

Theological Training and Mother-Tongue Translators

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ABSTRACT

The theme has to do with how theological training can better equip mother-tongue translators to transfer propositional truth more effectively into their language, culture, and conceptual schemes. The kind of theological training needed to accomplish this is discussed within the framework of contextual theology that is practical and pastoral. In addition, the paper reviews how dynamic equivalence translation carried out by cross-cultural translators is only a step towards a truly contextualized translation.

1. Introduction

Traditional Western techniques for training cross-cultural translators over the last several decades have focused on equipping new translators with skills in linguistics and translation methods. Exegetical training usually meant learning the Biblical languages, but most translators normally depended on using exegetical resources effectively, rather than the Biblical languages. Western training also included basic anthropology and some training in literacy methods. But theological education has not typically been a part of the curriculum.

In the West, theology is normally part of seminary curriculum; it's associated with training pastors and not with training translators. After all, translators are not typically asked to make theological sense of the message being translated. It's not their job to figure out how to communicate biblical doctrine within specific cultural contexts. Their job is to transfer the biblical text as faithfully as possible into the receiving language so that people are able to understand it better and hence they can know Christ better.

Moreover, and in retrospect, it's probably just as well that Western translators didn't concern themselves too much with Western theology as a tool for translation, considering its theoretical orientation and Enlightenment framework. Perhaps Tiéno and Hiebert were correct in saying, "exegesis was enclosed within the frontiers fixed by systematic theology" (2005, 4). That framework would not have assisted them in dealing with the realities of demon possession, vendetta killing, ancestral worship, spirit placation, and the political and socio-economic situation in their translations. Additionally, as linguist/translators, they were not supposed to become too involved in local church affairs, and especially in its duties to teach, baptize, and theologize. Those tasks were the work of pastors and church-planting missionaries. Translation was scientific and academic for the most part. Therefore keeping the line between translation and theology seemed appropriate.

However times do change. Mother-tongue speakers doing Bible translation is certainly not new, but the number of mother-tongue translation projects is exploding. And in many cases the translators have had some theological education. Today, pastors are more likely to be seminary-trained. And we see moderately-educated local people being trained by national and foreign experts. Therefore what once was considered the job of foreign experts is fast becoming the job of the local church and its own mother tongue translators.

Still the question persists; What's the role of Biblical and Systematic theology? Should it not help translators figure out how they will understand the concept of redemption within their Taoist worldview? Or comprehend the Apostle Paul's teaching on spiritual warfare within their animist worldview? Or view Christ's saving death from an African right-of-passage worldview? If translators don't address such issues, how will the users of their translations be able to do so? Or stating it another way; "how can we minister the Gospel effectively if we are not equipped to reflect theologically in the languages in which we pray and dream" (Bediako 2002)? Applying Bediako's question to translation, how can mother-tongue translators communicate important theological concepts in their translations if they are not trained to reflect on how to communicate those concepts in their language and culture? Commonly, translators work

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hard to find a good word to translate Greek or English words. But they will spend relatively little time thinking about the concepts they intend to communicate.

It seems clear to me that the next stage of Bible translation is, as Lamin Sanneh (2003) suggests, an indigenous one. In addition, the volume of articles dealing with contextual theology is growing. Much of the writing reflects a rejection of Western theology because of its rationalism framework. The church in the South is not only rejecting Western theology, but also "seeking to produce its curious provincial variants—"African theology," "Asian theology" and so on" (Jenkins 2006a). Personally, I believe this is an important development in the history of mission, and mother-tongue Bible translation work should play a key role in this shift.

In this paper I won't simply rehash the formal vs. dynamic equivalence in Bible translation debate. Rather I'll focus on theological training as an aid for mother-tongue translators, on helping them transfer various types of communicative acts from Scripture into their own language and culture in a way that will allow their readers to grasp the theological concepts more fully and deeply. Then readers should be able to understand the connection between their culture and the message of the Bible in day to day practical ways.¹ This approach for training translators has not been discussed to any great extent, at least within linguist/translator circles, but it should enhance the quality of translation.

I realize the label 'mother-tongue' translator is not the best expression to use in some situations. Another possible term could be 'local language translator', but this does not necessarily mean a native speaker of the language. Furthermore, 'native speaker' is also offensive in other parts of the world. Thus, for the remainder of this paper "translator" will usually refer to someone who is a native speaker of a language. I will refer to non-native speaker translators as "cross-cultural translators." Occasionally, I will use "mother-tongue" translator explicitly for the purpose of contrast.

2. Traditional Western translation methods

In Western translation tradition, translators take much care in exegeting the meaning of Hebrew and Greek words. Perhaps they pay less attention to the assertions or propositions encoded by those words. Most translators understand a one-to-one word correspondence between languages does not exist, except for languages that are closely related to Greek and Hebrew. Yet they will persist in trying to find one-to-one correspondences because they are concerned over how the translation will be viewed by others if the correspondences are not evident. Those kinds of translations are usually labeled as "paraphrases." Yet with most languages it is difficult to express important theological concepts, such as 'faith', 'sin', and 'worship' with one word in every context where the terms occur in the source texts. Commonly, languages have several ways to express the concepts in different contexts. Yet, in western tradition a translator may choose to translate the Greek word *sarka* 'flesh,' that Paul repeats twenty five times in his *Romans* letter, using the same word in all the same verses that it is used in *Romans*. The point is, if translators are more concerned with matching a Greek (or English) verb or noun, and less concerned with the item's propositional content, then they may be diluting the theological significance of the concepts expressed by those items, as Robert Priest explains (2006, 186-188). His example of the theological concept of "sin" among the Aguaruna of Peru illustrates this. Following a traditional Western translation approach, a cross-cultural translator may search for a word for sin in Aguaruna. But after studying a long list of words that describe moral failure, he is yet to discover a word for sin to match the word in his source text. His conclusion may be that the language is deficient because it does not have a word for sin. Therefore he will need to borrow a word for sin from the national language, a trade language, or a neighboring language.

I encountered the same situation while working with the Meyah people of Indonesia on their New Testament translation. Their language did not have a generic word for sin. However, this does not mean they had no way to discuss moral failure, either. At an earlier time, a missionary introduced a borrowed word for sin from an unrelated language in the same region. The Meyah pastors preached for many years about the concept of sin to their congregations. But according to them, the borrowed term only connoted two types of moral failure; adultery and murder. It did not address deception, jealousy, stealing, lying, or selfishness. They also considered these concepts as moral failure long before the Gospel was introduced. However, their use of the introduced word for sin limited their ability to theologize about the concept among their people. As a result, perhaps a question persisted as to who a sinner was. Or maybe sin could be avoided by not committing murder or adultery. Priest's main point is, "they would learn to not limit themselves to a single word for sin, and instead draw from the aide range of everyday vocabulary to

speak to their audiences in experience-near terms.” In other words, they would use terms or phrases that are readily available in their language rather than import foreign words. These two situations show how a translation that closely follows Western translation methods can hinder a pastor’s ability to theologize in their cultural context.

Western translators, particularly Evangelicals, reject any notion that a term or personal name for God could be associated with other gods (Vanhoozer 2006, 102). Even so, a translator’s choice of a word for God can have a very significant negative or positive effect on the user’s ability to theologize on the topic of God. In one southeast Asian context, a group of pastors launched a new translation project because they believed the term “Allah” in the existing translation negatively impacted their ability to speak about God in terms their people would understand better. Cross-cultural translators borrowed the term from the dominant religion in the region because they wanted to avoid local terms for God that would communicate wrong meaning. They also wanted to build a bridge between Christianity and Islam for better understanding (Thomas 2001, 172). However, decades later Christians were experiencing persecution under this introduced name for God within their religious and political context. Due to this, the pastors strongly desired to use a different name in their translation. However, missionaries on the scene advised against using any former names for gods because from their Western perspective that was tantamount to syncretizing the concept. Nevertheless, the cultural outsiders failed to understand that the translators were very restricted if they could not use anything from their cultural context that people could draw from to understand the God of the Bible better. The translators were pastors who had received training from their church denomination’s seminary. However, the seminary curriculum was based on traditional Western theology imported by the missionaries, so they did not know how to grapple with the practical theological issues they were facing. That is to say, they were trying to figure out how to translate a word or personal name for God in a way their culture could understand Him better, but their understanding of traditional theology did not aid them.²

Western evangelical translators may consider using local names for gods as tantamount to syncretism, nonetheless Vanhoozer, citing Schreier (2006, 103), argues syncretism could also be considered, “more a matter of forming new identities out of ready-to-hand cultural elements.” Hiebert makes the same point in the context of the Hindu religion: “Concepts of *devudu*, *avatar*, *papamu*, and *moksha* have only vague resemblances for the concepts of God, incarnation, sin, and salvation as presented in the Bible” (1997, 84). He advises beginning with words the people understand, even if it does not fully convey the Biblical message yet. Later on the words must be redefined to understand the truth revealed by scripture. Can translators use those Hindu terms to communicate the same biblical concepts within similar contexts in their language? Uncritical syncretism produces bad translations which generates bad contextual theology. However, if the translator is not trained to consider how beliefs and situations in his or her own culture can aid in communicating propositional truths more effectively, then they will inevitably produce a translation that reflects Western culture and traditions. This practice weakens the translation as a tool for local pastors. In a sense they will naively syncretize Western or Bible culture with their own.

3. Crisis of exegetes?

Complaints are rising out of Africa over the lack and weakness of African exegetes: “Instead of doing real interpretation and translation of the Bible, according to the cultural contexts, they just do the transplantation of their masters ideologies and Bibles” (Nsiku 2005, 6). The complaint is that Bible translation in Africa often follows the English or French text too closely. A translator’s assumption is, if people consider those texts to be examples of exegetically sound translation, then following those translations will produce a new translation that is also exegetically sound. In addition, the national language translations have ascribed prominence as the official translation of a Bible Society or a major church denomination. Therefore the style of translation is codified as being more sacred. The people involved in a translation project feel strong pressure to ensure their work closely reflects the mainstream translation. Some indigenous translations become resource texts for related language translations, and so the style and content of those translations is transferred to a fourth generation text.

This practice is not found just in Africa. A number of modern translations in Asia are also near literal reflections of Bible Society English language translations.³ Consequently, there are many third generation translations that are closely based on those mainstream translations, as well. The problem Nsiku sees with this is, it perpetuates the same Western translation with its traditions and biases in non-

Western contexts, thus weakening their use as a tool for theologizing in a local culture. His suggestion is to send the African students of exegesis back to their villages after receiving their formal modern training in order to learn how to discuss theological concepts in their mother-tongue.

4. Doing Bible translation is doing theology

Much of the theological reflection taking place around the world these days indicates a desire for theology to return to what it was supposed to be all along—practical. In relation to this, some theologians are also discussing what the purpose of Bible translation is supposed to be: “The purpose of Bible translation is to enact the way, the truth, and the life in new settings, to make Christ live within new contexts (Vanhoozer 2005, 131). Vanhoozer’s definition presupposes a process that is more than just transferring information from one language to another, as translation has been perceived to be. He asserts theology draws on the model of translation “where the emphasis is on preserving propositional content across different languages, cultures, and conceptual schemes” (2005, 73). He also argues that translation is not simply transferring information. It is transferring a variety of communicative acts. Further more, “Christians are to translate the gospel into the languages, thought forms, and practices of other cultures” (2005, 131). The ability of a cross-cultural translator to accomplish all of that is probably moderate at best. That is, the theological impact of doing translation as a cultural outsider, and a Western-trained one at that, has most likely made only a modest theological impact on the local situation. As a result fewer end-users know how to connect the message of the Bible with their own unique situations and challenges.

If some cross-cultural translators studied theology in preparation for translation, it was probably Biblical or Systematic theology. It had more to do with building on theoretical knowledge than providing practical answers. My purpose is not to debate or debunk Biblical or Systematic theology, regardless of the framework used to discuss it. My primary concern is translators do indeed need to receive some training in theology, but what sort of theological training would benefit them the most?

5. Theology that is practical and contextual

During the modern Western missions period, the purpose of Bible translation was indeed primarily to spread the Gospel all over the world; to establish churches; make disciples; and baptize people into God’s Kingdom. Eventually, local church leaders were sent to seminaries to learn Biblical and Systematic theology so they could pastor more effectively. However, the primary weakness of Biblical and Systematic theology is that it does not address the “excluded middle.” That is, the need to attend to healing and spiritual warfare (Hiebert 1982). This concern has provided a stimulus for developing local and practical theologies that are “pastorally and missiologically relevant” (Yung 1997, 9). Pastors need a theology that is practical and not just theoretical. It involves learning how to draw theological insights which would allow them to theologize in their local context (Whiteman 2006, 59).

It appears this view of contextual theology is quickly gaining momentum, and it seems to provide a foundation for ushering in the next stage of mission. In this stage the task is to better connect people and their daily struggles with the Gospel of Jesus Christ in practical ways; providing answers, raising hope, and making sense of the times and situations people find themselves in. Within this stage, Bible translation plays no small role.

Contextual theology is nothing new. Addressing the Thai Buddhist context, Kosuke Koyama’s *Water Buffalo Theology* is widely known, as is Minjung Theology (theology of the masses), within the Korean context. Latin American Liberation Theology is also well known. These forms of theology developed during the 1970’s. However, based on the growing volume of literature on the subject, it is apparent the postmodern rejection of Enlightenment rationalism and its influence on theology is gaining strong momentum all over the world. As Hwa Yung states, “It is not a fad or a catch-word, but a theological necessity demanded by the incarnational nature of the Word.” Furthermore, “The task of contextualization is relevance of Christ to revolutionary social changes, widespread poverty, ethnic and economic minorities, positive and negative aspects of culture, the plurality of religions and ecclesiastical divisions” (Yung 1997, 13).

Philip Jenkins (2006b) demonstrates that Bible translation is no longer seen primarily as a tool for spreading Christianity, as it was under the period of modern Western missions. Rather it is increasingly also viewed by local pastors in Africa, Asia, and Latin American as a need-driven, urgent task simply

because they live and serve in a context where people have suffered tremendously under horrendous civil and religious wars, disintegration of social structures, rampant spread of diseases, and long-lasting famine.

6. What might practical theology training for translators include?

Paul Hiebert (2006, 300) refers to missionaries as *outsider/insiders*. Although they have lived with the people and have gained more of an insider view, they never fully become one with the people. This is also true of cross-cultural translators. Even though they may be capable exegetes, and they have gained many valuable linguistic and cultural insights, they never fully develop the cognitive insights that a member of the culture can have. Those insights, or the lack of them, also have an effect on exegesis. Mother-tongue translators, being cultural insiders, naturally have a deeper understanding of the culture, therefore they are more capable of figuring out how to transfer propositional truth from Scripture into their language, culture, and conceptual schemes. But this does not mean they need no instruction on how to go about doing that.

Mother-tongue translators might spend years in university, seminary, or government jobs. The longer they are removed from their language and cultural situation, the more they lose their mono-cultural perspective. They are influenced by the culture they have been living with, so consequently they consciously or unconsciously adopt some of the values, philosophies, and traditions of their host culture. As a result they develop more of a cross-cultural perspective. This is where training in practical theology can help these sorts of translators recover their understanding of how their translation work will “make Christ live” in their language and culture. On the other hand, translators who have rarely traveled far from their cultural and linguistic heartland would benefit from learning how translators from other languages and cultures grapple with practical theological issues.

Within the scope of my own work, the question is asked of translators, “How will this translation impact your people, your culture, and your situation?” A typical answer is, “The people will know Christ better.” When reviewing translation project proposals, I have seen how even mother-tongue translators have a difficult time explaining the theological reasons for doing Bible translation. Could it be because, as part of their training they were not taught to think about the practical reasons for doing translation? The idea is to help them to think about and answer questions, such as “How will this translation address the deeper issues your people grapple with? How will it communicate God’s words, thoughts, and actions in such a way as to enable them to wrestle with those things and overcome them? How will it aid you within the socio-political situation your people live within? How will the forms of suffering that impact your people on a daily basis be understood from a biblical perspective?” What follows is just a brief overview of some topics which could be included in a workshop or a class on practical theology for translators.

6.1 Defining theology for translators

As I mentioned earlier, traditional theological training for translators, if they received any, usually involved taking a course on Biblical or Systematic theology. While the philosophical discussions on ontology and epistemology may have its usefulness in the academy, it has less usefulness in the village. One Western colleague who works with a number of mother-tongue translators commented, when the translators return from seminary, the theological knowledge they gain is nearly useless for the task at hand. Moreover, their views on translation tend to reflect Western rationalism which treats metaphysics as a less evolved form of human knowledge. Therefore a review of the types of theology and their usefulness to the task of Bible translation is a good starting point. Tiénou and Hiebert (2005) provide a helpful overview of the differences between Biblical theology, Philosophical theology, Systematic theology, and Missional Theology. In my view, practical and missional theology is very similar because they both seek, “to translate and communicate the Gospel in the language and culture of real people in the particularity of their lives so that it may transform them, their societies and their cultures into what God intends for them to be” (2005, 6). They both have to do with practice over theory. Therefore, for this present work, I will simply refer to both as practical theology.

6.2 Understanding what contextualization means in Bible translation

Vanhoozer's comments on the decoding and encoding of meaning in translation by missionaries and theologians can apply to translators, as well. A traditional Western cross-cultural translator will approach translation as a method whereby he/she decodes and extracts propositional meaning, then encodes the meaning into the local idiom and culture. This model presumes contextualization happens primarily at the encoding stage (2006, 100). However, "all translations are driven by choices, and presuppose interpretation, and an assumed grid of what is most importantly preserved" (Caron 2003, 3). Therefore, the weakness with this method is it still reflects the culture of the cross-cultural translator, in terms of choices the translator makes in the process of encoding. The model over-looks the deeper significance of the culture and context. Yung makes the same point (1997, 11). Quoting Schreier (1985), he claims dynamic-equivalence translation allows for some immediate translation into the local context, but it is still inadequate for two reasons given by Schreier:

- 1) it assumes cultural patterns are easily decoded by outsiders, and
- 2) it assumes revelation can be detached from its culturally embedded state.

So it can at best only function as the first stage in the development of a local theology. Therefore, in a course for translators, a systematic approach to translation would show that the former is only the first step towards a more contextualized translation. The second step is thinking about the theological concepts that will be transferred (i.e. sin, grace, rebellion, etc.), and then figuring out how to communicate the decoded meaning of those terms in a more culturally intuitive way, by using what is available in the language and culture. It involves discussing how form and meaning is understood in the translator's own language and culture rather than only the way it is understood in the culture the source text is oriented towards, be it ancient Hebrew and Greek culture, or modern Western culture: "The best translations achieve more than a wooden repetition of the original's conceptual content; the best translations achieve a communicative consistency that preserves and sometimes even develops our understanding of the original" (Vanhoozer 2006, 132).

This notion of contextualization differs somewhat from the no less important concern of communicating context in Bible translation. When meaning is transferred from one culture into another, the people of the receiving culture will form a range of assumptions during the transfer. Harriet Hill's discussion on communicating context deals with the types of assumptions the receiving culture will make: "Translators need to identify the mismatches between the first and secondary receptors' contexts and provide the specific intended contextual assumptions the secondary receptors lack" (2005, 3). This prevents the intended meaning from being misinterpreted. It has to do with supplying information that is relevant to the correct interpretation of the passage. But, as she cautions, not all of the additional information is relevant. However, in this current work I discuss how translators could learn how beliefs and situations in their own culture can aid in communicating propositional truths more effectively, as Schreier suggested. The former notion of context aids in correct interpretation, and the latter aids in a deeper understanding of the theological concepts being communicated.

6.3 Understanding their own social context

I mentioned in 6.0 about the sorts of questions a translator should ponder before launching a translation project. The questions are meant to help him or her think about how the translation will empower local pastors to theologize within their social and cultural situation. The longer translators are away from their language and cultural heartland, the more they are removed from their cultural perspective. As a result they might begin to forget the deeper things the people of their culture struggle with. Therefore, a refresher course on the social situation most of their people are situated in may be necessary. It would enable the translators to figure out how to communicate biblical concepts more deeply. It is like Nsiku suggests, sending them back to their village to learn how to think about important theological concepts in their own language and culture. On the other hand, translators who have rarely traveled far from their cultural and linguistic heartland would benefit from learning about the kinds of things other people struggle with in order to understand their own more deeply. Philip Jenkins addresses this concept well (2006a). The following chart, based on Jenkin's theme, illustrates this by comparing the social situation in North America with that of Asia, Africa and Latin America (see Table 1).

Table 1: Comparison of North American Context with Asian/African/Latin America Context.

Human Needs	North America Context	Asian/African/Latin America Context
Happiness	Need for constant material and physical satisfaction to produce short term happiness.	Struggle to feed one's family; send children to school, survive the year's unknown challenges.
Meaning to life	Cultural nihilism. Need to find meaning in life.	Understand how God and Jesus impact people's lives on a daily basis in comparison to how capricious malevolent spirits dominate their daily lives.
Daily life	Competition. Constant pressure to perform or be devoured by the business market. Personal value is derived from work.	Fear of arrest, intimidation, famine, war, rampant inflation, injustice, rampant unemployment.
Family/Society	Social contacts. Lose of community; loss of family cohesion, increasing social isolation.	Protect and strengthen family and social relations. Threat of disintegration.
Time	Life is filled with busy activities, so no time to reflect on the past or the future.	Life is short, perilous, and the after life offers little incentive to persist.
Sexual issues	Social moral relativism coupled with nihilism produces constant tension and confusion over sexuality.	Spread of disease, AIDs, resulting in death.
Church	Modern church experience is generally consumer oriented, so maintaining satisfaction is difficult.	Church grappling with life's difficulties, full of suffering, looking for hope in suffering rather than only relief from it.
God	Lose of the sense of God's supernatural presence, power and intervention.	Looking for reaffirmation about God's omniscience and supernatural power to cope with daily living.

Practical theology seeks a way to show how the Scriptures reveal much to humanity about the situations they find themselves in now, rather than the situation humans found themselves in thousands of years ago. It makes God's Word relevant and dramatic for today. Indigenous language Bible translation is the tool pastors use to accomplish this, therefore the translation style should also communicate meaning in currently relevant and forceful ways.

6.4 Key terms and theology

The concept of “key terms” has been discussed and debated within linguist/translator circles for many years. As far as I can tell, the term has been in use for over forty years. Other terms used in literature are: Biblical terms, key Biblical terms, key theological terms, and key thematic terms. Typically the activity focused on collecting “words” often without their contexts. A list of key terms might be rather short or it could be very extensive, depending on what one labels as a key term.

In reality, most of the key terms are important theological concepts, whether they are nouns or verbs, objects or actions. However, “words are certainly signals which trigger concepts, but concepts are not the objects of our thinking processes, they *are* those processes in action. Words, therefore, do not refer to concept-things but stimulate concept-events. Concepts are not what we think about; they are what we think with” (Callow 1998). Modern philosophers of language, such as John R. Searle (2002), refer to words as symbols. Symbols refer to concepts, and the symbols themselves are not what matters. Fritz Goerling (2000) provides a good illustration of this in his discussion of the key term ‘grace’ in the Jula language of Côte D’Ivoire: “The source-language term and a corresponding receptor-language term may share most or some components of meaning, they may differ with regard to more or less components, components may overlap, but there is hardly ever exact equivalence. In order to convey important sense components that are in focus in a particular context, a source-language key term may have to be translated by several different words or by a combination of words or a paraphrase in the receptor language.”

I encountered the same situation while searching for a way to express ‘grace’ in Meyah. I could not find one word or even one basic phrase to convey that concept. Instead, the language speakers expressed it in different ways within different contexts. It was not absent from their culture as I had naively thought. They just used a different set of symbols to encode it in different situations. The key term for sin in Aguaruna (section 2), provides a similar example of how one concept that is expressed by one symbol in the Greek language, can be encoded in different ways using different symbols in the Aguaruna language. In dealing with key terms, our traditional Western bias dictates that the same key term, or the same symbol used to express that term, must occur in the receptor language translation in all of the same places it occurs in the Greek text. However this practice shows more of a concern for the placement of symbols than it does the faithful expression of concepts.

The training translators receive now may focus more on compiling lists of key terms without adequate discussion about the theological concepts encoded by those terms, and how those concepts are normally communicated in language and culture. People who desire to translate biblical texts need to understand that form and meaning is not necessarily based on shared symbols. Instead, they would exegete the concept behind a key term, and then think about how the same concept is expressed, possibly in several different ways, in their language. This task poses the biggest challenge in producing a contextual translation that communicates important propositional truth in a way that can greatly impact a culture, and at the same time not wander from the meaning as intended by the original authors.

7. Summary

I have presented the topic of theological training for translators in somewhat of an academic manner. However, a course in practical theology does not need to be conducted that way. Depending on the background and educational level of the translators, one could communicate the information in appropriate ways through workshops or in a classroom setting. Naturally, an in-depth course could produce greater results.

The ideas discussed in this paper have to do with how translators can produce Bible translations that make the Gospel live in their language and culture. This can be accomplished by training them to not follow second generation texts (trade languages, national languages, major world languages) too closely. The goal is not to produce a new source text, per se.⁴ Only the Hebrew and Greek texts are reliable records of what people said and wrote thousands of years ago. Instead, the translators would learn to draw from everyday vocabulary to speak to their audiences in experience-near terms, as Priest suggests. They would learn to think more about how their language encodes concepts expressed by words, rather than matching words from the source text with the translated text; to consider how their beliefs and situations within their own culture can aid in communicating propositional truths more effectively; and view

key terms as important theological concepts which may be communicated in different ways within different contexts in their own language.

Some people may consider this approach to translation as bordering on syncretism. However, “Why in principle can theology borrow from Plato but not from primal religions? Why can Clement of Alexandria get away with suggesting Greek philosophy was a pedagogue that led to Christ, while Bolaji Idowu is criticized for saying the same thing about African Traditional religion” (Vanhoozer 2006, 103). Even though pastors and theologians have more freedom than translators do in figuring out ways to communicate theological concepts, I would like to extend Vanhoozer’s question to address Bible translation, as well. If translation is more than just transferring information from one language into another, then elements of the language and culture are needed to communicate propositional content more faithfully. Vanhoozer further states that context helps recover the pastoral and practical dimensions of interpretation. Therefore, a translation that takes the cultural context more fully into account will greatly enhance the pastoral task of theologizing in their local situation. The impact on people, cultures, and nations can be significantly greater than it has been.

However, producing contextual translations require some ground rules. Contextualization does not mean developing an alternative exegesis. Faithfulness is still adhering to the message communicated by the original authors. If the translation, for example, portrays Christ as one way to salvation among other ways, then it has clearly wandered from the traditions handed down from the Apostles. The approach cannot produce a “different Gospel.”

In addition, Strauss’ warning is apt when he says, “Maintaining that any form can freely be substituted to communicate the same meaning is equally simplistic. It ignores the historical connection between forms and their meanings, and the control social groups maintain over their symbols” (2006, 143). For example, in the Meyah worldview spirits are only ‘placated’ and never ‘worshipped.’ Therefore can their word (actually a phrase) for ‘placate’ be freely substituted for the Greek or Hebrew word for ‘worship’ in reference to God, who is a spirit? The theological implications for deciding this are significant. God is not a capricious, malevolent spirit. However, Jesus’ atonement for the sins of humanity removed God’s righteous judgment, which in the Meyah worldview is spirit placation, indeed! These are the sorts of theological concepts a translator must learn to grapple with more deeply in order to produce a translation that is faithful to Apostolic traditions, but is also more successful in transferring propositional content more dramatically. With training, only a native speaker translator can do this better.

As Thomas Atta-Akosah proclaims, “Culturally appropriate categories and idioms serve as connecting cords to the hearts of mother tongue speakers. Translation therefore, has great influence on biblical interpretation and theologies” (2005).

Resources

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End Notes

- 1 In post-Christian America, I see the same sense of urgency for the Church to become missiological and contextual in the way we do church and spread the Gospel. Perhaps the difficult situations we face in

our daily lives are not nearly as dramatic as they are in China or Sudan, but nihilism and rampant consumerism is wreaking destruction in people's lives in not so subtle ways.

2 Rick Brown (2006) addresses this issue well with regard to contextual translations and references to God in Muslim contexts.

3 In Indonesia the *Bahasa Indonesia yang Sehari-hari* (BIS) translation closely follows UBS's Good News Bible. The *Firman Tuhan yang Hidup* translation closely follows the Living Bible.

4 Good second generation translations are valuable resources, especially between related languages. Even so, they are still imperfect reflections of the Hebrew or Greek texts. And if done contextually, they are more reflective of a local language and culture, at least in the way propositions are communicated.