

Why Should We Translate?

By Steve Combs

When speaking of Bible translating, the reader should understand at the beginning that I am *not* referring to translating yet another English translation. I believe the multitude of modern English versions is a spiritual scandal. They have weakened faith in the Bible, lowered the effectiveness of Bible Study and actually led to less Bible literacy. I realize there is no space or time to discuss this here, but let me refer you to a book. I have written and to the references and Bibliography there.

That volume was entitled *Must We Translate?* and subtitled *Every Word for Every People*. In that book I explained seven reasons why it is absolutely necessary that we get involved in translating the Bible into the mother tongues of unreached people groups. In this article I will summarize those reasons, but for a full discussion also see that book.

Our Absence from the Field

The first reason independent Baptists must translate is because of our general absence from this field. There may be many and varied reasons why this is so, but it *is* so. I have made a search over several years to find involvement in translating by independent Baptists who stand for the correct line of Bibles, the Received Text line from which your King James Bible was translated. I did not find any mission boards that specifically expressed that burden and only, perhaps, one that had a burden for unreached people groups. Even for that one, their stand regarding the English Bible was uncertain. At least, these agencies didn't specifically mention either of these topics on their internet sites. There are some independent Baptists involved in these ministries. Some go out from local churches and are working without the help of a board. There is one mission organization I learned of after completing the above mentioned book, First Bible International, founded by Dr. Charles Keen, who also founded Bearing Precious Seed in Milford, Ohio. However, these two organizations have printing the Bible as their primary burden, not recruiting and sending translators. There is, also, the Baptist Bible Translators Institute in Bowie, Texas, directed by Rex Cobb, a veteran missionary. BBTI is not a mission board, but, rather a very excellent training institution. Beyond this there is very little apparent involvement of Bible believing independent Baptists in planting churches and translating the Bible for unreached people groups.

Because of the Great Need

Some of the great need for translating has been outlined on the Facts and Statistics page with the information about the thousands of people groups which are still unreached. However, the distressing news doesn't end there. Unreached peoples also represent thousands of languages that have nothing of the word of God. Additionally, there are many of the translations that have been done which are far

inferior in quality to what they should and could be.

The Ethnologue is the most complete language listing in existence, produced by SIL, the sister organization to Wycliffe Bible Translators. According to it, there are 6,912 living languages on earth (SIL, Ethnologue, www.ethnologue.org, 2005). This number has grown over the years with the increase of knowledge and is probably still less than the real number. Some of these languages may even be broken down into dialects that are similar yet different enough to need separate translations.

Of these 6,912 languages, only about 400 have the whole Bible. Around 1000 more have the New Testament. About 2,800 others have bits and pieces, some being a work in progress. But, the real heart wrenching fact is that over 2,800 languages have no part of the word of God. They don't even have one word in a written translation into their mother tongue. The people can never read it or hold it in their hand. They can't read it in church and preach it. They can't grow by feeding on the word of God

Because of the Power of the Mother Tongue

For then will I turn to the people a pure language, that they may all call upon the name of the LORD, to serve him with one consent. (Zephaniah 3:9)

The above verse is a prophecy that God would give the people of Israel a pure language. It is also an expression of how the Jews and God felt about their language. The mother tongue of the Jews was (and is) Hebrew. To them it is a special language. In fact, any other language was considered a "strange language." "When Israel went out of Egypt, the house of Jacob from a people of a strange language" (Ps. 114:1). Some languages are even spoken of as being "hard" languages. "For thou art not sent to a people of a strange speech and of an hard language, but to the house of Israel" (Ezekiel 3:5). To many Hebrew is a "strange" language, because their mother tongue is different. To me Hebrew is a "hard" language. But, to the Jews Hebrew was a natural instinctual language and it "feels" right and normal in the same way that English feels right and normal to us.

This is the case with every distinct people and their language. A people's heart language speaks to them in a way that no other language can. Even when they know a second language they relate the words and idioms of that language to their own mother tongue for full understanding. The language a person grows up hearing and learning exists as something much deeper than the intellectual sum of grammar, vocabulary, and idiom. It exists, for that individual, on an almost instinctual level. When a person sees or hears his mother tongue it has a deeper effect on him than any other language. It can open his understanding of God and salvation like no other can.

In Genesis 10, we have the story of the tower of Babel. The significance of this story goes way beyond the rebellion of man and God's way of dealing with that rebellion. Of course, God had commanded them to scatter and replenish the earth, but they had chosen another way. They remained together and determined to build an empire. The symbol of their power was the tower and the strength of their unity was the fact that they all had one language. In order to force them to separate according to their nations, God confused their language. They couldn't understand one another any more so they had no choice but to gather into smaller groups according to common languages. They each went their own way. From there languages continued to multiply

naturally, so that now the world has many languages that can be traced to a few great language families.

There is, of course, more to it than that. It fit perfectly into God's plan for the nations. The confusion of languages was a necessary part of God's plan as expressed in Acts 17:26-27. He "hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation; That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us". God's plan included separating the nations. Why? According to Acts 17 there is something about the separation and association with one's own kind that encourages a seeking after God. This association includes a group feeling of identity that produces a common way of life and thinking. If God can get a foot-hold in a group like this, the faith of some will encourage faith in others. The specific group will have much of its identity found within its distinct language and through this language they will find a natural wall of protection from the ideas of foreign groups which have a different identity, culture, and language. The gospel itself is, of course, cross-cultural and requires that someone from one culture go to another culture to make it known. However, when this alien, the gospel preacher, arrives in the new group it is necessary that he identify himself with that group and that he become accepted by that group. He can only do this by, among other things, learning that group's language and communicating with them in that language.

Because of the Power of God's Word

When Paul was traveling to Jerusalem at the end of his third missionary journey, he determined to stop near Ephesus and to bid farewell to the elders there (Acts 20:17-35). In the eighteen verses of his speech, he referred to the word of God or to the preaching of the word of God in nine verses. There Paul was commending the future of the church which he had built to the God who was able to preserve it. Specifically he was commending the church to the word of God (32).

What was this word to which he was commending them? Was it just the Old Testament? Certainly not. Paul had spent many years writing inspired letters to various churches. It was to these scriptures that he was commending the churches (2 Peter 3:16) as well as those of the Old Testament. He trusted God's ability to use the scriptures to continue the church growth and expansion that he began. He did not trust Timothy or Titus or Silas to do this, because they too would soon be passing from the scene. But, He knew that God's word would always remain.

When a missionary goes to a people to preach the gospel to them, he hopes to have great fruit among them. He may have much fruit. He may start one church or many. He may stay many years. But, he cannot stay forever. Let's suppose he has gone to a people who have no Bible in their language. When he leaves, in whose hands does he leave the security of the church's future? He could leave it in the hands of the elders he has trained. However, this is no certainty of a good future. Paul told the Ephesian elders that wolves would arise from among *them* (29, 30). The only real security is to do what Paul did and that is to commend them to the word of God (32).

Without the word of God in their language a church cannot survive in a healthy and doctrinally pure condition. For this cause, missionaries must not neglect the

translating of the Bible. If they should do so, they neglect to perform a full ministry and they place the church in jeopardy.

Because of God's Plan

Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God. Mt. 4:4

The Bible proceeds out the "mouth of God." This is the Biblical definition of inspiration (2 Tim. 3:16). The words, all the words, of scripture proceed out of God's very mouth. These are individual words, not simply messages. They are HIS words, not man's. They are part of His heart and of His nature. But, they are given TO mankind, to transform man and his manner of living.

The words of God were given to "live by." We are born again by the word of God (1 Peter 1:23). The word gives us milk so that we can become healthy and grow as babies in Christ (1 Peter 2:2). It is meat for those who are mature (Heb. 5:14). Those who gaze at it are transformed into the image of Christ (2 Cor 3:17-18; James. 1:22-25). The Scriptures give spiritual strength and muscle and give us "an inheritance among all them which are sanctified" (Acts 20:32) Is it any wonder why we must live by "every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God"? The word of God is absolutely necessary to growth and godliness.

Are these benefits of the word of God the sole possession of western or English speaking Christians? Are we, in the heart of God, to be the only recipients of His good word? Is it only for us to get alone in the mornings to read and meditate on the Scriptures and hear the small still voice speak to our hearts through his word? Is it not also for the most ignorant and primitive individual in the darkest wettest jungle? Yes, a thousand times, yes. It is also for them. Man, every man, must live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. This is the express will of God and we are His instruments to make it a reality. If all men do not have the knowledge of God, it is to our shame (1 Cor. 15:34).

Because of God's Footsteps

God is the God of history. He has determined the ultimate end of history and the course the world will take to get there (Is. 46:10). God is intimately involved with the activities of history. Throughout the Old Testament we can see how He intervened in history on behalf of His people and in dealing with man in general. The flood, the call of Abraham, the selling of Joseph into Egypt, the call of Moses, the plagues of Egypt, the Red Sea, the giving of the law, the captivities and subsequent deliverance during the period of the Judges, God fighting for his people during the time of the Kings, the judgment on Solomon, the captivity of the Northern kingdom, the Babylonian captivity of Judah, the prophecies, and the judgments on the nations are examples of how God intervened in history during the time of the Old Testament.

God was not silent in the New Testament either. The most monumental involvement of God in the history of mankind took place in the New Testament. This was the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ into the world along with His work, crucifixion,

and resurrection. After His ascension, the power He gave his apostles and servants was remarkable. The ultimate promise of His involvement is found in the Great Commission: "I am with you always, even unto the end of the world." (Mt. 28:20)

The tone was set for God's involvement in history after the close of the New Testament period. With some spiritual discernment and knowledge of God from the Scriptures, it is possible to trace the footsteps of God. Jesus said, "Without me ye can do nothing" (Jn. 15:5). So, when God's work is done, it is God who has done it through man as His instrument. All labor for the Lord is done by His grace and sufficiency (1 Cor. 15:10; 2 Cor. 3:5).

So what do the footprints of God in history tell us about His attitude toward translating His word into all languages? The answer to this question is abundantly seen throughout the church age. From the close of the apostolic age (about A.D. 100) new translations appeared in abundance up until the time of the Dark Ages (about A.D. 500). There was little translation done while the Catholic Church dominated the European scene for about 1000 years. However, as soon as the reformation dawned with the posting of the 95 theses by Martin Luther, Bible translation literally exploded. The true church had broken its chains to the great oppressive whore (Rev. 17) and the Spirit of God caused it to start blossoming and expanding. Part of that expansion involved Bible translating. Wycliffe says,

We can rejoice in how God has blessed Bible translation during this last century. In 1900, 522 languages had at least some Scripture. Today more than 2,200 languages have at least some of the Bible in their language (Dr. John Watters, "Vision 2025").

Does God promise that every culture and people will have a perfect Bible? No, there is no promise that this will occur. God's promise is that He will preserve His words. *"The words of the LORD are pure words: as silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times. Thou shalt keep them, O LORD, thou shalt preserve them from this generation for ever"* (Ps. 12:6, 7). We believe God has done that in English and, as we shall see, history will reveal what God has done with other languages. What God *has done* will reveal something about His desire and His plan.

After the close of the New Testament, up to 500 A.D. there were dozens of translations made. By about 150 the Bible had been translated into Syriac (the Peshitta version) and Latin (generally called the Old Latin version or the Itala). Around 170 a man named Tatian published a harmony of the gospels known as the Diatessaron. This was also translated into Syriac. Egyptian versions, known as Coptic, began to appear in several dialects by about the middle of the third century (A.D. 250). Ulfilas, the great missionary to the Goths, translated the Bible into Gothic about 350. The Bible was translated into Armenian after A.D. 400. The Georgian Version was translated for the people in the mountainous region between the Black and Caspian Seas in the middle of the fifth century.

During the Dark Ages, Bible translating slowed down. The Roman Catholic Church desired to keep the Bible out of the hands of the people. Nevertheless, as we have already seen, the Nestorians were busy spreading the Gospel and translating the Bible almost through the entire period. Also, as we know, the Irish missionaries who

spread into Europe translating portions of Scripture.

However, when the Reformation started, Bible translating increased greatly, starting with Martin Luther's translation into German from the newly printed Received Text edited by the great reformed scholar, Desiderius Erasmus. David Cloud has done much research on these translations and offers this summary of the translation work done from 1517 through 1900. I have included brother cloud's comments here, but I have left out most of the specific translations he mentions, because the list is so long.

THE RECEIVED TEXT GOES TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

As we have seen, the King James Bible and its immediate predecessors were based upon the Received Text. In fact, practically all non-Catholic Bible translation and printing work from the 1500s until the late 1800s was based upon the Received Text. Hundreds of translations were produced from the TR during these centuries... Godly missionaries from Europe, Britain, and America carried the Received Text to the ends of the earth by translating it into the languages of the people.

Beginning with John Eliot, who produced the Bible in the Pequot language in 1663, missionaries were busy translating the Scriptures into the languages of the North American Indians. Dutch Protestant missionaries translated the Received Text into the Malay language in 1734. In the 1800s, translations came fast and furious. Henry Martin translated the TR into Persian and Arabic; Adoniram Judson, into Burmese (1835); Though we cannot give the exact particulars of the textual basis for all of these translations, we do know that the vast majority of these were Received Text Scriptures. I know this from correspondence with Bible Society leaders and missionaries, as well as from my personal study of manifold sources, including personal examination of several of the translations referred to above (Slovak, Czech, Carey Nepali, Judson Burmese, German Luther, Russian, and Spanish). Some were translated from the English Authorized Version; some, from the Greek Received Text; some, from important European Received Text versions such as Spanish and German. When we say these were Received Text Bibles, we do not mean that they were exactly like the English King James Bible in every detail, but that they were textually the same as the KJV. They included the words and verses disputed by the modern texts. They contained "God" in 1 Tim. 3:16, for example. They contained Matthew 17:21 and Mark 9:44,46 and Mark 16:9-20 and John 7:53-8:11 and Acts 8:37- and the dozens of other verses which are omitted or questioned in the new Bibles. Please note, too, that in many cases the early Received Text versions in these languages have fallen into disuse and have been replaced in the twentieth century with Westcott-Hort type versions [David Cloud, "Modern Bible Versions," Way of Life, 2000, 25 June 2004, (<http://wayoflife.org/articles/modem.htm>)].

There are 147 foreign translations included in Brother Cloud's list. May I remind the reader that our purpose here is not to have a history lesson, but rather to trace the

footsteps of God in history. This list reveals some mighty steps that God has taken. Why was it in the hearts of God's people to make these translations unless the Spirit of God put it there? Why did God lead His people to go to such an effort to disseminate the word of God around the world? It must be for only one reason. God *wants* His word to be spread around the world, and He wants it not only in a world-wide language (English) that only the well educated can understand (outside an English speaking country), but He wants His word to be available to common poorly educated people in a language that those people can understand: their heart language and mother tongue.

It's hard to imagine how that anyone could miss the point of such a mountain of evidence. We have been looking for the foot prints of God in history and we have found them! There is a consistent history of Bible translation effort among believers from the time of the Apostles until now. The efforts summarized above are still going on.

It is an unavoidable fact that God's people have in their hearts a desire to see God's word spread abroad. Many Christians desire to see the Scripture translated into the worlds languages. Why is this interest and desire there? The answer is obvious. God put it there. Why do you suppose God put this in the hearts of His children? Once again there can only be one answer. God wants all people to be able to read His word in an understandable language. God has led many of His ministers to translate the Scriptures. Why has He done this? Again the answer is the same. *God wants His word to be easily heard and read by anyone in a language they can easily understand!*

Because of the Agencies Doing the work Now

In the last section mention was made that most of the translation work done up until 1900 used the Received (Greek) Text as the source text for New Testament translation. In fact this is probably the case for most translation up until 1940. However, this is definitely *not* the case for translation work done now. The Received Text is the text of the Reformation and of the great missionary period from the 1600's to 1960. It is the traditional text of the true church before and during the entire middle ages. The Received text is responsible for all the great revivals of history and for starting the aforementioned missionary movement which is still going on. If we look at God's foot prints in history as we did in the previous section, it is obvious that God has made a deliberate choice of the traditional Received Text.

There is a rival text and it is different. It has come to us in several forms since the Anglican clergymen, Westcott and Hort, introduced it into the English revision committee of 1881 which produced the Revised Version. Its current popular form is that of the critical Greek text published by the United Bible Societies. We call it the UBS text. It is not my purpose to go into these matters in depth. However, it is necessary that I point out that the UBS text has made over 8000 changes in wording as compared to the Received Text. The UBS editors include both Modernist and Roman Catholic elements. In speaking of history, parts of this text can be traced back to at least A.D. 250. But, there are no foot prints of God on it. It has never been used to bring major revival or great movements of God. God rejected it when it came time to choose a text for the Reformation. He rejected it when it came time to make the greatest translation to ever exist, the King James Bible, in 1611. He rejected it when it came time to start the missionary movement of the Moravians (the 1600's). He rejected it when it came

time to start the greatest missionary movement in history (1790's). It has always been associated with heresy. We can see this in that it is the type of text found in the official Bible of the Roman Catholic Church, the Latin Vulgate, and in all translations approved by the Roman Catholic Church. That church has rejected all versions that come from the Received Text. The UBS type text is behind Good News, the Revised Version, the American Standard Version, the Revised Standard Version, the New American Standard Bible, the New International Version, the Message, The New Century Version and every other modern Bible available. Even the New King James, which supposedly was translated from the Received Text, shows influence from the critical philosophies behind the UBS Text.

Now with that as a background we can launch into our review of the major agencies involved in today's translation efforts. Let me say, though, in the interest of balance, that I am glad that some effort is being made. I am also not evaluating the salvation or spirituality of anyone involved in these organizations, except to examine some of their beliefs and obvious doctrinal preferences. We are looking at methods and principles and practices and beliefs.

Major Agencies

Some of the major agencies making this effort today are:

1. Lutheran Bible Translators
2. Pioneer Bible Translators
3. New Tribes Mission
4. Evangel Bible Translators
5. World Bible Translation Center
6. The Seed Company
7. The International Mission Board (Southern Baptist)
8. Baptist Mid-Missions (Bibles International)
9. Association of Baptists for World Evangelism
10. SIL and Wycliffe Bible Translators
11. United Bible Societies
12. Baptist Bible Translators Institute
13. The Trinitarian Bible Society
14. Graceway Bible Society
15. Bearing Precious Seed
16. First Bible International

In this brief study we can only summarize the methods and principles of these organizations. The first eleven of these all use a Greek New Testament other than the Received Text. This can be readily discerned by an examination of their web sites. Numbers 1-7, 9 and 10 use the UBS text. Number 11, The United Bible Societies, produces that text. Bibles International (No. 8) uses the "Majority Text" which is a third text with about 1000 differences from the Received Text. It seems that the modern desire is to use anything except the text God has approved.

A word about the United Bible Societies is in order here. The UBS text itself lists the editors of that text. An examination of the statements of these men reveal that they

all are liberal in their theology of the Bible. They do not believe that God has preserved His word in as pure a form as He inspired it. There is even some doubt about the quality of the inspiration. One of the editors is Carlo Martini, a Roman Catholic Cardinal. As history proves, the Roman Catholic Church does not desire the pure word of God to be in the hands of the common people. The United Bible Societies is a liberal leaning Catholic compromising apostate organization. Nearly every other translation organization in existence is tied to them in some way.

Another problem is with the quality of the translations. In many cases the translations done are no better than Today's English Version (otherwise known as Good News for Modern Man). This is a liberal watered down version. If it's the best some of these translators can give a needy people, that is truly a sad shame.

Numbers 12 through 16 are all committed to the Received Text and the King James Bible. Unfortunately, none of them are precisely a Bible translating organization. They all will encourage translation and some are equipped to help in translation checking (such as the Trinitarian Bible Society). The only one doing much to recruit translators is The Baptist Bible Translators Institute and they are not a sending agency, but rather a training institution. The rest are involved in various stages of printing and distribution of Bibles. First Bible has been trying to expand translator training in the East.

Conclusion

The picture that has just been painted is not an encouraging one. Most of the mission organizations specifically and explicitly committed to Bible translating are listed above. The first 11 of these organizations promote the use of the UBS Greek Text. They are in fellowship with a corrupt organization that is led by heretics, that compromises and cooperates with false teachers, and provides a Greek Text which is edited by liberals and Catholics and approved by the Roman Catholic Church. Hence, these organizations are, at best, guilty of compromise and, at worst, doing great harm through the quality of the translations they produce and through revising existing faithful translations to be closer to the UBS Text.

This is what is offered to the world. Where are the faithful independent Baptists, who stand firm on the KJB and the Received Text? The faithful organizations listed in 12-16 are not strictly mission agencies. They are mission support organizations. Only one is involved in recruiting of translators. First Bible encourages translation and seeks to partner with translators, but it is still a new organization. It seems that we have been largely absent from this field. In fact, we have nearly totally abandoned the field and left the task of Bible translation to modernists, Catholics and those who cooperate with them.

On the positive side there is some move toward developing translation ministry, but it cannot yet be said to be a general movement among fundamental Baptist churches. There is a Bible Institute training linguists and cross-cultural missionaries (the Baptist Bible Translators Institute). There are publishing organizations. There are churches here and there which are sending their own missionaries without the help of an agency. Also, there are some agencies that may have one or two translator missionaries supported through them. Other Bible believing translator missionaries have probably gone through New Tribes, Wycliffe, or one of the others. Nevertheless,

our efforts have been weak up to now. More, much more, needs to be done