

Theological Implications in Translation

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A well-founded, systematic and Biblical theology is of fundamental importance to the Bible translator. This truth is illustrated by the problems confronting the missionary and especially the missionary translator. Our own experience came from working among the Anuak people, a primitive Nilotic tribe on the borders of Ethiopia in the upper-Nile provinces of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. In a sense it is true to say that a thorough understanding and conviction regarding theological implications in the various concepts of the gospel is equally important for all missionaries whether engaged in translating the Word or not. In either instance we are seeking to interpret the gospel to a non-Christian society. However, the errors of the translator become more embarrassingly apparent because we see the stark reality of them on the printed page. It must be recognized that especially for the translator sound theological training is important because it is his work that will be passed on to succeeding generations in a more or less permanent form.

The very uniqueness of the Christian message makes its interpretation within a non-Christian society so difficult. The gospel calls for new thought patterns to describe it adequately. It becomes difficult to express the gospel within a non-Christian society because we are attempting to describe an entirely new set of relationships between God and man. Within non-Christian religions man stands in a relationship of a "doer" meeting the demands of God. Within the Christian religion God becomes the great "doer", and man is called upon to respond to this "deed" of God with child-like confidence and trust. The translator's consuming passion is to uncover terms or to find ways of expressing this unique phenomenon of the gospel within the framework of a non-Christian thought pattern. Without an accurate translation of the basic concepts which constitute the glory of the gospel the entire presentation of the Christian message breaks down.

For example, if one inaccurately translates the concept "to love" he will run into serious difficulty in getting across the meaning of "sin". Similar difficulties arise with the concept of "forgiveness". At first we were using an idiom meaning "cause your liver to return to the ground". At first glance this would seem to be very excellent because it is an idiom which arose within the culture pattern and made sense to those who used it. Gradually, however, we discovered that basically it always implied anger on the part of the one who was being asked to forgive. It was natural for the native to pray to God in this manner because he believed that God stood ready to curse him with sickness, calamity, or death. When this was his experience, it was natural for him to pray that God, whose liver had risen in anger, would cause his liver to return to the earth. By using this idiom we were doing injustice to the fundamental character of God in relation to man. In seeking to express the concept of God's forgiveness we had to steer between the dangers of God's

passing over sin and not dealing with it, or of his being in a vindictive mood.

For months we wrongly translated the concept "to love". Not only was our translation inadequate, but it was basically inaccurate and false. The term as first given by the informant in response to the missionary's illustrations of "love" was *ayey*. Hundreds of times we used this term to express the meaning of "love", but each time we were saying something that meant other than love. In its central area of meaning the term *ayey* was later discovered to mean "to be in agreement with", "to assent to", "to accept". It was the natural term for the informant to produce in response to the examples, given by the missionary, of the relationship between husband and wife or lover and loved. The informant was thinking in terms of his own culture, and in it the wife stood in an essential relationship of "agreement" to the desires of her husband. Or again, the girl "accepted" the proposal or entreaty by the young man.

To be sure, this term *ayey* had something of the quality of "love" in it, but it always implied a fundamental agreement between subject and object. While the missionary was trying to affirm that God loved the world, he instead was affirming that God stood in an essential relationship of agreement with the world. This fitted well the native thought pattern. For the Anuaks, God is very much a part of the world and the world is very much a part of God, however confused in his mind that relationship might be. To this message the native readily assented.

But when the concept of "sin" was presented, it resulted in confusion in the native's mind. Implicit in the use of the term *ayey* for God's relationship to the world was the complementary teaching that the world had no serious sin problem, or that God had sin in Him, or that God condoned sin. One could not on the one hand affirm that God "agreed" with the world and on the other hand teach the fact of sin and guilt and punishment.

The frightening thing about all of this is that we missionaries were unaware of the real nature of our difficulty. Every time we used this term *ayey* we thought "love" in the sense of our Christian background. But every time the native heard it he thought in terms of the central meaning of this word in his culture. It is a vicious, paradoxical cycle, which can continue for months, or even years, without one's becoming aware of it.

One of the surest ways of checking these basic terms which we use is to produce countless different types of illustrations, with the informant supplying the terms to describe them. In our own situation it was only gradually that the light dawned upon us with respect to this concept "to love". We tried examples such as the following. Suppose I had a dear friend, who became drunk and came with a sharp knife, threatening to kill my son. What could I say to him that might persuade him of my affection for him (i.e. the drunken man) to dissuade him from his evil intent? The informant told us that if we used the term *ayey* for "love", the man would immediately kill the boy because instead of saying, "We love you", we would have said, "We agree with you". To express our affection for him, we should have said, "Our insides are sweet with you".

We used another illustration about a man in prison for murder. We send the man food and a warm blanket. What term will express his feeling about us? The informant again said, "He will say 'Your insides are sweet with me'. He could not say that you love (*ayey*) him, for then you would be one with him in his evil deed".

It is only through using such illustrations that we can hope to get at the real meaning of our terms. Merely to ask for the meaning of certain words is futile because the informant will only perpetuate the errors that we missionaries have taught him.

The cardinal point of this discussion is that in our selection of various terms to express the meaning of the gospel, it is often possible for us to be unconsciously using terms which involve fundamental contradictions to the total teaching of Scripture. In many instances terms will take on added Christian coloring and significance through usage and time. But we must remember that other terms will always convey to the native that central area of meaning which may be in contradiction with gospel teaching. Through illustrations used in preaching, the native will often get the drift of what we are trying to say, but in translation of the text this is obviously impossible. The only thing to do then, it would seem, is to abandon the word and seek out a term which can potentially express the meaning. It is probably this use of illustrations in the early teaching and preaching of the missionary, which prevents the native from totally missing the idea behind the message. I think this in part explains how it is possible to find those who have caught the drift of the gospel in spite of very inadequate translations of the Christian message.

The concept "to believe" is also very interesting and exceedingly important. It is not difficult to get a term to express "intellectual assent to" or "acceptance of". But to get a term that expresses the concept of "to trust in" or "to place confidence in" is another matter. The non-Christian thought pattern is in terms of "agreeing to" or of "accepting" the demands of God upon him. The idea of "placing confidence in" or "trusting in" is an entirely new aspect in describing his relationship to God.

It perhaps should not be surprising to learn that in our area the informant produced the same term for "to believe" as he did for "to love". It was again *ayey*. In using this term, as we had for months, the native meant no more and understood no more than that he "intellectually agreed to" what the missionary affirmed about God. The idea of trust was totally absent. When the native said that he "believed" (*ayey*) in Jesus, he meant little more than that he agreed to what the missionary said about Jesus. He still often looked to his old fetishes and charms for protection against the evils of the Devil and the spirit world, but in "agreeing to Jesus" he expressed a willingness to "take on" Jesus also. In his mind it was essentially a neo-legalism. One set of demands of God was added to another. The uniqueness of the Christian message had been missed.

Again it is this very "novel" character of belief in Christ that makes it so difficult for the missionary to evoke the proper expression for "to believe in" (Greek, *πιστεύω εἰς*) in the New Testament sense of "to be

placing one's confidence or trust in". The native naturally thinks in terms of his own background, which is one with all non-Christians the world over. He thinks in terms of coming into agreement with those things which God expects of him. He has never before heard of God's doing something for him which he could never do for himself. The native exhibits unabashedly the natural reaction of man in his futile attempt to do something to enjoy the favor of the supernatural. The uniqueness of the gospel lies in its glad tidings of God's having done that great "something" in Christ on behalf of sinful man, to which all men are commanded to reorientate themselves (to repent) and in which all are invited to trust with perfect confidence and hope for both time and eternity. Unless the term we use to translate the concept "to believe in" has something of the quality of "to trust in" as well as "intellectually to assent to as being valid", we are failing at a crucial point in presenting the gospel. It would be well if all missionaries and especially the translators would reexamine the present translations of this basic concept to see if they have missed this most fundamental aspect in presenting the uniqueness of the Christian gospel.

Translating the Word of God¹

Pham Xuan Tin

All Protestant missionaries recognize the great importance of translating the Bible into the language of the people to whom they desire to preach the gospel. The Bible does not merely enrich their literature and help them to speak their own language more correctly, but it is also the means God can use to bring them salvation and then build them up in the most holy faith.

I would not dare to pose as a person who knows how to translate the Bible perfectly; but after fourteen years' experience in learning languages and relying upon the Lord's grace and power as I have translated the Scriptures, I have learned that there are many hard things encountered in this work. I thought I would enumerate some of them, trusting that they will prove to be of value to those already engaged in seeking to win the lost or to those whom the Lord may call into His whitened harvest field as translators of the Word.

A Shortage of Words Is Not Unusual

One difficulty encountered in translating the Bible into the languages of the tribes people of Indo-China is that they lack so many words. Not only do these tribes lack words to translate the Scriptures correctly according to the original, but they also lack many ordinary words. What is a missionary to do in such cases? He will be obliged to borrow words either from a nearby tribe, from some tribe closely associated with them,

¹ The article was translated from Vietnamese by Rev. H. H. Hazlett.