

Why Translate the Bible?

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Why translate the Bible? I'd like to give you four reasons for translating the Bible, each more compelling than the first. And I'd like to start with the reason that has moved many Bible translators over the centuries—simply put, because so many don't have it.

There was a student from Southern California who had that thought very much on his heart. After he finished his junior year at Occidental College, he went to Guatemala to give out tracts, to give out Bibles, and to share the gospel. He had a heart for evangelism. What happened was in Guatemala, he met up with some believers and he was giving out Bibles, and they were, it turned out, Guatemalan, but they were Kaqchikel.

The Kaqchikel are one of the larger indigenous groups. There's like 500,000 today. He's doing things with the Kaqchikel believers. He finds out, that most of Kaqchikel don't understand Spanish. They're just buying the things out of interest or curiosity, but they can't fully read them, and the track taking them to be nice, and he starts learning Kaqchikel. Then 10 years later, they actually produced the New Testament in Kaqchikel. That was just the beginning, because this didn't happen last year or 10 years ago. This happened back in the 1920's. They produced the Kaqchikel New Testament in 1930.

The man who was behind this was named William Cameron Townsend. He went on to establish Wycliffe Bible Translators in about 1942. Then what's fascinating is in 1959, they published a book. Do you see the title? You can see that right? **Two Thousand Tongues To Go**, it has a nice sound to it, right? **Two Thousand Tongues To Go**. Now, I mentioned this because in 1959, their work was expanding to different parts of the world. On their best estimate, they had 2000 languages that still needed God's word. Now, the problem is they had just begun to count. They really didn't know how many languages there were.

Today, we know that there are 7,361 languages, so the need is great. I mean, if you wanted something to motivate you, the need, it's really great in terms of how many languages there are in the world and what percentage of those languages would have a Bible? I have the answer here.

What percentage would have a Bible? I'll give you the answer. Someone, tell me. 9% of the world's languages have a Bible. That's 683 languages. Then 21% have a New Testament. The last 80 years, the focus in a lot of translation work has been to get at least a New Testament to the group of people, so a lot of languages have a New Testament, 21%.

Then that leaves the 70% with some have a few portions but most of them have nothing.

There's just an incredible need, but I would say that of all the reasons to translate the Bible, that's the least important. There's something more compelling than just the fact that there's a need. What would that be?

Why translate the Bible? because of what the Bible is itself. That is even more compelling. What is the Bible?

First, it's from God. When you think of 2 Timothy 3:15-17, that all scripture is breathed out by God. We know that from that flows several important doctrines, that the Word of God is inspired. It's inerrant. It's authoritative. All of that follows from being from God, and it's for reproof, for correction, for training and righteousness that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

Another passage that talks about scripture being from God is in 2 Peter 1:20-21. "Knowing this, first of all, that no prophecy of scripture comes from someone's own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit."

This is a book from God and it's for our salvation. 2 Timothy, again, 3:15, "From childhood, you've been acquainted, this is Paul writing to timothy, with the sacred writings which were able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus." The scriptures made Timothy wise for salvation.

The apostle Peter wrote in 1 Peter 1:23, "Since you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable through the living and abiding word of God." Born again, how? Through the living and abiding word of God. It's from God and it's for our salvation.

Then finally, it's for our sanctification. Acts 20:32, we have a record of the apostle Paul's final words with the elders from Ephesus; Paul met with them in Miletus, on the beach, to tell them, "This is the last time I'm going to see you. I'm going to Jerusalem and I'm not coming back, but I want to see you one more time."

They were in tears on the beach there, and he tells them this, "And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified." What does the word do? It's able to build them up and to give them the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

And remember what Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 3, notice that it says that the scriptures is not only breathed out by God, but it's for reproof, correction, training in righteousness that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

From these verses, we see that the word of God equips the "man of God" and every believer for good works, and what is the "every good work" referred to? I think it includes, at least, the four things mentioned just prior, "teaching, reproof, correction, training in righteousness" The Scriptures equip us to do these so that we grow in Christ-likeness, individually and as a body of believers.

When we reflect on what the Bible is, I think we find a very compelling argument for its translation. In fact, this is what motivated John Wycliffe and other English translators.

John Wycliffe, centuries ago said this,

"For as much as the Bible contains Christ, that is all that is necessary for salvation. It is necessary for all men, not for priests alone."

When he says, "it's necessary for all men", he means, "for all men to have and be able to read and understand."

John Wycliffe was a theologian, priest, and evangelist as well. He was a leading figure in the Catholic church in England; he was a professor at Oxford and organized a team of translators. In 1382, his team finished the Bible in English. However, the Pope condemned him; he died in 1384, but his bones were later dug up and burned.

Why would he say not for priests alone? Do you regularly talk about things not being for priests alone? You remember his context. He was an Oxford professor pushing against the Roman Catholic church. At his time, there were two popes and they were fighting with each other. He said, "No, the authority is in the word of God, not in the pope's, in the councils, and salvation is here, not in the priest and in the confession booth." That's what drove him to translate. The scriptures are where we find Christ and salvation.

Then William Tyndale said something comparable 150 years later when he was translating from Greek to English for the very first time, and he produced his translation of the New Testament which fueled the reformation in England. He wrote this in his preface in 1526,

"I have here translated, brethren and sisters most dear and tenderly beloved in Christ, the New Testament, for your spiritual edifying, consolation and solace."

He was clear and forthright about why he was translating. It was because what the Bible is, it is the only true source of spiritual edification and where we find true consolation, true solace.

He and his friends needed this consolation and solace because they were being arrested, tortured, and, in many cases, burned at the stake. There was all kinds of turmoil in England, and his translation would actually fuel it even more but in a good way, because many came to faith through reading the scriptures that he translated.

I would say that's a much more compelling reason. Yes, there needs to be a need. If there was no need, you wouldn't translate, but there's a need because of the compelling nature of what the scriptures are—the word of God. They're what we

need for salvation and sanctification, and so that drives us to meet that need of the people without the scriptures and without the gospel.

Why translate the Bible? There is a third reason that is even more important than these first two—

Until recently, I didn't even think about this more compelling reason because I'm a typical American, and evangelism is about individuals. I think of languages, and then I think of an individual, and I think of that person coming to the Lord, but there's something I'm missing in that very common equation.

because of what the church is! The church has a unique, eternal place in God's plan. Moreover, there is no church without the Scriptures, and the Scriptures without the church do not achieve their purpose.

What is the church? It is the true believers of Christ, purchased by the blood of Christ for the worship of the triune God. The local church is a gathering of believers who meet to worship God and encourage one another.

When the first church met in Jerusalem in Acts, they were devoted to the teaching of the Word. Luke records in Acts 2:42, "They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer."

When the early church faced complaints over the distribution of food, the apostles summoned the believers and instructed them to select seven men to oversee the distribution. The apostles recognized that their ministry of preaching and teaching was so important that they could not take time for other tasks. In Acts 6:4, the apostles told the church, "But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word."

Paul also instructed Timothy to keep the Word central in the worship of the church. In 1 Timothy 4:13, he wrote, "Until I come, give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching." Thus, Timothy and his congregation were to regularly engage in reading, preaching, and teaching the Word.

Furthermore, for reading, preaching, and teaching to truly edify the church, the believers had to have the Scriptures in a language they understood. Paul understood that using a language that no one understood was pointless. In fact, in 1 Corinthians 14:1-26, Paul corrects the Christians in Corinth for their practice of speaking in tongues without an interpretation. He states it is better to say only five understandable words than to speak in a tongue that no one knows, saying in 14:19, "... in the church I desire to speak five words with my mind so that I may instruct others also, rather than ten thousand words in a tongue." He underscores the motivation in 14:26: "Let all things be done for edification."

Is this a new thought, that the church must have the Word in its own language to properly worship God? In 1588, a British theologian by the name of William Whitaker (1547-1595) wrote a book entitled *Disputations on Holy Scripture* (1588); he argues in his book that the church must have the Bible in its own language, the vernacular.

Whitney quote, 245; he gives evidence from the early history of the church; Theodoret of Cyrrhus, in modern-day Turkey (393-457):

"Theodoret, in the fifth book of Therapeutic Discourses, established the same fact in these words: "The Hebrew books were not only translated into the Greek language, but into the Roman tongue also, into the Egyptian, Persian, Indian Armenian, Scythian, and even Sarmatian, or (to say it at once in one word) into all the languages which nations use up to this day."

From these earliest centuries, throughout the Reformation, and today, it remains true that the church exists to worship God through the Word, and believers must have the Scriptures in a language they understand to truly worship God and edify one another.

An incredible need for the Bible exists around the world, in thousands of languages. Yet, as we have seen, that is not the most important and compelling reason for Bible translation. It is because the Scriptures are the Word of God that we translate them, but even that is not the strongest argument for translation.

Even more significant than what the Bible is, is who the Bible is for—the church. We must translate the Bible for the sake of the church. The translation of the Word is one part of the greater work of establishing His kingdom

Yet, there is one more reason which is even more important than these first three, because without this final reason, the others would crumble.

We see this final reason on vivid display in the Apostle John's vision of the throne room of God in Revelations 4-5.

In Revelation 4, John was taken in a vision to heaven. He sees worship around the throne, with angels, elders, and mysterious creatures continually praising God the Father. And no sooner does John take in what he is seeing than an angel proclaims with a voice that halts all worship, "Who is worthy to open the scroll and to break its seals?"

John watches and begins to weep bitterly, because there is no one who can take the scroll. Did he think God's purposes would be thwarted? Did he think there would be no more praise around the throne? But then one of the elders told John to stop crying and, instead, look, because the Lion of Judah, the Root of David, had overcome and could take the scroll!

Then John looks at the throne, but he doesn't see a lion, but rather a lamb—a lamb that looked like it had been slaughtered for sacrifice! The Lamb took the book from God the Father, and immediately heaven burst into praise!

In Rev 5:9-10, the twenty-four elders fell down before Christ and sang, "

Worthy are You to take the scroll and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth."

Then a second song springs up from the thousands upon thousands of angels,
"Worthy is the Lamb that was slain."

Why is the Lamb worthy to open the scroll and receive such praise? Because He was slain. And by His sacrificial death on the cross, He purchased a people for God and has made them a kingdom and priests to God.

In the praises around the throne, we hear of the fulfillment of Christ's commission to his disciples in Matthew 28:18-20. Jesus instructed his disciples to go and make every nation his disciples, baptizing them and teaching them to observe all that He taught. Furthermore, He promised to be with His disciples until the end of the age.

Now, in Revelation 5:9, at the culmination of that age, the Lamb is praised because He purchased for God people from "every tribe and tongue and people and nation" and made them a kingdom and priests. In other words, He is praised because, through the church, His bride, He accomplished His mission by the power of the Spirit for the glory of the Father.

For the church and for each believer, this is the culmination. This is where all is leading – the redeemed nations worshipping around the throne.

And here we find the ultimate reason, the most compelling reason for translation: we translate the Word because the Lamb is worthy!

Worthy of our praise, worthy of our lives, worthy of our faltering efforts to make His infinite greatness known in the finite languages of His redeemed!