

My God speaks my language

On the cutting edge of Bible translation, by Calvin Edwards

The celebration lasted four hours, a nonstop extravaganza of speeches, dance, video, and awards. It was a high-energy production, appropriate for the remarkable and life-changing achievement it honored.

For me, well, it was an interruption to my work. I was in South Asia to profile one of the largest church-planting ministries in the region* for a major US donor. But I felt like I had been kidnapped (by people with the best of intentions) and taken to a large hall on the ministry campus for this event.

What was being celebrated there, though, was incomparably more important than my work, and I was delighted to be where the action was. This ministry I was evaluating had facilitated the complete translation of the New Testament into 12 minority languages – the “mother tongue” of some obscure people groups mostly hidden away in the foothills of the Himalayas.

Each people group had representatives there. And nothing could contain the enthusiasm, the fervor, the raucous celebration evoked by receiving God’s Word in one’s own language.

As an analyst of ministry and the impact of investments in God’s work around the world, I was intrigued. I was visiting a church-planting organization. Yet, I got caught up in the the dedication of 12 New Testaments this ministry had translated.

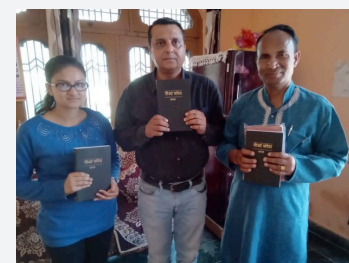
People are amazed when they realize God speaks their language. Now, he is no longer an English god or a Hindu god, he is their God.

Church-centric Bible translation

Translating Scripture into another language is not a task to take lightly. Getting it wrong matters greatly. Eternal consequences are at stake. Plus, it’s a highly technical and labor-intensive task. The Bible has more than three-quarters of a



In the lush, remote valleys of the Himalayan Mountains, 200,000 Jesraj language speakers were blessed to receive the Word of God in their own heart language.



Three believers from Northern India with their Bibles

million words, and every one has to be right. Plus, you need a readable product that conveys the meaning well, including all manner of figures of speech.

So, can a church planting ministry do that?

Traditionally, the answer has been a categorical “no.” Historically, translation experts, biblical scholars, linguists and the like have relocated from the West to live among the speakers of a Bible-less language. At monumental sacrifice and substantial cost, faithful missionaries did what Jesus did when he left heaven for this wayward planet: they moved into the neighborhood that needed the message of salvation. Commonly, this was a 10, 15, or 20-year commitment, starting with learning the target language, and often creating an alphabet for an unwritten language.

That approach to Bible translation accomplished great things for more than a hundred years. Then, about 25 years ago, there was a revolution. Bible translation leaders looked at the languages left to translate and realized it would take too long.

So a new paradigm was created. This modified approach to Bible translation used near-culture people or mother-tongue speakers to do the translation, under the oversight and management of Westerners.

Since many translations had already been completed using the earlier approach, and the church had spread to nearly every region of the world, Bible translation could now be done by people close to the target language. The Seed Company spearheaded this change and provided high-quality technical support to indigenous teams that led the creation of new Bible products that were completed in perhaps 25 percent of the time of the first approach.

A pilot project between four translation ministries – Every Tribe Every Nation, Wycliffe Bible Translators, unfoldingWord, and the South Asia ministry – came to fruition at this amazing dedication.

There was obvious pride among local believers who had done this remarkable task. I was observing the fruit of a third Bible translation paradigm: Church-Centric Bible Translation (CCBT), which is led by the local church.

Once the gospel has gone to a region (such as the 200,000 Jesraj language speakers in the lush, remote valleys of the Himalayans) and small churches are formed, those churches within the language group itself (not Westerners, and not near-culture missionaries) create the Bible translation and manage all aspects of the process themselves.

These believers, keen to reach their neighbors, first heard scripture in a second language, possibly a “trade language” of the area. But now they want the Bible in their own heart language, not the language of outsiders. They seek the Word of

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When Christian neighbors in the local church band together to translate the Bible into their own language, that changes everything. One such language is Serla. I watched as godly folk from this remote community assembled on stage to accept a written and audio copy of the New Testament they had created.

I imagined that this is likely the most significant creative achievement of this community. To translate, with excellence, the sacred Scriptures of the God they have only recently found to their own language must rank amongst the most remarkable accomplishments of this small and unsophisticated community. It had no great literature, no world-class architecture, no award-winning fine art, no inventions yielding global impact, no Nobel Prize winners, no medical breakthroughs.

But they had the New Testament in their own language – a product of their labor, dedication, and skill. With justification, this was an achievement of great moment. It deserved the celebration I saw that day.

Faster and better

Yet, I wondered about quality. Was this product true to God's inspired Word, or may it have taken a left turn? Was it a literary achievement, but one that fell short of sacred scripture?

Translation specialists from seasoned Bible translation agencies like Wycliffe Bible Translators and The Seed Company laid that question to rest when they came forward to be thanked and honored. Revered and loved by those they had worked with, these men and women had ensured that local work did not cut corners or make inadvertent mistakes. Indeed, they declared this product – the result of the efforts of the churches that speak these languages – as good or better than Bible products from other, more traditional approaches.

On the cutting edge of this new era in Bible translation stands unfoldingWord. This ministry is devoted to advancing Church-Centric Bible Translation – and that is exactly how the organization I was visiting was able to achieve its historic results. unfoldingWord provides technology, training, methodologies, and expert assistance, so that indigenous churches without Scripture can faithfully translate the Bible into their local language. They also ensure that every Bible product is “open source,” yielding wide and free access.

Givers interested in Bible translation now have a new approach to consider. CCBT builds on prior translation approaches and captures the capabilities of local

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churches to do translation without heavy reliance on “foreign professionals.” This breakthrough offers advantages to investors in Bible translation:

- People get Bibles decades sooner.
- Hundreds of thousands of dollars are saved, freeing up resources for more projects.
- Local ownership and enthusiasm are generated.
- Creative plans for Bible use and distribution are facilitated.
- Skills, experience, and confidence are built within the church for future service.

It enables a church-planting organization, like the one I was examining, to lead a massive translation effort. Perhaps most important: Churches with their own Bible translations grow and bear fruit. Those without it sometimes die after one generation.

Churches with their own Bible translations grow and bear fruit. Those without it often die after one generation.

Celebration of God’s Word is a praise to God!

The celebration concluded with an exuberant dance by people from the nine-million- member Harla language group, and it drew people throughout the audience to their feet in spontaneous praise to God. Using their cultural dance form, set to an original composition by the pastor, it could have come off a Broadway stage.

I had to return to work, but that celebration was going to continue with similar energy back in 12 communities in the foothills of the mighty Himalayas. The slide on the screen on stage said, “Now, 12 languages will never be without the Word of God.” That changes everything.



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Calvin Edwards & Company is a philanthropy advisory firm in Atlanta, GA. It specializes in research, analysis, and evaluation of ministries to maximize the good of giving. Calvin can be reached at:

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*The ministry featured in this story is headquartered in South Asia and was founded by a team of local professionals committed to missions. You can get in touch and learn more from Steve Hoffman at mail@friendsofagape.org. More about Church-Centric Bible Translation is available at www.ccbt.bible. *unfoldingWord* is based in Orlando, FL and led by David Reeves (david.reeves@unfoldingword.org).*