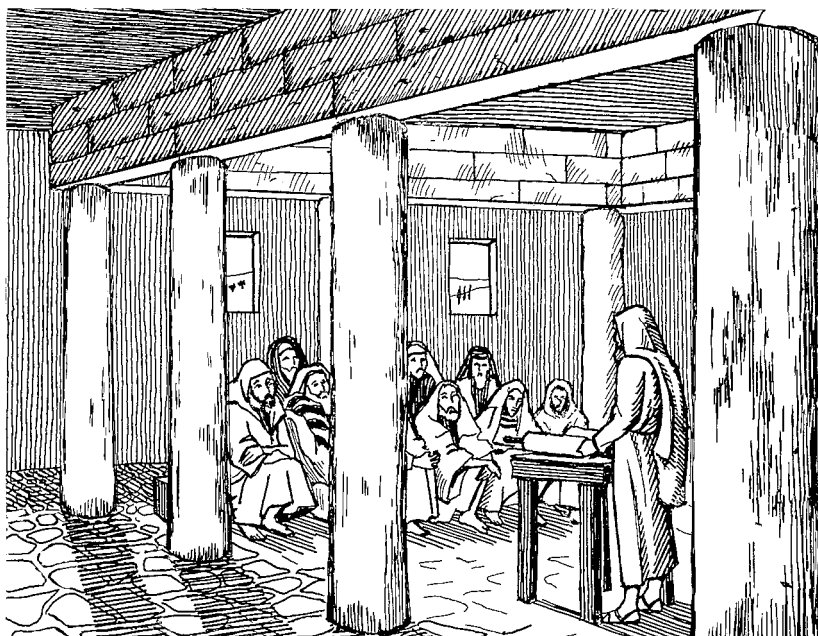


What kind of language does God use?

Is His message intended for everyone?

Charles E. Grimes, Ph.D.



Wycliffe Bible Translators &
Australian Society for Indigenous Languages

2010

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Introduction: are some languages inherently unworthy of use in ministry?

There are some people who have issues with or even strong objections to translating the Christian Scriptures or “doing church” in what they consider “rubbish languages”—ones they consider unworthy or inappropriate for use in worshipping God, who is high and holy and sacred. And because God is high and holy and sacred, people think the language used to worship God should also be high and holy and sacred. Are they right? Or is there a problem with their assumptions?

For some people this view about the language of the church, the Bible, and ministry needing to be high and holy and sacred is reflected in their negative attitudes towards the use of *creole* languages such as Hawai'i Pidgin, Jamaican Creole, Kriol (Northern Australia), Yumplatok (Torres Straits), Kupang Malay (Indonesia), Ambon Malay, Manado Malay, and other pidgins and creoles around the world.

But an even more common view relates to the use of *national* languages versus *local* languages. The feeling by many is that for some unexplainable reason, national languages are somehow inherently more high, holy, sacred, or worthy of having the scriptures and being used in ministry. And local languages are somehow inherently low, common, and unworthy of being used in ministry.

It is the assumptions behind these attitudes that I am addressing in this booklet, in the hopes that many more people can get past some man-made barriers and start to have much more effective spiritual ministries.

God is in the business of transforming lives, changing hearts, giving new values, new perspectives, new thought patterns, and new commitments (*Romans 12:1-2*).

"And so, dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all he has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice—the kind he will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship him. Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect." [NLT]

What this means for ministry is that the message has to reach the heart, not just the head. ***To impact a life, our message must reach the heart.***

What this means for ministries working with multilingual societies, is that to be most effective, they need to understand the benefits and limitations of their *choice of language* in ministry.

Many of us working in multilingual situations find it useful to think of

- 1) the language of *fellowship*, and
- 2) the language of *discipleship*.

The language of *fellowship* is important for interacting with Christians who speak other languages in your own country and around the world. For most people in rural areas, the language of fellowship is their *national language*. This is important for praying and worshipping with Christians from elsewhere, sharing ministry resources and training. It is also useful to become familiar with *international languages* in today's world, such as English or Spanish. There may be many more opportunities and resources available, for example, in English, than in your national language.

But it is also extremely important to keep in mind that the national and international language will never have the same life-changing impact that the *local language*, the mother

tongue, or the language of the heart will have. For language that connects us directly with the heart of God through prayer and the Bible, that impacts the core of our being, our values, and how we see ourselves before God, the local language that we speak every day in our homes and communities is far more effective for a deep and meaningful relationship with God. As one senior church leader said after 40 years in ministry, “The Bible in the national language has *never* touched my heart and gripped my thoughts in the way that this clear translation in my own language has.”

If I am a native speaker of a major language such as English, then the language of fellowship and the language of discipleship can be the same language.

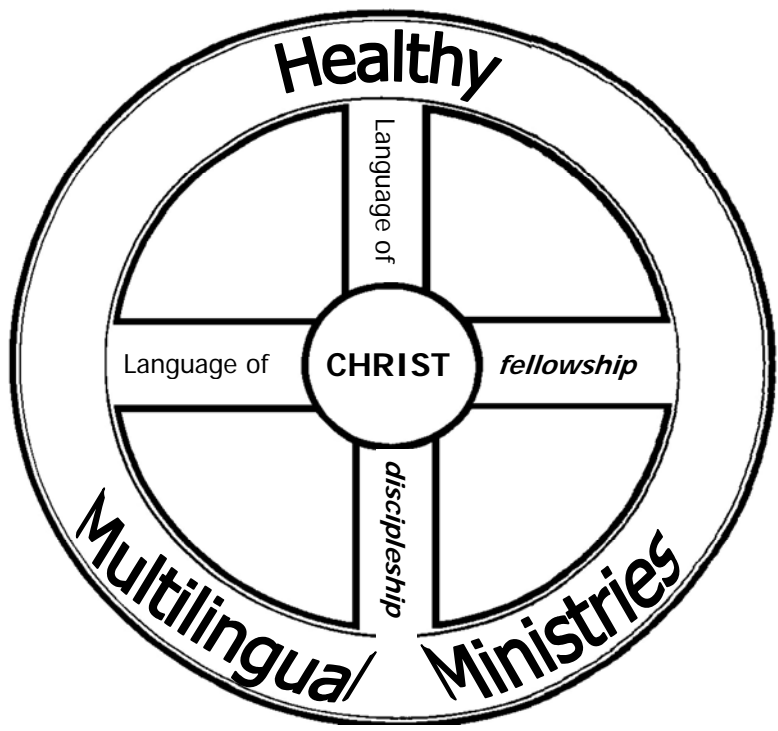
If I am a native speaker of English living or working in Indonesia, then the language of discipleship for me is English, but the language of fellowship should be Indonesian in the national context, and local languages in the local context.

If we reverse that perspective, and make me a native speaker of Amarasi in eastern Indonesia, the language of discipleship for myself and my community of 60,000 speakers is Amarasi, while the language of fellowship to link in with other believers is Indonesian.

If I am a native speaker of English living or working in Mexico, then the language of discipleship for me is English, but the language of fellowship should be Spanish in the national context, and local languages in the local context.

But if we make me a native speaker of Huichol in west central Mexico, the language of discipleship for myself and my community of 20-30,000 speakers is Huichol, while the language of fellowship to link in with other believers is Spanish.

One can illustrate the role of the *language of fellowship* and the *language of discipleship* in multilingual societies and healthy multilingual ministries as follows:



1. Bible translations that don't use sacred language: *(Lessons from ancient times)*

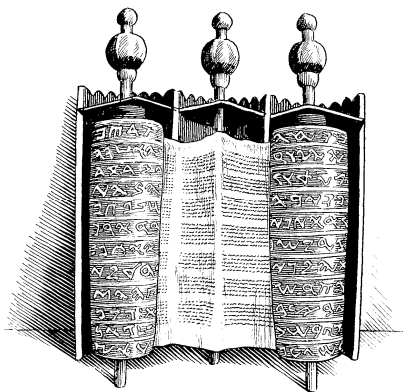
There are some people who have issues with the popular Hawai'i Pidgin translation, *Da Jesus Book*,^a and similar translations in creoles or local languages because they feel these translations use the language of daily life heard on the streets, that they consider to be not 'sacred' or 'holy', nor appropriate for use in church or ministry. Hearing those objections, the Pidgin translation team says "thank you!" for this criticism, because that common language that people speak every day is exactly what they were aiming for. In reality that is the kind of language that most major Bible agencies in the world are aiming for in their translations these days, even in standard English. Perhaps we can learn a few things from church history.

When God gave Moses the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai (around the 14th century BC [=Before Christ]), was the Hebrew language already considered to be sacred, literary, or a language of high status? No! In fact during that time period there were many other languages that had much higher status and were thought to be far superior than this unknown and unrecognised Hebrew language.

For example, there were prestigious languages associated with huge political, cultural, and religious influence to be found in Egypt, Babylon, Akkadia, and elsewhere. The Hebrew people (who later also became known as 'the Jews' or 'the Israelites') were no more than a little-known isolated tribe

^a It has sold over 68,000 copies at the time of writing, and been on the best seller lists in the state of Hawai'i many times. In spite of that, some people are offended that the Bible has been translated into Hawai'i Pidgin, even though it is estimated that around 200,000 of the 600,000 speakers have limited proficiency in standard English.

who lived nomadically, moving from place to place with their herds, whose way of life was more like a simple backwards village than an advanced civilisation. In fact, until the time of Joshua, the Hebrews were a tribe that were not even traditional owners of their own land. Up until Moses' time they had been slaves in Egypt for



several hundred years, on someone else's land. The Hebrew language was despised, just like the people who spoke it.

Scroll written in Hebrew

So it is worth asking, if there were all these other languages available that had more prestige, more influence, were more positively valued, and could have a more strategic impact in a much wider geographical area, then why did God choose to give the Ten Commandments to Moses using Hebrew? Perhaps it is because ***God wanted His people to know Him and to understand His message in the language that reached deep into their hearts.***

After the people of Israel were exiled to Babylon (from the 8th to the 6th centuries BC), the Jews began to use Hebrew less and less, and increasingly used Aramaic for their daily needs, for shopping in the market place, for trading, etc. Aramaic is actually fairly closely related to Hebrew.

Later, when Alexander the Great conquered the countries in the eastern Mediterranean, (4th century BC), the Greek language began to be used widely as the language of inter-ethnic communication, the language of government, the language of education, and the language of trade & commerce. So even though most Jews still in Israel were

speaking Aramaic, those outside of Israel began to use Greek more and more. The problem eventually became that Jews living outside of Israel no longer understood Hebrew, which had begun to become extinct as a spoken language. ***The result was that God's people no longer really understood what God's Word had to say to them!***

Because of that, Jewish religious leaders came to an agreement that there was a need to translate the Holy Jewish Scriptures (that we know today as the “Old Testament”) into the Greek language so that Jews who were spread out over the whole ancient world could understand the contents of God's Word which was so important for all of them.

Actually there were two kinds of Greek. The one is often called “Attic Greek” “literary Greek” or “classical Greek”. That is the language used by the Greek philosophers, such as Aristotle and Plato. The other kind of Greek is often called “Koiné Greek” “common Greek” or “market Greek”. This kind was used widely for everyday communication in homes, in the markets, in commerce, for inter-ethnic communication, etc.

From the years 285-246BC, under pressure from Ptolemy, who wanted to add to the number of books in the library in the city of Alexandria, 72 Jewish religious leaders were commissioned to translate their Scriptures (the Old Testament) into *Koiné Greek*, not into the more literary and elegant Attic Greek. Why did they choose the language considered to be common and for everyday use, and not choose the language considered to be elegant, sacred, high, and literary? It was because they realized the crisis they were facing was a problem of communication and understanding! If religious rituals and other sacred matters were what was in focus, then there was no need for a translation. Sacred rituals can be carried out without understanding, as they are around



A section of the Septuagint

the world today. ***But lives, attitudes and relationships are not going to change if the message from God does not reach the heart.*** If that is what is important, then the ‘high’ language (considered sacred) isn't actually the right language or even the best language for worship and ministry, and isn't going to get the job done effectively.

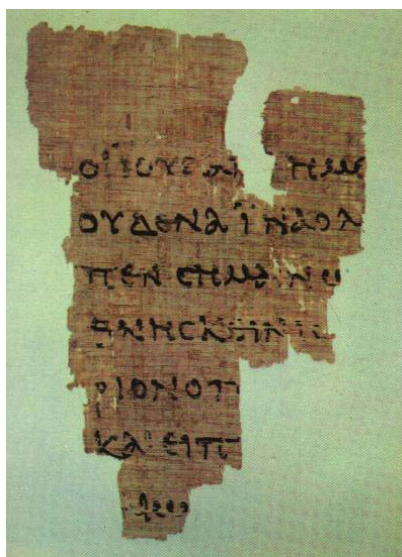
The translation that these Jewish leaders produced is known as the ‘Septuagint’, sometimes indicated by the Roman numerals ‘LXX’ (meaning ‘70’). It is not surprising that many Jews, who were sometimes known in the Old Testament as ‘habitual complainers’, would feel upset and offended that with this Septuagint translation into common Greek, the Word of God had been made into something *ordinary*, rather than preserved as something *holy*. There were Jews at the

time who thought that only the Hebrew language was sacred or holy. Hebrew was obviously the language of God! After all, it was the language He had used to communicate with Abraham and Moses. So they were upset and even angry about the translation of the Scriptures into a common, ordinary, everyday language widely understood by the average person. In spite of their strong objections, the people of God are the ones who benefited from the translation.

As many people know, most of the New Testament was also written in this same 'ordinary' Koiné Greek. There are a few isolated sayings and sentences written in Aramaic, and a few passages considered a bit literary, that are closer to classical Greek (such as 1 Peter).

It is also interesting to note here that in the New Testament there are many quotes from the Old Testament which are taken from the Septuagint (which was considered to be a *translation* from the sacred original into ordinary language that people could understand), not taken from the original Hebrew scriptures.

Why was the Word of God (New Testament) in its original form written in the ordinary everyday language of the common people of that time? And into a language that at the time wasn't even considered to be beautiful,



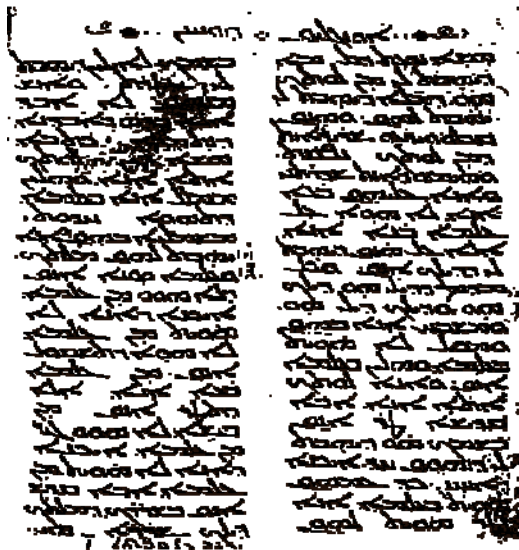
The John Rylands manuscript, considered the oldest writing from the New Testament in Koiné Greek (dated around 120 AD)

literary, or sacred? It was because it was so important for Christian believers of all walks of life to deeply and meaningfully understand the contents of the Word of God so the message from God could influence and change their thoughts, attitudes, relationships and lives.

Before the 27 books of the New Testament were settled and locked in as the Word of God, books and letters written by Matthew, John, Peter, Paul, and others were circulating widely around the Mediterranean region. It wasn't long before the need arose for these letters to be translated into local languages in which there were believers who didn't understand Greek very well.

As an example, in Acts 11:26 we see that the Christian religion had already spread to the city of Antioch in northern Syria. They used a language there that wasn't very different from Aramaic, but it was written using a different script, or different-shaped

letters (like Arabic, Greek, and Hebrew use different scripts from English and from each other). Their language is known by Bible experts as 'Syriac' which was centered around the city of Edessa (which is now in the country of Turkey). It is very close to the Aramaic that Jesus spoke in Galilee.



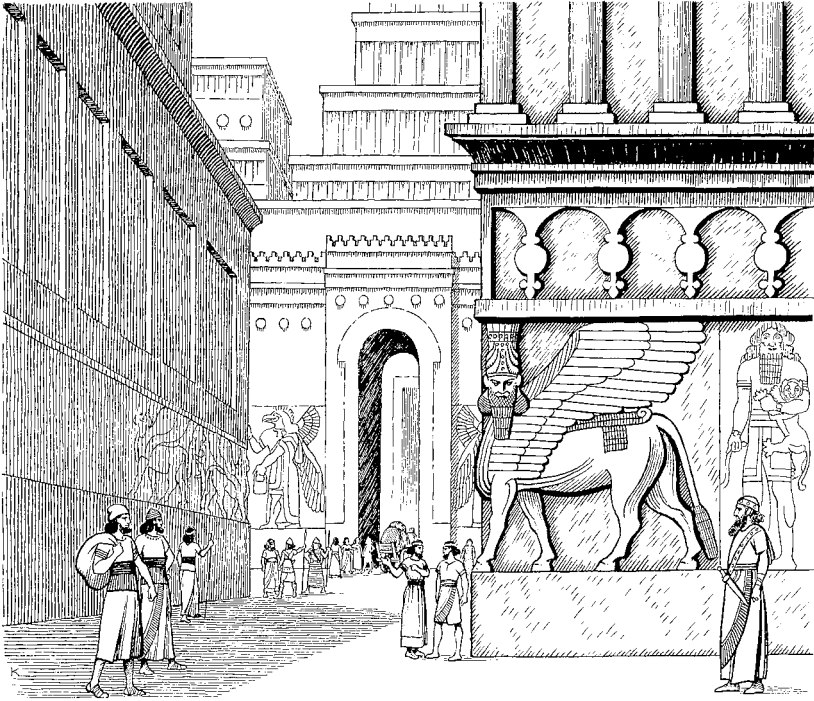
A portion from the Peshitta, an early translation of the New Testament into Syriac

From the years 150-165AD, translations into Syriac of several gospels and other letters began to circulate. Later, the whole New Testament in Syriac became known as the 'Peshitta', which means 'simple' or 'ordinary'. Perhaps there were people who thought that translation used language that was not sacred, and unworthy to be used in church or ministry? Nevertheless, Bible experts these days are all grateful for the existence of this ancient translation that gives us another window into early understanding of the Biblical text.

So we can see from four collections of books from the ancient world that were so important to Christians, that is the Old Testament, the Septuagint, the New Testament itself, and the translation of the New Testament into Syriac, that all use common ordinary language that was initially not considered to be sacred. They didn't use high literary language considered to be appropriate for church or for religion. ***What was most important, was that the people of God had to be able to understand the message of God fully.***

The challenge for you is this: how are you going to help the people in your region who have limited proficiency in the national language, and limited education, but who are fluent in their own language? They need to hear all of God's message in the language that speaks to their heart. For many of them, that is not the national language. Are we going to only minister to the educated élite, and leave everybody else to struggle? Or are we going to have the heart of our Father in heaven, who is the Good Shepherd willing to go after the one lost sheep?

If they only have the Word of God in the national language, then many of them do not have direct access to hearing God speak to them fully. And if your translation uses lots of vocabulary that is not widely understood by everyone, then it is not likely that the next generations will keep using it.



*Ancient Akkadian civilisation
(why did God choose an obscure and despised language called Hebrew?)*

2. Bible translations that don't use sacred language: *(Lessons from the Vulgate)*

There are some people who have issues with common language translations, particularly into creoles or other local vernacular languages, because they feel these translations use the ordinary language of daily life that they consider to not be 'sacred' or 'holy', nor appropriate for use in church or ministry. In the previous chapter we looked at four collections of books from ancient times that are very important to Christians. They were: the Old Testament, the Septuagint, the New Testament itself, and a translation of the New Testament into the Syriac language. We saw that all of them used language that at the time of writing was considered ordinary everyday language that was not considered particularly sacred or prestigious, and didn't use high literary language that was considered sacred—even though they could have!^a ***What was important was that the people of God needed to be able to understand the contents of the Word of God in a deep and meaningful way, so that the message from God could grip their hearts in such a way that their lives, attitudes and relationships could change, and become more like Christ.***

Even though by the 3rd and 4th centuries AD, the Koiné Greek language (ordinary, market Greek) was already widely used in the eastern parts of the Mediterranean, nevertheless in the western parts of the Roman empire (from Italy to Spain, France, Germany, Netherlands, England), the Greek language

^a In the Old Testament the Books of Moses and other books of history are particularly this way. By the time some of the books of poetry were written, there was a clear sense of what made up beautiful literary style. So books such as Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Isaiah, Song of Solomon, and Jeremiah are deliberately and overtly literary.

was not widely used or understood. What was better known in those regions was Latin.

There were actually two types of Latin. There was standard/literary/ancient/classical Latin (like that used by Cicero and Julius



Roman soldiers came from many ethnic backgrounds and ruined 'good' Latin

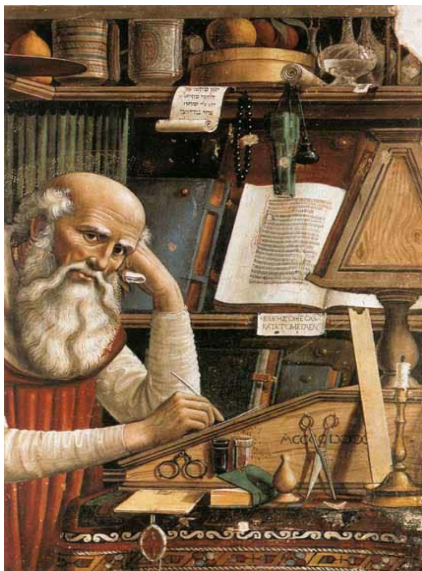
Caesar for their writings), and common ordinary Latin used everywhere by the Roman army and by people outside of Italy. The Roman army was actually made up of mercenaries from all sorts of scattered ethnic groups from around the Roman empire. They created a mixed language that kind of trashed standard or literary Latin, to the point that the type of Latin spoken by Roman soldiers was despised and even called 'dog Latin'.

Because *Pope Damasus* was aware that the New Testament in the original Greek was not very useful or effective in the western parts of the Roman empire, in 385AD he commissioned a Bible scholar named *Jerome* (342-420AD), to translate the Bible into Latin.

Actually there were several translations into Latin already in circulation. For example, we have copies of letters from Tertullian (150-220AD) and Cyprian (±200-258AD), which quote long passages from old Latin versions which were considered quite sacred. These pre-date Jerome's translation.

So why didn't Jerome just revise or improve the Latin translations that were already available? There were two main reasons:

- 1) In Jerome's view, the existing translations were considered to be not very careful and not very systematic when compared with the original Greek and Hebrew texts;
- 2) The existing translations didn't fulfill the requirements set down by the pope to be able to be *understood well* by Christians in the western regions of the empire (Jerome, *Letter 57*).



Jerome translating the Bible into 'vulgar' or ordinary language (Latin)

Because of that, the translation produced by Jerome (finished in 405AD), deliberately chose to use the common ordinary Latin that was widely understood in that region in that time period. That type of Latin was known then as *vulgar* Latin (meaning 'coarse, common, ordinary'). It was not considered sacred. So the Latin translation produced by Jerome is known these days as the *Vulgate* (meaning 'that which has been made coarse; that which has been made common').

In the eastern parts of the Roman empire, the Greek New Testament continued to be used along with the Septuagint. But in the western parts of the empire, the Latin Bible (the Vulgate) was circulated widely. There were also several translations into local languages. Beginning from the 6th

century we see the role of Latin and the Vulgate translation gaining strength and influence, while Greek was being used less and less.

The Vulgate in the Latin language became the dominant translation in church circles for around 1,000 years. There were several revisions done after Jerome, and there were some additions made by editors that were not included by Jerome himself, and were also not based on any Greek manuscripts. (For example, 1 John 5:7b-8 only began to appear in the Vulgate from the 9th century; Carson 1979, Metzger 2001).



*A page from the Vulgate,
translated by Jerome*

What is interesting here is the change in what the church considered to be the mission of the church. In the early centuries, what was considered important was that **Christians needed to understand the contents of the Word of God**, so that His Word along with the Holy Spirit could work in people's hearts. Ministry and efforts to build and equip believers were what was in focus. But after several centuries Latin was no longer used as a spoken language for normal communication by ordinary people. It became a 'high' language revered in the church and in education. After several centuries, the role of Latin had changed significantly!

As an institution, the church really liked using Latin, because it made managing church affairs easy and convenient in several respects. For example, Latin could be used everywhere for training candidates for the priesthood and training other categories of church workers. The same

theology books (for example, those written by Augustine) could be used in Italy, in Spain, and in Ireland. Moving church workers to other regions was also easy. As long as they thought their job was only doing mass, and doing the liturgies for other services, one language could be used for everyone everywhere, even though that language was not very well understood by most Christians anywhere.

But the story of Latin in the church does not end there. In 1962-1965, Pope John XXIII convened the meeting of the Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican. These meetings are of huge significance in the history of the church. One of the decisions, among many, was that it would be good if mass and the Bible were no longer only in Latin, but it was OK to use local languages that people understood well. This decision was based on the awareness that people's lives are not going to change if the message doesn't reach deep into their hearts. So understanding the contents of the Word of God has to be a core mission of all ministries of the church.

Documents from *Dei Verbum*, (the Catholic body charged with dealing with Bible translation) declare that:

- 1) “the Bible should become once again familiar to the Christian people and that it should be a point of reference for its prayer and for its life...”;
- 2) “...Easy access to Sacred Scripture should be provided for all the Christian faithful... since the Word of God should be accessible at all times, the Church by her authority and with maternal concern sees to it that suitable and correct translations are made into different languages, especially from the original texts of the sacred books...”;
- 3) “...The necessity of interconfessional collaboration in the area of Bible translation should also be mentioned

here. *Dei Verbum* gives Catholic Christians the explicit commission to work on Bible translations, and to do so in collaboration with their sisters and brothers of other denominations.”

In addition to that, the 2nd Vatican Council elaborated four things about homilies (or sermons and devotionals) as follows:

- 1) the contents of a homily must be firmly rooted and grounded in the Word of God;
- 2) should preferably be synchronized with the Christian calendar and lectionary readings from the Bible that are available for everyone;
- 3) must proclaim the Gospel of God which is available to everyone on earth (don't just deliver good moral and ethical teachings);
- 4) All of this must be delivered in a language and style that is clear and easy to understand by the average person.

We are confident that Christians from all denominations and persuasions can affirm and applaud these decisions.

What is interesting is that in many places Catholics themselves objected to these decisions, because they now considered Latin (which had formerly been considered vulgar or ordinary) to be a sacred language of special status in the church. And they considered their national and even their own local mother-tongue languages to be inappropriate and unworthy of being used in church. It's pretty ironic when you think about it.

3. Bible translations that don't use sacred language: *(Lessons from the Reformation period)*

There are some people who have issues with common language translations, particularly into creoles or other local vernacular languages, because they feel these translations use the ordinary language of daily life that they consider to not be 'sacred' or 'holy', nor appropriate for use in church or ministry. In previous chapters we have looked at the Old Testament, the Septuagint, the New Testament, a translation of the New Testament into the Syriac language, and the Vulgate Bible in Latin. We've seen that all of them used language that at the time of writing was considered ordinary everyday language that was not considered particularly sacred or prestigious or highly literary.^a What was most important for God's people was for them to meaningfully understand the contents of the Word of God so the message from God could grip their hearts and change their lives, attitudes and relationships to be more like Christ.

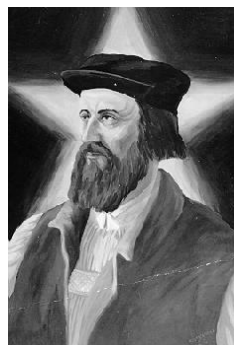
One consequence of the church elevating the Bible and 'doing church' in Latin and not in the languages that were well understood by the people in general was that the understanding of Christians about what they believed became fairly shallow over time. There arose various strange ways of thinking, teachings, and obligatory practices among Christians that were not based on the Word of God. Even more unfortunate was that people didn't even know that what they were doing wasn't based on or in accord with the Word of God.

Even though there were many of God's servants ministering in many places with pure and sincere hearts, nevertheless

^a Parts of the Old Testament are an exception to this, such as Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Solomon and Isaiah,

there were also people who viewed the church as an institution that provided opportunity for them to gain power and wealth. In the world history, this period is known as the 'Dark Ages'. Because many church workers as well as people in general did not know what God's Word actually said, there were no clear criteria for them to know how they could be saved and find new life in Christ. They had no direct access to the Word of God, because during that time period the thinking arose that the Word of God was only for trained priests, not for the general populace.

But for the few who did have direct access to the Word of God there began to arise some different ideas. For example, a priest and lecturer in theology at Oxford, named *John Wycliffe* (1329-1384AD), was able to study the Word of God for himself. From that he saw the teachings of the Lord Jesus, including the great commission, the growth of the church in Acts by people responding to a message they understood, the writings of Paul, and so forth. For Wycliffe, it was clear that the Word of God was intended for



*John Wycliffe
'morning star of the
Reformation'*

- 1) building up the people of God (not for building up an institution), and
- 2) winning over those who didn't yet believe in Christ.

The problem was, if the Bible was in a language that wasn't understood by the ordinary person, and was poorly understood by educated people, how in the world could they grow in their faith? (See also *Romans 10:8-18*). If the Bible was intended only for priests, how could the great commission be fulfilled? So Wycliffe came to the conclusion, "The gospel must reach out to the farms and into the

kitchens, and not reach only as far as the pulpits.” Because of that, he started two programs:

- 1) train his followers to take the Word of God to the villages and farms, using the language people themselves used on a daily basis;
- 2) translate the Word of God into the language of the people (he translated from the Latin Vulgate).



John Wycliffe's translation

But in that time period, the language of the people was despised and looked down on by the elite; it was considered not right for use in church, in philosophy or theology; it was not sacred, and the language was belittled as a rubbish language. During that era, the king of that country used foreign languages (that is, Latin and French) and under no circumstances wanted to know the language of his own people. So, what language was so despised? It was a language called 'English'. This thinking seems kind of funny now.

Two reactions arose toward Wycliffe's programs. The people who were so hungry to know God, to be saved, to grow in Christ, accepted what he was doing everywhere. Many of his fellow priests felt the same as John Wycliffe. But there was a group of priests and bishops who felt that John Wycliffe's ministry, which had begun to influence all of England, was threatening their role and authority in the church as people who controlled the special language of the church (Latin). And they felt it was not at all appropriate to use the language of the people in the ministries of the church. (It seems like this issue is parallel to some of the conflicts between the

Pharisees and Jesus, don't you think?) As a result, John Wycliffe and his followers were hunted down and killed. His translation was banned, confiscated and burned.

In the 14th, 15th, and 16th centuries in Europe, if a mother wanted to teach her children to memorize ‘The Lord's Prayer’ in the language of the home, the language they understood, the punishment for getting caught could be as severe as being burned alive. The risk was pretty big. This happened in England, in France, in Germany and in Switzerland. But in our time looking back, John Wycliffe is known as the “Morning star of the Reformation”, because his thinking and his translation work foreshadowed what was to come.

As a side note, the largest Bible translation organization in the world today took its name from John Wycliffe (according to 2007 statistics, this organization is involved in 73% of all active Bible translation programs in languages around the world). That is, Wycliffe Bible Translators. This organization serves Catholics and Protestants alike.

In 1450 *Gutenberg* made a new invention—the printing press. With this invention, written material was no longer distributed only in the language of the educated élite (that is, Latin and French), but could also be used for spreading information for everyone to read in their own language.

In Germany, there was a lawyer who became a priest and then a lecturer in Biblical studies in a town called Wittenberg. His name was *Martin Luther* (1483-1546AD). In his work he also had opportunity to study the



Gutenberg's printing press enabled Bibles to be printed in large quantities

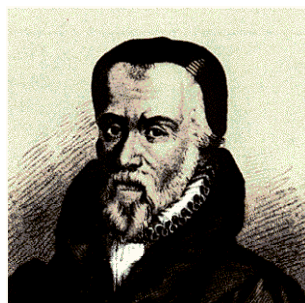
Word of God for himself. Because of that, he became increasingly disturbed by various ways of thinking, teachings, and widespread religious practices that were not grounded in the Word of God. In his ministry among the people he saw many people being tricked into paying money so they could get into heaven.



Martin Luther

That and other practices upset him, and he began to teach and write in the everyday German language that people spoke, instead of using Latin, so that his criticisms of things he felt were wrong could be understood by the people. The more often his superiors in the church objected to what he said, the sharper and more forceful Martin Luther's responses became. Eventually he was forced to flee. Even though he was in hiding, he translated the Bible into the German of the people, which was despised by the educated élite. But Luther said, “The language of the Bible should be the same as the language of a mother speaking to her children.” What is not sacred about this?

In the same time period, in England there was a priest and lecturer in Biblical studies at Oxford, named *William Tyndale* (1494–1536AD). From his experience studying the Bible for himself, he reached the same conclusions as John Wycliffe and Martin Luther. Because of that, he began to translate the Bible into the English commonly spoken at the time (he translated from the Hebrew and Greek texts). His translation was

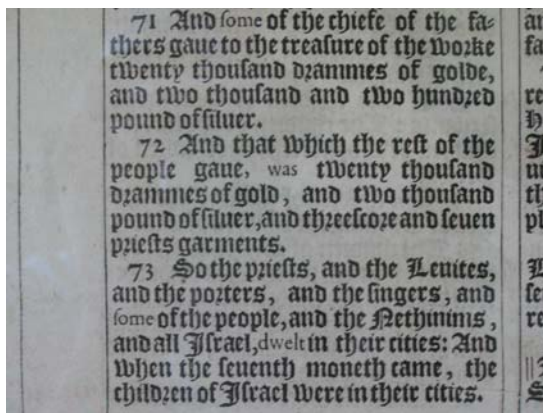


William Tyndale

smuggled into England from the Netherlands in sacks of flour. The people of England received the translation and thousands of people repented and were hungry to grow in Christ. In spite of all this spiritual growth, the higher leaders in the church objected strongly! (Imagine!) Tyndale was hunted down and burned alive.

It's worth noting now that Tyndale's translation of the Bible into English is considered by scholars to be not only very detailed, but also to use very beautiful English. Many of Tyndale's phrases and sentences were preserved in the King James Version (1611AD), and continue to be used in modern English today. But at the time Tyndale was translating, the English language itself was still despised, and felt to be inappropriate for use in church.

If we are honest about the Reformation period, many things were done in the name of 'Christianity' that would not have been pleasing to God, that were at odds with the teachings of the Bible, and that did not reflect the love of God. Protestants did evil things to Catholics. Catholics did evil things to Protestants. Let's not repeat any of that!



*Page from the first printing
of the King James Bible (1611)*

4. Bible translations that don't use sacred language: *(Lessons from modern translations)*

There are some people who have issues with common language translations, particularly into creoles or other local vernacular languages, because they feel these translations use the ordinary language of daily life that they consider to not be 'sacred' or 'holy', nor appropriate for use in church or ministry. In previous chapters we have looked at the Septuagint, the New Testament itself, a translation of the New Testament into the Syriac language, the Latin Vulgate, the translations of Wycliffe and Tyndale into English, and Luther's translation into German. We have seen how each of them used language that, at the time they were being done, was considered ordinary and common, and certainly not sacred. These Bibles did not use language that was considered high and literary, and many thought it was language that was not appropriate for church. ***What was important to the translators was that God's people could understand the Word of God in ways that touched their hearts, so that the message from God could transform their lives, attitudes, and relationships.***

Another way of looking at this, is that there were significant numbers of people who had limited proficiency in the language of the Bibles that were in widespread use in the church, and so *were not being reached and could not grow to maturity in Christ* because of that. Large segments of the church were operating on the assumption that if a few educated elite after years of study could understand the scriptures in major languages, that was good enough for everybody. This attitude of the church stands in stark contrast to Jesus' compassion for the multitudes, concern for poor, disadvantaged, and marginalized people, and command to make disciples of *every* ethnic group (*Matthew 28:18-20*) and preach the gospel "to *every* creature" (*Mark 16:15*).

And we see this attitude continuing on today. We hear, “They should just learn good English.” “They should use version X. It's a literal translation.” Yes, it's one that even people who grew up in the church and are highly educated often have trouble understanding if they take a moment to look at the issue honestly.

Many protestant denominations (such as, Reformed, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Baptist, Assemblies of God, Four Square, Christian & Missionary Alliance, Pentacostal, Salvation Army, etc.) have for a long time understood the principle of needing to understand the message so that lives can be transformed. There are those within the Catholic church that also understand this well. But we often find church leaders up the hierarchy, and right down to the level of local pastor or priest, elder or catechist, who forget themselves and try to force people to only use the Bible in the national language, in the ‘high’ language, in the ‘church’ language, or only use a certain ‘approved’ translation. That's too bad. It is short-sighted, and has already gotten ***off-track from the responsibility for building up the body of Christ*** entrusted to them by God.

Many pastors forget that a certain version is clear to them and rolls off the tongue *because* they have invested years of study in it. But many in their congregation can't understand it, and often tune out when they read the scriptures. Is effective ministry oriented to what actually gets through to the listeners? Or to what is familiar and convenient to the minister?

In recent years there is a broad trend in the church that is very interesting. To understand this trend, we need a little background information.

As the Reformation period began to wane, translations of the Bible in languages that were spoken widely began to appear in many places. For example, the King James Version (1611AD) in English was widely considered 'standard' until the middle of the last century. In the 1500's and 1600's we also got, among others, translations in German (Luther), French, Dutch, Persian, Spanish (Reina Valera), Portuguese (Almeida), Italian, Czech, and Malay (Leijdecker). Many of these translations functioned for a long time as the standard translation among the people who used that language. Some still do in certain circles.

But these days, why is it, in the English-speaking world, according to statistics from the Christian Booksellers Association (2001), that the majority of the church is no longer continuing to use the older King James Version, and are increasingly using other clearer translations? Why is it, in the Spanish-speaking world, many churches are no longer continuing to use the Reina Valera translation, and are increasingly using other translations? Why is it, in the Portuguese-speaking world, many churches are no longer continuing to use the old Almeida translation, and are increasingly using other translations?

There are many reasons, including language change, translation philosophy, a more complete understanding about Greek and Hebrew words, and clearer ideas about what makes a good translation. Words and phrases that used to be considered widely known, may now be considered high language, awkward, archaic (not known or out-of-date), literary, hard to understand, church language not known outside of church circles, and so forth. Many of those outdated translations are also considered by some to be appropriate for pastors and priests with high levels of education, but in reality are difficult for lay people with

average levels of education to understand. In some major languages, if we check carefully, even educated pastors have difficulty understanding the main translation in widespread use in churches.

In the English-speaking world more recently, many of the translations that are considered most useful for personal growth and ministry are the versions that are done with great care to the meaning of the original text by teams of Biblical scholars, linguists, and Bible translation experts into clear and natural modern everyday English. Good translations have also been tested with lay people before they are published to minimize ambiguities, smooth out awkward phrasing, and minimize vocabulary that is not widely known. Translations should not be understood by *only* a few highly educated theologians, priests and pastors, such as happened with some of the older translations in a number of major languages.

So, in the English-speaking world, good recent translations that meet the criteria of being

- a) **accurate** to the *meaning* of the original Hebrew and Greek texts;
- b) meaningful and **clear**;
- c) **natural**, phrased in good English as real people might be found using it;
- d) **audience appropriate**, the sentences and words are widely understood by the average person with an average level of education in the target society.

These include: the New International Version (NIV, 1993), New Living Translation (NLT, 1996, revised 2004), Today's New International Version (TNIV, 2005), and several others.

In the Spanish-speaking world, good recent translations include Nueva Versión Internacional (NVI, 1999), Dios Habla

Hoy/Version Popular (VP, 1994), and a very recent translation, Traducción en Lenguaje Actual (TLA).

In the Portuguese-speaking world, good recent translations include Nova Versão Internacional (NVIP, 2001), and Tradução em Português Corrente (TPC, 1993). And so on in major languages around the world.

And if we look at minority languages around the world, every major Bible translation organization is also trying to balance accuracy to the meaning of the source languages with clear, natural, and modern phrasing in the target language. They are deliberately avoiding archaic and obscure words, and awkward phrasing. Everyone is now trying to avoid the criticism aimed at some English translations that try to preserve the grammatical structure and exact wording of the Greek, while sacrificing both comprehension and accuracy in the process. The criticism says, "It's better Greek than it is English." Oops! Those sorts of translations certainly aren't helpful to people who have had limited contact with the church, limited education or limited ability in standard English. Seriously, ***how can they grow and change their core values of they have real difficulty understanding the message fully?***

According to the testimony of many people in ministry in many Christian denominations and interdenominational para-church organizations, translations that preserve archaic and obscure words, use special words not heard outside the church, and force awkward phrasing that no native speaker would ever use these days, are actually felt to ***block or inhibit growth in Christ and to make ministry more difficult***, rather than be more effective.

But translations like those noted above, that are carefully researched, use words and phrasing that are widely

understood inside and outside the church, are considered to ***facilitate the ministries of the church, to strengthen people in their faith, to better equip the body of Christ, and to empower them to face all sorts of challenges and difficulties***, not as babes in Christ, but as mature adults in Christ who have been equipped to grow and to minister to others.

There are three other issues of interest here.

- a) *level and difficulty* of language used;
- b) confidence and *reliability*;
- c) *sustainability*—the harder it is to understand now, the less likely it will be that future generations will choose to use it if easier options are available.

The first is the *level of language used*. All the translations mentioned above aim for English/Spanish/Portuguese that is around grade 7 at the junior high school level (according to data from the Christian Booksellers Association, 2001). Why? If they aim at high school or university levels (for example as seen in form-based translations such as the KJV, NKJV, ASV, NASB, NASU, NRSV, REB, ESV), it has been shown that language aimed at this level is difficult to use for ministering effectively to broad cross sections of society, such as those found in many church congregations. When the language is ‘high’ and hard to understand for significant groups of people it pushes many to focus more shallowly on merely carrying out religious activities and obligations, and doing good deeds (See *Matthew 6:1-8*), and less deeply on letting God transform their lives and living “the abundant life” in Christ (*John 10:10*).

Educators have formulas (algorithm) for looking at sentence structure, complexity, and word choice, and giving a text a rating of how many years of formal schooling a person needs

to be able to read that text with full understanding. The chart below is adapted from the Christian Booksellers Association (2001).

KJV	12+ ^a
NASB	11
NRSV	10.4
NKJV	9
NIV	7.8
NLT	6.3
CEV	5.4
Message	4.8

Speakers of many minority languages around the world average only 6-7 years of formal education, or even less. So what this means for translating the Bible into these languages, is that if we are modelling our translations on form-based translations such as those on the top half of the chart, our translations are *not appropriate* to our audience. The style and level of a translation such as the NLT is much closer to what we want to aim for. [In fact, to be easily and widely understood by our target societies, we may need to go further than the NLT in repackaging the discourse, unpacking key theological terms, and making some implicit information explicit.]

The second issue relates to *confidence and reliability*. The translations mentioned above all aim to use language that is clear, natural, simple, and widely understood, but because they are also done with great care to detail, these translation

^a The evaluation of the KJV is my own, given the level of archaic vocabulary (e.g. 'straitened in your own bowels' 2 Cor. 6:12), the testing of tertiary level seminary students who were native speakers of English and were raised in the church using the KJV, but who could not explain the meaning of words and phrases from the KJV, and other factors.

are also acknowledged and even preferred by many Bible scholars and other highly educated experts. Many recent commentaries of good repute refer far more often to the NIV, TNIV, and NLT (which are 'meaning-based') than they do to the KJV or the NASB (which are 'form-based'). After examining them carefully (as a Bible translator), we can confidently and honestly say that these meaning-based translations are reliable in reflecting the meaning of the original Hebrew and Greek texts. They do a good job of accurately translating the meaning, not the words.

If God-fearing, Bible-believing brothers and sisters in ministries all over the world are worthy of having scholarly translations that are carefully done, phrased in clear and natural language that people use every day, using words and phrases widely understood both inside and outside the church, reliable in its exegesis (done under the guidance and oversight of a major Bible agency), that is useful for helping people grow in Christ and useful for effective ministry, what about reaching those people in Hawai'i who are native speakers of Hawai'i Pidgin and who have limited abilities in standard English? What's the issue? What's the problem? (Note: some scholars estimate from around 600,000 speakers of Pidgin, as many as 200,000 have limited proficiency in standard English. It's not trivial!) What about the tens of thousands of Kupang Malay speakers who have limited proficiency in formal Indonesian? What about the tens of thousands of Ambon Malay speakers whose heart language is not formal Indonesian? And what about the native speakers of minority languages in your country? Especially the ones who are not being adequately reached by the Bible in the national language.

We would hope that 'high' language that is awkward, archaic, and difficult to understand wouldn't be preserved and

revered simply because someone has labelled it 'sacred'. We would hope that what is meant by the term 'sacred language' isn't simply a term used to excuse the use of high literary phrasing that is rarely used, difficult to understand, and which has little relevance to our lives, values, attitudes, and relationships. We would hope that the labels 'sacred' and 'not sacred' wouldn't be flung around irresponsibly, simply to preserve the status quo, as leverage to resist change, to preserve what is familiar, or to preserve the political power of ritual language specialists in the church! Yes, it's true. Some highly educated church people like to show off how they can use 'high' language. Often subconsciously they have fallen prey to the values in their society that tell them they can get more prestige and influence by showing that they control vocabulary and grammar that the people listening to them don't know or control. Sadly, they have lost sight of the true purposes of ministry and of building up God's people. As one educated church elder complained, "When they use high language like that, all we take home with us is the 'Amen' at the end." How sad!

What book, chapter, and verse did the thinking come from that the language of the Bible should not use ordinary, everyday language that is clear, natural, widely understood, and relevant? Perhaps that kind of thinking is not actually based on Biblical passages and principles, but is based more on cultural values, human ideas about the role of religion, power plays, noise from other religions, and ill-informed rhetoric.

5. Remember Gamaliel's advice

In Acts (chapters 2-11), leaders of the Jewish religion were faced with a problem. Thousands of people desired to know God in a meaningful way; thousands of people were gathering every day to pray together and to study God's Word together. They were receiving teaching that was clear, relevant, applicable, powerful, and authoritative. They heard God's Word in their own language—the language that reached right down and touched their heart. It was more than just an issue of “can they understand it?” They had good healthy relationships with each other. They were helping each other in practical and even generous ways. Many people were spontaneously praising God with a pure heart for what He was doing. It was clear to your average lay person that the Holy Spirit was directly involved in what was going on.

The problem for the leaders of the Jewish religion was that:

- 1) it wasn't them that was initiating and guiding this movement (but according to them, it was just some uneducated people with no authority whatsoever who were behind it); and
- 2) the whole approach, the activities that were going on, and the reactions of so many people were completely outside of their experience. And because it was outside their experience, they assumed there had to be something wrong with it.

Among the leaders of the Jewish religion we see two very different kinds of thinking arise. The dominant one was that this movement was not to be allowed, supported, or even tolerated. It shouldn't be given any opportunity to grow, develop, or spread.

The second way of thinking was quite different, and can be summarized as follows, “What if this movement actually is from God? What if God is the one who is giving a new and fresh opportunity for us to minister to His people in even more effective ways? What if our own understanding about what God wants to do and how He wants to work among His people has been limited up to this point?” What was happening shook them to their core.

So when they arrested Peter and John, and gathered to discuss their case, there were some religious leaders who were so upset they wanted to kill them (5:33). Imagine the irony of that! But there was a well known and well respected Jewish scholar among them named Gamaliel. In fact he's so highly respected that Jews still revere him today. He stood up in the meeting and gave the following advice, (5:38-39):

“So my advice is, leave these men alone. If they are teaching and doing these things merely on their own, it will soon fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop them. You may even find yourselves fighting against God.” [adapted from Kupang Back Translation]

“So, fo dese guys, I tell you wat fo do. Leave um alone! Let um go! Cuz if wat dey do ony come from peopo, goin pau. But if da ting come from God, you no can stop um. You ony goin make one big beef agains God.” (*Da Jesus Book*)

Now, why are we drawing attention to this story here? Well, we've been seeing some things happen in Hawai'i and Kupang that are not all that different. On the one hand it seems like lots of people are reading *Da Jesus Book* in Hawai'i Pidgin (68,000 copies sold at the time of writing) and feeling blessed, gaining a fresh understanding of God and His Word, and growing in Christ.

- Some are saying they are reading a whole book of the Bible through for the first time in their life.

- There are people following reading schedules for reading through the Bible, and finding that reading the Bible systematically in Hawai'i Pidgin and in Kupang is helping them to grow in Christ.
- Some honest people are saying that they can finally understand some of the more difficult books, such as Romans, 1-2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians, and Hebrews.
- Youth are telling their youth group leaders that they can understand *Da Jesus Book* and the Kupang New Testament much better than other translations,
- and if they had that in hand at opportune times they would be better able to communicate to their peers what the Bible is talking about.
- There are those who report that their teenagers, who used to sit oozing boredom when the family read the Bible at the dinner table, now are urging their parents to read from *Da Jesus Book* or the Kupang New Testament.
- There are university students who report that with translations like *Da Jesus Book* and the Kupang New Testament they have more opportunities to talk about the Bible than they did before.
- There are parents who report that their young children love to read these translations over and over, among other things helping improve their reading skills.

Are these things bad? Would it be better if they were not allowed? Is there something dangerous here?

On the other hand, there are also some negative voices and criticisms that have been heard. Some are delivered with pure hearts and reflect the love of God; some are pretty harsh and pretty sharp; some have tried to influence others to not read

Da Jesus Book or the Kupang New Testament, condemning the translation; and some border on slander and perhaps have forgotten that the team that translated it, and the organizations supporting them are also brothers and sisters in Christ with a high view of the Word of God.

We see criticisms falling into several categories. For example, there are people who are not native speakers of Hawai'i Pidgin who criticise *Da Jesus Book* for not using the grammar and word formation strategies of 'good' English. Now if *Da Jesus Book* was supposed to be in standard English, maybe those types of criticisms would have some legitimacy. But *Da Jesus Book* is a translation into Hawai'i Pidgin, not into standard English. Even though both languages are based on English, according to the science of linguistics they are two different languages. There are a number of books, grammars, dictionaries, academic papers, and seminars that have mapped these differences in systematic and scientific detail. Scholars at the University of Hawai'i have been heavily involved in this too. (You can see some of this for yourself in the premier inventory of the world's languages at www.ethnologue.com; the ISO code for Hawai'i Pidgin—also called Hawaii Creole English—is 'hwc', and the code for standard English is 'eng'.) Similarly, people who are not native speakers of Kupang have criticised that translation for not using good Indonesian grammar and vocabulary. Well guess what? Kupang is not Indonesian. Linguistically and socially they are different languages!

Some criticisms make the mistake of 'guilt by association'. What do we mean? Well, they think that because Hawai'i Pidgin is a rubbish language, that therefore *Da Jesus Book* must be a rubbish or sloppy translation, done in an ad hoc way by cowboys in somebody's back yard. Nothing could be farther from the truth. People who have looked into it find it

is actually a very careful and scholarly translation, involving Greek scholars, professional linguists and Bible translators, local pastors, and other local people from many walks of life who are native speakers of Hawai'i Pidgin. The same is true of the Kupang New Testament.

There are criticisms that arise because some people find *Da Jesus Book* to be quite different in style and phrasing than their favorite English translation. It's important to note here (as has already been explained in the Forward to *Da Jesus Book*), that it was not translated from an English Bible (which itself is not the original Scriptures, but a translation), but rather from the meaning of the original Greek texts. So criticizing *Da Jesus Book* on the basis of how it differs from a certain English translation is using ***the wrong measuring stick!*** The right measuring stick is evaluating it against the *meaning* of the Greek, and against what is good, clear, and natural phrasing in Hawai'i Pidgin, following recognized principles of Bible translation. Our suggestion would be that your favorite English translation should also be held up to that same level of scrutiny. When *Da Jesus Book* is systematically compared in detail with the meaning of the original Greek, people can see for themselves how careful and reliable it is. Go ahead! *Da Jesus Book* is actually so carefully done, that there is at least one seminary that uses it for classes on New Testament exegesis.

There are criticisms that do not understand the differences between two fairly different approaches to Bible translation. The two approaches are known as '*form-based translation*' and '*meaning-based translation*'. Briefly, '*form-based translation*' seeks to preserve the structures (or forms) of the original language, and where possible, use the same English or Pidgin word every time a certain Greek word occurs. In practice, this

is not possible to do consistently, and it has been shown that this approach sacrifices meaning, clarity and naturalness, and more importantly it sacrifices accuracy. The sense of the passage is often lost. (See for example, discussion in Fee & Strauss. 2007. *How to choose a translation for all its worth*. Zondervan). 'Meaning-based translation' preserves the *meaning and sense* of the original language texts, even if the grammatical structures, words, and idioms need to be adjusted to how the target language works. ***We translate the meaning, not the words!*** In recent years, all major established Bible translation organizations (including Wycliffe Bible Translators, and the United Bible Societies, among others) follow the principles of 'meaning-based translation'. So if you've got problems with the translation philosophy, don't raise your objections only to the Hawai'i Pidgin translation team, or the Kupang translation team, but to the entire theory and practice of modern Bible translation, the institutions that practice it, the professional journals on Bible translation, the textbooks on Bible translation, etc. Go ahead! But perhaps a more worthy use of your time would be to produce an alternate translation in Hawai'i Pidgin or Kupang, just as carefully researched from the Biblical languages, and just as carefully tested with native speakers, that will do even better to reach people in Hawai'i who have limited abilities in standard English, to help them grow in their faith. Or to reach the people of Kupang who have limited abilities in standard Indonesian, to help them blossom in their relationship and commitment to God.

There are a very few criticisms that make themselves appear to know exactly what the Greek is. But on closer inspection, when those criticisms are compared against mainstream scholarly Greek dictionaries and commentaries widely used in Biblical studies circles, it turns out these criticisms don't

stand up to scrutiny. But *Da Jesus Book* and the Kupang New Testament do, and they have been thoroughly checked over by outside Bible translation consultants, just to make sure they do. Check them out for yourself!

There are criticisms that are not based on facts, apparently attempting to dismiss the legitimacy of the translation. For example, “No ministers were involved in the translation.” The reality is quite different. Ministers from several denominations were involved from the very early stages. So were Bible scholars.

There is one class of criticism we find a bit confusing. Normally, if someone really truly wants to know what's going on, the best way is to ask right at the source. And there have been people who have legitimate questions and approach the translation team to try and understand why a certain passage is worded that way, or a certain phrasing is used for a certain theological concept. That shows integrity and sincerity in pursuit of the truth. But there seem to be other criticisms floating around that are a bit irresponsible both factually and ethically, that haven't approached the translation team. We would hope that it's not more about making a name for oneself than about finding out the truth.

So our suggestion for people who assume there is something inherently wrong with these sorts of translations, is, “Remember Gamaliel's advice.”

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