

TUTORIAL
8.4

Bible translation in church planting

Learners will gain a sense of the level of commitment necessary for doing Bible translation and correlate the importance of translated vernacular Scriptures with effective church planting.

Translation: is it worth the time, effort and sacrifice?

Translating God’s Word into a previously unwritten language requires a serious commitment of painstakingly careful effort over a period of several years.

The Old Testament has over 23,000 verses. The recommended Old Testament portions for a foundational Bible teaching program total about 4,000 verses. The New Testament consists of about 8,000 verses. That means when we are all finished, we could end up translating about 12,000 verses—about one and a half times the volume of the New Testament.

No sacrifice too great

In the sixteenth century, William Tyndale devoted his time and effort to translating God’s Word into the English language. Since translating the Bible into English was outlawed in England, Tyndale went to Germany to work on his translation.

In 1526, the first copies of the newly translated New Testament were smuggled into England. Tyndale then pressed ahead with Old Testament translation, completing the Pentateuch in 1530. In 1535, William Tyndale was betrayed into the hands of the authorities and thrown into prison. In 1536, he was burned at the stake as a heretic.

William Tyndale gave a lot more than just “time” and “effort.” He gave his life to see God’s Word translated into the English language. Many generations of English speakers have benefited greatly from his sacrifice.

It is unlikely that we will be asked to die for the sake of Bible translation. But we should have the same unwavering commitment to making the written Word

of God available to people who have never had access to it in their own language.

Do we appreciate what it means to have the “written Word”?

We who are English speakers have the written Word of God so readily available that we may tend to take it for granted. There are many good translations in English and more are being produced all the time. But for much of the world, it is not that way.

There are about 7,000 *living languages* in the world today.¹ About 22% have translation work in progress. About 13% have at least one BOOK of Scripture. Another 15% have just the New Testament. Another 6% (including English) have entire Bible. And about 44% have a probable translation need—more survey work needs to be done.

Only 1/3 of the world’s languages have some or all of the Bible. That means 66% (2/3) of the world’s language groups still have little or no Scripture.

If we consider the minimum amount of translated Scripture for any given language group to be a complete New Testament, with some Old Testament portions, there is still an urgent need for a translation in about 80% (4/5) of the languages of the world.

Geographic breakdown of the world’s languages

- Europe: 3%
- The Americas: 15% (North & South America)
- Africa: 30%
- Asia: 33%
- Oceania: 19%

Asia and Oceania are often combined and considered as one geographical region. These two regions together account for more than half of the world’s languages—about 52%. That’s not half of the world’s population—it’s half of the world’s languages. It actually accounts well over half of the population because about 60% of the world lives in Asia.

¹ M. Paul Lewis, ed., *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*, 16th ed. (Dallas: SIL International, 2009), www.ethnologue.com.

The “written Word” is God’s chosen means of communication

In ancient times, God communicated His Word orally. Sometimes He spoke directly to individuals; sometimes He communicated through the prophets, giving His message directly to a prophet who would communicate that message to the rest of the people.

Today, however, everything we know about God and His truth comes from His written Word. That is the means God chose for communicating His truth to us, so it makes sense that we should use this same means to pass it on to others.

The basis of a foundational teaching program

In order for a Bible teaching program to be effective, it must be based on a clear translation of God’s Word. The first thing we do in a foundational Bible teaching program is establish the fact that God’s written Word is the underlying authority for everything we teach. It is a trustworthy benchmark that we can always go back to. It contains the eyewitness accounts.

When we did foundational teaching among the Lamogai people of Papua New Guinea, we continually emphasized the fact that God’s Word is the ultimate standard. We reminded them that we were not telling them “our” thinking or someone else’s thinking; we were telling them God’s truth.

We said, “If someone tells you something that lines up with God’s Word, it is true. But if someone tries to tell you something that does *not* line up with God’s Word, it is false.”

The emphasis the Lamogai believers received on the authority of God’s written Word would make it difficult for anyone to come into their area and turn aside any significant number of the believers to false teachings. Obviously, there will always be some on the fringe who could be turned aside, but it is unlikely that would happen to the church as a whole.

God’s Word in written form assures preserved accuracy

If we do not give the target audience God’s Word in written form, what assurance do we have that the message will remain pure after we are gone? Without God’s written Word, the message can drift. God’s written Word needs to be the core of future teaching and outreaches by the churches we plant.

It must be our goal, not just to plant churches, but to plant strong, lasting churches that will perpetuate the Gospel to succeeding generations. If we do

not give them God's Word in a written form in their own language it is less likely that the churches we plant will be "lasting" churches.

Believers feeding themselves

A strong church is made up of strong Christians. We will never have a strong church if the church members are not able to feed themselves spiritually. Bible teaching meetings are important for giving spiritual nourishment to every believer, but it is also important that each believer have the opportunity to feed himself or herself outside of the teaching sessions.

When we taught the Lamogai believers, we continually emphasized to them that the Bible is not just another book—it is the living and powerful Word of God. *"Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God."* We told them that God's Word is our "spiritual food." It helps us to grow spiritually.

I think we all understand this principle, but sometimes we give priority to other things in our lives. Relating this to our physical food, when is the last time you forgot to eat? Have you ever said something like this? *"I don't have time to eat this week. There are too many things going on. Next week, I'll make up for it and take double-sized portions at every meal."*

Or maybe you have said: *"Hey, I have been so busy that I hadn't thought about it, but I just realized I haven't had a bite to eat in three days."* For me that only happens when I'm sick. That's when I can easily forget about eating. I don't want any food.

A person who is healthy and physically active will get hungry. In the same way, a person who is spiritually healthy and spiritually active will have an increased hunger for God's Word.

Another thing that can cause me to have no appetite at mealtime is if I am already full of something else—junk food, for example. If we are full of spiritual junk food, then we won't have much of an appetite for God's Word.

We are abundantly blessed! In the home countries where most of us come from, we have an abundance of food compared to much of the rest of the world. Sometimes we can be very wasteful with our food. Also, in our home countries, God's Word is more available than in many other parts of the world. Let's not waste this precious resource.

We can't expect the individual new believers to feed themselves spiritually if we don't give them God's Word in written form. It must be the conviction of every church planter that we cannot plant lasting, indigenous churches without the written Word of God in the heart language of the target people.



DISCUSSION POINTS

Bible translation in church planting

1. Visualize writing out a *Church Planting Strategy Statement*. Realizing that translation involves a lot of hard work, and there may be pressures to try to do church planting without doing translation, consider this question:

“Why is Bible translation a necessary part of the overall church planting effort?”

As you answer this question, make a list of reasons to be recorded in your written *Strategy Statement*. This list is for you to go back to in the event you consider omitting translation from your church planting effort.