

# **Bible Translation as Holistic Mission**

by Kirk Franklin, Executive Director of Wycliffe International.

## **Introduction**

This paper attempts to develop a natural connection between Bible translation and holistic mission. The remaining Bible translation need is daunting; over 2,700 languages do not have any Scripture translated into them. This warrants building a linkage with holistic mission because of the importance of both Bible translation and holistic ministry in missiology. This paper will therefore examine biblical, historical and contemporary connections between Bible translation and holistic ministry.

## **Bible Translation and Holistic Mission**

Building the case for a connection can begin by the focus of the gospel on transforming the whole person. Holistic mission is the 'intentional integration of building the church and transforming society' (McConnell, 2000: 448). It is the deliberate 'process of facilitating change throughout a community or region' (Voorhies: 1999: 588). This change has to do with seeing the whole of the person become like Christ in all areas, the 'material, social and spiritual – as well as in the community – economics, social and political' (Voorhies: 1999: 588).

Generally the focus of transformational development and holistic mission are the marginalised peoples and communities of the world. These are the same people that Bible translation as mission serves. What is at stake for these people is the 'survival strategy in a particular culture [which] is the combination of agricultural, medical, religious, educational, commercial, construction, and household activities that contribute to human welfare' (Bradshaw, 2000: 966).

Holistic mission 'is then no longer seen as priorities, but as parts of a whole' (Steward: 2000, 448). The linkage to Bible translation then is that it should not be viewed as what needs to be done (i.e. the number of languages that are yet to be translated) but as a part of God's holistic and transformational plan for the nations to glorify him.

Bible translation as mission has many disciplines that can be expressed from a holistic perspective. These include literacy (addressing issues of illiteracy), sociolinguistics (learning how people use language in their social situation), ethnomusicology (understanding and valuing the music of people), anthropology (appreciating the cultural factors of a people group), linguistics (including 'practical concerns such as language learning/teaching methods and procedures' (Dickerson, 2000: 580)) and translation (the 'transmission of a message from one language to another whether in written or oral form' (Scott, 2000: 967)).

The concept of the translatability of God's Word is at the heart of Bible translation. This ensures that God's Word is available to all people groups in the language of their heart. This commitment ensures that God's message to people is 'couched in their own

language and culture' (Shaw, 2000: 125) so that God's 'power and authority comes to them directly in their culture' (Shaw, 2000:125).

Bible translation in the context of the world's minority people groups ensures that 'the Bible empowers the powerless and forces the powerful to recognise their own weakness before God' (Shaw, 2000: 125). The spiritual understanding gained from the vernacular Scriptures encourages harmony within the emerging Christian communities. Through reading and understanding the translated Scripture, people 'develop an awareness of God and understand their relationship to him' (Shaw, 2000: 125). They are also no longer dependent upon the outside world and are equipped to do theology in their context and apply this to daily life (Shaw, 2000:125).

Finally, many Christians assume that the Bible is only about spiritual things and therefore only applicable to personal devotion and spiritual growth. However, the Bible needs to speak for itself. Therefore it needs to be freed 'from its spiritual captivity and [be allowed] to engage and speak to the whole of human life' (Myers, 1999:227). Only then is it being used in a holistic sense – Bible translation and holistic mission join together for the same cause.

## **Biblical Perspectives on Bible Translation as Holistic Mission**

Jesus defines his coming in Luke (4:18-19 and 7:22) as the 'new age of salvation ... the time in history when God in sovereign grace brings freedom from the guilt and effects of sin' (Barker and Kohlenberger, n.d.: n.p.). The good news of Jesus Christ is directed to the poor, prisoners, the blind and oppressed but it includes all who need to depend upon God. In this context therefore, the holistic needs of marginalised people groups are highlighted.

Furthermore, Jesus' message of salvation is focused on the wholeness of all people. He 'promises the restoration of all that sin has marred or destroyed' (Barker and Kohlenberger, n.d.: n.p.). Christ is unique in what he offers – righteousness given by God. Salvation, 'whether it is conceived of physically as deliverance (Ex 14:13) or spiritually (Ps 51:12)' (Barker and Kohlenberger, n.d.: n.p.) is from the Lord.

The foundation for Christ's authority over creation, expressed in Colossians 1:15-20 is that he is Lord over all creation because he was involved in its formation. 'To him it owes its unity, its meaning, indeed its very existence ... he is both the unifying principle and the personal sustainer of all creation (Barker and Kohlenberger, n.d.: n.p.). Furthermore, God has removed all hostility between himself and all people. When accepted by people, this will result in 'submission to, and harmony with, God' (Barker and Kohlenberger, n.d.: n.p.).

Building upon this theme of wholeness, James (1:22) challenges Christians to put the Word into practice. The Word should not just be listened to or read, but to be applied in one's life and community. A Christian's faith must also be more than superficial acts or formal religious activity. 'The person whose religious experience is genuine will put spiritual truth into practice, and one's life will be marked by love for others and holiness before God' (Barker and Kohlenberger, n.d.: n.p.).

Paul speaks of the power of God's Word to transform people's lives (Rom 1:16 and Col 3:16) to the extent that we 'submit to the demands of the Christian message and let it become so deeply implanted within us that it controls all our thinking' (Barker and Kohlenberger, n.d.: n.p.).

When these biblical concepts are linked together the case is made for Bible translation as holistic mission because without Bible translation, the Word is not made available to people who need it the most. If they are denied the Word of God in the powerful form of it being given to them in their heart language, then there is little likelihood of holistic transformational development occurring.

## **Historical Perspectives on Bible Translation as Holistic Mission**

In the early church, the Bible was considered to be the book for every Christian. The church fathers emphasised Bible reading, which in turn produced literate people. For those who were not literate, the Bible was read publicly because the Bible was considered to be central for 'deepening of the spiritual life of the individual Christian, and of the Church' (Southwell, n.d.: n.p.). Later on William Tyndale wanted the King of England to understand how important it was for the poor and uneducated people to be able to read the Bible in their own language.

In the 1600's Bartholomew Ziegenbalg went to southeast India to work with the Tamil people. Ziegenbalg believed the vernacular Scriptures needed to be available at the earliest possible stage of mission. His was a broad strategy because he believed Bible translation had to go hand-in-hand with Christian education. The new Christians and their children had to be able to read the Bible for themselves. He also believed that the diligent study of the philosophy and culture of the people group was foundational to evangelism and church growth. He carried out medical work and pursued the formation of an indigenous church with its own unique ministry. He insisted on the use of Tamil lyrics in worship. He was totally committed to the personal conversion of the Tamil people. Ziegenbalg was considered ahead of his time in his holistic approach (Neill, 1986:196).

William Carey in his work in India had a five-fold strategy: the understanding of the language, culture and thought process of the non-Christian peoples; the preaching of the Gospel by every means possible; the translation of the Bible into the languages where it was needed; the planting of a church as the earliest possible point; and the training of local Christians to be leaders in ministry (Neill, 1986:224-5).

Other notable missionaries who were involved in Bible translation such as Adoniram Judson (1788-1850), Henry Martyn (1781-1812) and Hans Egede (1686-1758) demonstrated a holistic approach, as they were also involved in evangelism, Christian education, medical work and theological education. They all showed that Bible translation was complementary to each of these areas.

Herbert Klem points out that early mission goals in Africa included 'well schooled African pastors and a Bible reading laity. Literacy programs and schools were at the very center [sp] of missionary thinking and policy' (1982:26).

Lamin Sanneh commenting on the development of the African Independent Church movement notes that during the centuries of upheaval and expansion of the church, missionaries 'became pioneers of linguistic development ... the resulting literacy, however limited, produced social and cultural transformation' (2002:99).

Therefore, historically there do appear to be strong connections between Bible translation and holistic ministry.

## **Contemporary Perspectives on Bible Translation as Holistic Mission**

A fundamental issue concerning Bible translation is the language of the heart. This is 'whatever language most effectively communicates about deep spiritual and personal matters to the majority of the members of a given ethnolinguistic group' (Sheldon,1999:n.p.). Ray Aldred, an American First Nation person, states that a heart language also expresses people's 'spirituality, their economics, and their political aspirations' (2003:n.p.).

As the message of the Bible is central to transformational development, it must be made available to all people in a language they can understand. There are two goals of Bible translation: for people to read the Bible and come to a personal faith in God; and ensuring that a translation is a clear, accurate and natural one so that people will be brought to God (Gela,n.d.:n.p.). Holistically, there is the goal of spiritual transformation of people as they allow the power of God's Word to change them as they understand and obey it (Gela,n.d.:n.p.).

Furthermore, Bible translation puts 'power into the hands of ordinary people, to apply God's Word in their lives and in their culture' (Sanneh, cited in Southwell n.d.:n.p.) This makes the Bible radical for those who are poor and oppressed because it becomes it 'empowers the powerless and forces the powerful to recognise their own weakness before God' (Shaw, 2000:125). The Bible also shows that 'no people group can be truly independent, but needs to recognise its interdependence with others, even as they express mutual dependence on God' (Shaw, 2000:125).

Bible translation as mission focuses on finding terms and concepts in the recipient culture and language. This makes 'Jesus and his followers into Africans for African hearers, makes them Chinese for a Chinese audience' (Jenkins, 2002:113). Furthermore, the task of Bible translation requires the development of alphabets, grammars, dictionaries and other aspects of the language. All of this investigation in the recipient language results 'almost everywhere in arousing deep loyalties towards the indigenous cause' (Sanneh 1993:140).

In a holistic sense, literacy plays an important partnership in the ministry of Bible translation. This is because people need to 'develop their own literature, expressing in writing what has heretofore been available only in oral form' (Shaw,1988:238). Literacy provides minority languages with value and a greater socio-political status through developing a positive environment where these people groups have their rightful place in the larger society. 'A growing literate society would support various

social and economic gains for the community, as well as provide a context for the reading of God's Word' (Watters,2003:2-3).

Wayne Dye notes that literacy is linked to evangelism (the witness of a Christian literacy teacher in a class of non-Christians); building up believers (literate believers are generally stronger spiritually and less likely to backslide than non-literate believers); practical assistance (literacy skills lessen the likelihood of getting cheated in business transactions); economic advancement (being able to read and write increases one's ability for personal and economic achievement); self esteem (using the vernacular builds personal and community esteem, respect and achievement) (1985:221-232).

Bible translation as holistic mission can be evaluated by Samuel Voorhies' ten principles of holistic Christian transformational development (1999:590-1).

First, Voorhies states that people and their culture have intrinsic value. In response, Bible translation too emphasises this because it respects and focuses on people's heart language and their identity within their own culture. Bible translation in Africa ensured that cultural communities were preserved because of infusion 'with a spirit of stimulus and conservation with its linguistic investigations and its adoption of local religious vocabulary to express Christian teaching' (Pitman, Habito and Muck,1996:341).

Second, the local culture needs to be understood and respected. Those involved in Bible translation do study and respect the local culture to help ensure an accurate translation will be done and that the people will use it. Lamin Sanneh notes that, 'a culture that for the first time possessed a dictionary and a grammar was a culture endowed for renewal and empowerment, whether or not it adopted Christianity' (2002:99).

Third, people's needs and self-respect must be considered, to ensure ownership and self-dignity. Successful Bible translation programs should start with identifying and using local resources as the foundation of a sustainable process. Part of this process is that of grappling with technical areas of designing the alphabet, the writing script, how the language is structured, including its grammar, and analysis of the culture (Sanneh, 2002: 106).

Fourth, people rather than technology should be the focal point. In Bible translation, the people must be the focus. It is possible however, that because of the 'high tech' nature of the Bible translation process due to the heavy usage of computer technology, there are some who may have found it difficult to keep this balance.

Fifth, the whole person – mind, body and spirit must be involved in the development effort. In response, Bible translation has historically focussed on the mind, on theological, evangelistic and discipling aspects of the Christian life. The needs of the body and spirit are outcomes of the Scriptures being used by people.

Sixth, development needs to communicate Christ through word (the gospel of Christ), deed (serving as Christ would) and sign (demonstrating Christ's kingdom life). While

Bible translation has enabled the communication of God's Word, those involved in Bible translation will be more effective if they are also serving in deed and sign.

Seventh, 'all interventions into a group of people... carry a message that must be understood and interpreted from the recipient's worldview' (Voorhies,1999:590). It is important for those involved in Bible translation to study the worldview of the recipient language and culture. This also ensures a relevant translation process.

Eighth, God is already at work in the community so this must be understood and supported. This is a universal principle and applies as much to those involved in Bible translation as it does to other forms of mission.

Ninth, 'transformation in a person comes through a relationship with Christ' (Voorhies,1999:591). As has already been pointed out, a goal of Bible translation is for people to read the Bible and come to a personal faith in God (Gela, n.d.:n.p.). Furthermore, Kwame Bediako claims that African Christianity today is inconceivable apart from the existence of the Bible in African indigenous languages.... Africans had the means to make their own responses to the Christian message, in terms of their own needs and according to their own categories of thought and meaning (2001:n.p.).

And finally, tenth: 'churches are foundational for sustained and abundant transformation' (Voorhies,1999:591). Bible translation is always to be in support of the local churches where they have been established. They are to participate in the Bible translation process.

## **Conclusion**

The case for Bible translation being holistic mission has now been made. However, it is possible this has not previously been considered in this way. There appear to be strong enough missiological, biblical, historical and contemporary connections. Without Bible translation, the Word is not going to be available to people who are usually culturally and linguistically marginalised. If they are denied the Word of God in their heart language, then there is less likelihood of complete holistic transformational development occurring.

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