should not imagine that the Bible will continue to be loved, read, and translated without faithful servants of the Word like William Whitaker to

defend it. In our own generation, we need to affirm and defend our beliefs about God's Word. And Whitaker's arguments are just as forceful today as when he first penned them.

Let us remember the words of Whitaker, that we have a cause good, firm, and invincible. May we seek to serve our Lord and his church until our own final breath.

25 William Whitaker Quotes on Scripture

When William Whitaker died at age 47, he was a rising scholar and churchman at the University of Cambridge. He published several books, including his most well-known, *A Disputation on Holy Scripture, Against the Papists, Especially Bellarmine and Stapleton*, referred to simply as *A Disputation on Holy Scripture*.

In this chapter, I'd like to conclude our study of Whitaker and his work by way of 25 quotations. These quotations are provided with their page references and have been edited for spelling and punctuation.

I hope you are encouraged and even intrigued by his statements, perhaps even enough to read his classic work on Sola Scriptura. In these quotes and his work, you'll find a scholar with a high view of Scripture and a sincere desire to defend them against heresy to the glory of the triune God.

“As the brightest light appears in the sun, so the greatest splendor of divinity shines forth in the word of God.”

“Nothing is more certain than the word of God and the Scriptures because it is God who addresses us in his word and teaches us through his word.”

“If hope springs from the Scriptures, then faith; for hope is supported by faith. Therefore, all things necessary may be derived from the Scriptures.”

“There is nothing which truth fears so much as to be prevented from appearing in public and being exposed to the examination of all men.”

“The blind cannot perceive even the light of the sun; nor can they distinguish the splendor of the Scriptures, whose minds are not divinely illuminated. But those who have eyes of faith can behold this light.”

“The Scriptures are sufficiently clear to admit of their being read by the people and the unlearned with some fruit and utility.”

“But the scripture is so full of divine light as to dispel our blindness with its rays and make us who before saw nothing in this light to see light.”

“In the first place, prayer is necessary for reading the Scriptures so as to understand them; and on that account David so often begs of God to illuminate his mind and to open his eyes.”

“A lamp hath light in itself, whether men look upon that light or not: so also the scripture is clear and perspicuous, whether men be illuminated by it, or receive from it no light whatever.”

“The Scriptures are to be read publicly in such a manner as that the people may be able to derive some advantage from them. But they cannot be useful to the people in an unknown tongue.”

“Scripture hath for its author God himself; from whom it first proceeded and came forth. Therefore, the authority of scripture may be proved from the author himself since the authority of God himself shines forth in it.”

“Our second argument stands thus: The people should not be deprived of those arms by which they are to be protected against Satan. Now the Scriptures are such arms: therefore, the Scriptures should not be taken away from the people; for taken away they are, if the people be prevented from reading them.”

“If what these men teach be true, we are in a miserable condition; we are involved in infinite errors of the grossest kind and cannot possibly be saved. But if, as I am fully persuaded and convinced, it is they who are in error, they cannot deny that they are justly condemned if they still persist in their errors.”

“For the mysteries of scripture are like gems, which only he that knows them values; while the rest, like the cock in Aesop, despise them, and prefer the most worthless objects to what is most beautiful and excellent.”

“Then the scripture is called lucid, not only because it hath light in itself, but because it illuminates us, dispels the darkness of our minds, and brings us new light, which is what no lamps can do. For a lamp is beheld by those who have eyes; but to those who are blind no lamp shews light.”

“The sense of scripture, therefore, is but one—the literal; for it is folly to feign many senses, merely because many things follow from the words of scripture rightly understood. Those things may, indeed, be called corollaries or consequences, flowing from the right understanding of the words, but new and different senses they are by no means.”

“We must not bring any private meanings, or private opinions, but only such as agree with the mind, intention, and dictate of the Holy Spirit. For, since he is the author of the Scriptures, it is fit that we should follow him in interpreting scripture.”

“In forbidding the people to read the Scriptures, and performing their service in a strange language, they plainly take away all mutual converse of God with the people, and the people with God, and interrupt the intercourse and communion of the Deity with man.”

“Our arms shall be the sacred Scriptures, that sword and shield of the word, that tower of David, upon which a thousand bucklers hang, and all the armor of the mighty, the sling and the pebbles of the brook where with David stretched upon the ground that gigantic and haughty Philistine.”

“Scripture, as we have already said, hath one simple meaning, which may be clearly gathered also from the Scriptures themselves; and although the scripture hath not voice and speech like a man, yet does it speak plainly as a law; and God himself speaks in the scripture, and scripture is on that account styled the word of God.”

“Our opinion is, that the supreme decision and authority in the interpretation of scripture should not be ascribed to the church, but to the scripture itself, and to the Holy Spirit, as well speaking plainly in the Scriptures as also secretly confirming the same in our hearts.”

“Some things may seem contradictory in Scripture, to a man who does not consider them with sufficient attention; yet it is certain, nevertheless, that Scripture is in perfect harmony with itself. God willed that some such shews of contradiction should occur in Scripture, that we might be so the more excited to diligence in reading, meditating upon, and collating the passages together.”

“Christ taught the people in their mother-tongue; so also the apostles and disciples of Christ, as well when upon the day of Pentecost they published the gospel in a known tongue, as afterwards when, scattered over the whole world, they taught all nations in their own native languages. Hence we draw our conclusion thus: The holy doctrine of the gospel is not contaminated when preached or taught in the vernacular tongue.”

“How could such men have written so divinely without the divine inspiration of the Holy Ghost? They were, almost all, illiterate men, learned in no accomplishments, taught in no schools, imbued with no instruction; but afterwards summoned by a divine call, marked out for this office, admitted to the counsels of God: and so they committed all to writing with the exactest fidelity.”

“It is folly to suppose that Satan can be driven away by bare ceremonies, exorcisms, gesticulations, and outward fopperies. We must fight with arguments drawn from scripture, and the examples of the holy fathers. The Scriptures are the only arms which can prevail, or ought to be used against him. Those, therefore, who take the Holy Scriptures away from the people, leave them exposed, naked to Satan, and hurl them into most certain destruction.”

20 Miles Coverdale Quotes on Christ and Scripture

Myles Coverdale was a leading figure in the English Reformation. He assisted William Tyndale with the translation of the English Bible. After Tyndale's arrest and execution, Coverdale completed the translation and produced the Coverdale Bible in 1535, the first complete English Bible of the era. He further revised the work and eventually produced the Great Bible in 1539.

In the [preface](#) to the Coverdale Bible, we find two largely forgotten documents. First, Coverdale writes a dedication to King Henry VIII. After the dedication, he writes a prologue to the reader.

In this chapter, I'd like to introduce you to Myles Coverdale by way of 20 quotes from the [preface](#) of the Coverdale Bible. These quotations have been slightly modernized and edited for spelling and punctuation.

In these following quotes, I hope you will be as encouraged as I was by the words of a pastor and translator who loved his Lord and Savior and dedicated years of his life to feed the flock with the Scriptures in English.

“Whosoever believes not the Scripture, believes not Christ, and whosoever refuses it, refuses God also.”

“Christ was the true prophet, the true Messiah, and the only true Savior of the world, sent of his heavenly Father to suffer the most cruel, most shameful, and most necessary death for our redemption.”

“Defend the faith, yea even the true faith of Christ, not dreams, not fables, not heresy, not papistical inventions, but the uncorrupted faith of God’s most holy word.”

“If thou be a preacher, and hast the oversight of the flock of Christ, awake and feed Christ’s sheep with a good heart.”

“Seeing that light is come into the world, love no more the works of darkness, receive not the grace of God in vain.”

“Take these words of Scripture into thy heart, and be not only an outward hearer, but a doer thereafter, and practice thyself therein, that thou mayest feel in thine heart, the sweet promises thereof for thy consolation in all trouble, and for the sure establishing of thy hope in Christ.”

“And above all things fashion thy life and conversation according to the doctrine of the Holy Ghost therein, that thou mayest be partaker of the good promises of God in the Bible and be heir of his blessing in Christ.”

“The word of God is the only truth that drives away all lies, and discloses all juggling and deceit.”

“So to love it [the Bible], so to cleave unto it, and so to follow it in thy daily conversation, that other men seeing thy good works and the fruits of the Holy Ghost in thee, may praise the father of heaven...”

“When thou readest Scripture, be wise and circumspect.”

“To live after the law of God, and to lead a virtuous conversation, is the greatest praise that thou canst give unto his doctrine.”

“For as soon as the Bible was cast aside, and no more put in exercise, then began every one of his own head to write whatsoever came into his brain and that seemed to be good in his own eyes; and so grew the darkness of men’s traditions.”

“God not only punishes the wicked but proves and tries the just and righteous (howbeit there is no man innocent in his sight) by diverse troubles in this life, declaring thereby, that they are not his bastards but his dear sons, and that he loves them.”

“...and have ever an eye to the words of Scripture...”

“In the Psalms we learn how to resort only unto God in all our troubles, to seek help at him, to call only upon him, to settle our minds by patience, and how we ought in prosperity to be thankful unto him.”

“If thou find anything therein that thou understandest not, or that appears to be repugnant, give no rash or hasty judgment thereof, but ascribe it to thine own ignorance, not to the Scripture.”

“Be ever reading, exhorting, and teaching in God’s word, that the people of God run not unto other doctrines.”

“For as false doctrine is the original cause of all evil plagues and destruction, so is the true executing of the law of God and the preaching of the same, the mother of all godly prosperity.”

“The Scripture of God teaches us everything sufficiently, both what we ought to do, and what we ought to leave undone; whom we are bound to obey, and whom we should not obey; therefore (I say) it causes all prosperity, and sets everything in frame.”

“...it brings learning, it produces understanding, it causes good works, it makes children of obedience...”

“...and where it is taught and known, it lightens all darkness, comforts all sorry hearts, leaves no poor man unhelped, suffers nothing amiss unamended...”

A Book Review of G. F. Main's *Forgotten Reformer*

G. F. Main's *Forgotten Reformer* is an excellent and much-needed biography of Myles Coverdale (1488-1569), a leading figure in the English Reformation.

Main organizes his biography into twelve chapters, with the first two describing the historical backdrop to Coverdale's life and the final one summarizing his major contributions. The intervening nine chapters lay out Coverdale's life from the day he joined the Reformation in 1527 until his death in 1569.

It is very fitting that Main's work has the subtitle *Myles Coverdale and the First Forty Years of the English Reformation*. By God's grace, Coverdale survived the first forty-two years of the English Reformation while many of his fellow reformers were burned at the stake.

In Chapter 1, Main presents Myles Coverdale and offers several reasons for the biography. Main notes that Coverdale lived a long life "brimming with interest" (1). Coverdale was among the Cambridge scholars in the 1520s who led the charge for reform in England and who, for the most part, ended their lives being burned at the stake. Though often in danger of execution, Coverdale survived persecution under Henry VIII and Queen Mary, spending many years in exile. Main also notes a general forgetfulness, if not complete ignorance, about the English Reformation and the benefits we enjoy today because of what reformers like Coverdale dedicated their lives to accomplish.

Main proceeds in Chapter 2 to describe English society and religion at the dawn of the Reformation. In the midst of England's poverty and ignorance, the Roman Catholic Church was a firmly established institution. Priests held positions of respect and power, whereas common parishioners were expected to merely obey the authorities and faithfully attend Mass, confess their sins to the priest, fast during Lent, set up candles before images, creep to the cross, and fulfill similar duties.

In Chapter 3, Main presents the events that led to the dawn of the English Reformation, noting in addition the events in Coverdale's life that led to his conversion and eventual flight into exile. Main discusses the changes brought about by the Renaissance, especially the printing of books and Erasmus' Greek New Testament and new Latin translation.

He then turns to Martin Luther and the beginning of the Reformation in Germany. In 1521, five years after Luther nailed his theses on the Wittenberg chapel door, a group of students at Cambridge were reading Erasmus' New Testament. The leader of the group, Thomas Bilney, found salvation in Christ and rejected the teachings and duties of the Roman Catholic church. Coverdale and other students joined Bilney, studying the Scriptures and reading the works of Luther. By 1527, the movement for reform had spread beyond the centers of learning, and Coverdale left his monastic life at Cambridge to preach the gospel and advance reform. With the increasing persecution of his fellow reformers, Coverdale went into exile in 1529.

Chapter 4 covers the events that took place during Coverdale's first exile from England. In 1529, he seemed to have fled to Hamburg, Germany, to work with William Tyndale. Tyndale had fled England a few years earlier to translate the New Testament into English. When Coverdale joined Tyndale, he assisted in the translation of the Old Testament. When Tyndale was betrayed to the Roman Catholic authorities and imprisoned, Coverdale continued the work and eventually published a complete English Bible in 1535.

During Coverdale's first exile, several significant events took place in England that would lead to his return. In Chapter 5, Main presents the events that led Henry VIII to establish the Church of England and himself as the head of the church. Main also notes Coverdale's relationship with one of the leading figures, Thomas Cromwell. Together, they translated various theological works and also produced the Great Bible of 1539, considered Coverdale's masterpiece of translation (64). When Henry VIII turned against the reformers, Coverdale went into exile again.

Chapter 6 covers Coverdale's second exile from 1540 to 1548. After spending a brief time in Denmark, he spent two years in Strasburg. During this time, Coverdale met John Calvin, who was also in exile. Coverdale translated John Calvin's work on the Lord's Supper, *A Treatise on the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ*, in addition to other works that he thought would be beneficial to the Reformation in England.

Coverdale then settled in Bergzabern, Germany, where he served as the pastor of the town's church and headmaster of the local school. In the summer of 1548, after the death of Henry VIII, Coverdale returned to England.

For six years, the length of King Edwards VI's reign, Coverdale devoted himself to strengthening the Reformation in England, as detailed in Chapters 7 and 8. He also worked on the Book of Common Prayer. When the new Book of Common Prayer led to revolts in the county of Devon, Coverdale was the only preacher willing to go to the region. He was eventually appointed bishop of Exeter, the cathedral city of the county. Coverdale faithfully preached and taught, but the region remained hostile to the reformers.

When Queen Mary came to the throne, Coverdale was imprisoned. The King of Denmark intervened on his behalf by asking for his release. In 1555, Queen Mary released him to go into his third exile.

Chapter 10 presents the events of Coverdale's third exile on the continent. He arrived in Denmark and made his way to Germany. However, Coverdale and

many other English exiles found the situation in Germany too precarious. Coverdale then went to Geneva, Switzerland. He joined a growing community of exiles and assisted with the work on the Geneva Bible. In August 1559, he left Geneva to return to England.

Coverdale spent the last ten years of his life preaching and teaching. He declined his former position as bishop of Exeter or a similar office in the Church of England because he could not agree with a number of practices introduced by Queen Elizabeth, such as wearing vestments and kneeling for communion. He was one of a growing number of churchmen who would eventually be known as the Puritans. Because of his age and frailty, Coverdale spent the last years of his life in London. He was highly respected and commonly referred to as “Father Coverdale.” He died on January 20, 1569.

In Chapter 12, Main summarizes Coverdale’s contributions to the Reformation. He notes Coverdale’s part in the translation of the English Bible. He also notes his influence on congregational worship through the publication of metrical psalms and hymns. Furthermore, Coverdale translated many works of Luther, Calvin, and other reformers to further the Reformation in England. Coverdale was truly the translator of the English Reformation. Main provides an appendix listing Coverdale’s various translations and works.

Apart from the printed page, Coverdale was a noted preacher. He preached at the most important preaching stations in England, including Paul’s Cross, and in many little-known pulpits. Finally, his willingness to suffer for the sake of the gospel and even go into exile repeatedly encouraged many and advanced the cause of Christ.

In one of the appendices to the book, Main provides a letter that Coverdale wrote while in prison waiting to be burned at the stake in 1554. This is a valuable addition to the work, and this letter in contemporary English suggests another way in which Main could bless this generation. It would greatly add to our understanding and appreciation of this reformer to have more of his

writings in contemporary English, with introductions and annotations to make them even more accessible.

Despite the many strengths of this biography, Main could have done more to direct his readers to the writings of Coverdale and other resources readily available online. For instance, the works of Coverdale are available [at this website](#) and [here as well](#). The Coverdale Bible of 1535 is also available online [at this website](#). I have found [this website](#) very useful for accessing the Coverdale Bible and other Bibles of that time period. Coverdale's translation of John Calvin's work on the Lord's Supper is also available [at this online database](#). I hope these resources will encourage more research on the life and influence of Coverdale.

I highly recommend G.F. Main's biography of this English reformer and devoted servant of the church of Jesus Christ. Coverdale faithfully served the Lord in his own generation and has blessed many subsequent generations of English-speaking Christians through his translations. Main skillfully introduces the reader to the broader events of the English Reformation, thereby providing a fuller historical perspective for appreciating the impacts of this period which endure to our own day.

Main also writes in a style accessible to a broad audience and, as a result, this biography should be a valuable resource in the classroom, at a Bible study, or for personal reading.

I hope that many are encouraged by Coverdale's example of service and faithful suffering for the sake of the gospel. May we be challenged by the single-mindedness and devotion of his generation and, by God's grace, strive even more to honor our common Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.