

## **All Scripture to All People**

From the start, Christian missions has been about preaching and teaching all Scripture to all people. The apostle Paul described this process as declaring “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27). As the Gospel spread to every corner of the world, Christians spent great effort to create and preserve translations of Scripture that would allow the full richness of God’s Word to speak to the young churches that were dotting the map in Africa, Asia, and the Mediterranean. During the Reformation, accessible translations of Scripture were a crucial part of the renewed vitality that European Christianity enjoyed, and this vitality in turn produced a resurgence in missionary zeal. The primary accomplishment of William Carey, the progenitor of the modern missionary movement, was to translate and present Scripture into several Indian dialects; his career was spent primarily tracking down linguistic irregularities and bringing philological discoveries to bear on the translation of the Bible. Were it not for these (ostensibly tedious) efforts, the vibrant Indian Church might never have formed as it has. And as history demonstrates, the vitality that Carey’s translations brought are more the norm than the exception. There is an extremely strong correlation between the vitality of a body of believers and their passion for understanding and declaring the whole counsel of God.

At College Church, we take great care to affirm our faith in all of Scripture as God’s Word, which is able to make us “wise unto salvation through faith in Jesus Christ,” and which we trust God to use in order to make us “equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:15-17). But what we might not realize is that we fit into a larger body of Christians who, for all practical purposes, actually use only a small percentage of Scripture on a

consistent basis. Perhaps the most damaging evidence in this regard is the popularity of miniature Bibles that might be construed as stripped down versions of the large thing one carries to Church on Sundays, designed to preserve only the most necessary parts of Scripture for the busy or spiritually discouraged Christian. Quite often, this means eliminating the entire Old Testament (save Psalms and Proverbs), or in some cases, even more (e.g., the 100-Minute Bible, recently released by a British publisher hoping to stem steep declines in church attendance). Of course, there is nothing pernicious about these abridgments in themselves, since they clearly have uses in certain limited contexts. The problem occurs when we confuse the abbreviated version with the real thing, tacitly revealing our failure to believe that the *whole* counsel of God is worth our while.

Given our tendency to abbreviate and limit our own reading of Scripture, it should come as no surprise that we can sometimes resist the God-given task of declaring (and translating) *all* of God's Word for others. Would it not be far more efficient for us to translate key sections of Scripture (such as the book of Romans or the key moments of creation, fall, and redemption in Christ) for each remaining people group? Indeed, it can be tempting to pursue such a strategy when we examine the facts. An estimated 200 million people from over 2,000 language communities lack even a portion of the Bible in their language, and only 438 language communities (out of almost 7,000 languages total) have the entire Bible in a language that they can understand ([www.wycliffe.org](http://www.wycliffe.org)). Faced with these staggering statistics, even William Carey would surely have been tempted to discard any aspirations to translate and declare "all Scripture to all people."

So why are we so hung up on this idea? Is it not, after all, an aspiration that, in spite of our best intentions, will always go unfulfilled no matter how hard we try? And

could we not even argue that pursuing such a gargantuan goal is actually a poor use of resources? Surely the number of man-hours required for translating the whole Bible into each language could be used far more effectively doing evangelism with a small quiver of verses specially translated for each context!

We already alluded to the first answer to this question above. A cursory observation of the Church's history shows that when passion for the translation and declaration of Scripture in all of its fullness burns strong, the Church is more likely to flourish. This applies both to established believing communities in 'sending' nations, and to new communities in 'receiving' nations. In fact, there seems to be a circular motion at work: when believers become passionate enough about Scripture to study it and proclaim it, God forms new communities that are likewise deeply committed to His Word. Over time, these new communities reinforce and help to sustain the original 'sending communities' by helping them to hear the parts of Scripture that they may have initially not heard, completing the circle and producing a more vibrant and balanced global body. By contrast, when we limit our missionary message from the outset, we limit God's ability to speak through our global counterparts the correcting, convicting truth that we so desperately need. In short, we need to share the whole of Scripture with all of God's people for our own spiritual wellbeing, and we can only neglect whole-Bible translation and study at our own peril.

In addition to our own spiritual health, translating and declaring all Scripture to all people is a necessary part of our calling to care for the spiritual health of our global partners. A crucial part of the missionary task is entrusting our knowledge of the "whole counsel of God" to faithful people who can then share it with others (Acts 20:13-38, 2

Tim 2:2). This ministry of equipping the leaders of the future is the key to sustained Christian involvement in any particular area of the world, and is an especially important task at this moment in time, as the role of expatriate missionaries is increasingly narrowed. In short, excellent theological education is virtually impossible without a whole Bible, and healthy church movements can only be sustained by excellent theological education.

So we need the whole Bible both for our health and for the health of our brothers and sisters elsewhere. But about two thirds of the Bible is the Old Testament, and many might question the importance of translating and declaring this particular, voluminous, section of Scripture, full of out-of-date laws, repetitive stories, and endless genealogies. But to abandon the Old Testament, long and ‘boring’ narratives and all, would likewise be a major mistake with the potential to dethrone Christ and dampen the growth of the Church. First and foremost, without the whole Old Testament, we cannot understand who Jesus is or even what the good news of the Gospel is about. As Dr. Daniel Block has put it, “the world needs the Old Testament to understand the Gospel because without it, Jesus is little more than a phantom that just appears.” Of course, it is not just the Gospels that we will misunderstand without the Old Testament. How are we to understand the office of apostle without understanding any knowledge of the Old Testament prophets? And how would we understand the nature of the epistles without the background of prophetic critique and exposition first set forth in the Old Testament? It is only in the Old Testament that we learn that Israel is God’s first agent of redemption in the world, and that God is in the process of undoing the effects of sin throughout creation. Without this crucial backstory, we will misunderstand and mis-communicate the Gospel every time.

Beyond distorting Jesus' identity, Dr. Block also points out that when we ignore the Old Testament (especially the long, narrative sections of it) we leave out the part of Scripture that often speaks most immediately to non-believers and believers in non-Western contexts. As historian Philip Jenkins has also noted in his recent book, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South*, the similarities between many African communities and the ancient Near Eastern communities described in the Old Testament are quite palpable, and this resonance represents a crucial opportunity for Christians to reach out to their neighbors by using the Old Testament's stories. In addition to cultural proximity to the Old Testament, Dr. Block also highlights the importance of capitalizing on the narrative section of our Bible when sharing the Gospel in cultures with an affinity for story. In this sense, the Old Testament, in spite of its length and the expense we may incur to translate it, may very well be our greatest asset!

In Luke 4:1-13, Luke tells the story of Jesus' temptation in the desert. What is notable about this account for our purposes is not simply the fact that Jesus appeals to Scripture consistently to avoid sin, but that this story would make little sense without the "whole counsel of God" that we so often take for granted. Without the story of Adam (who is mentioned right before this story, incidentally), how could we understand that Jesus is to be a 'second' Adam? Without a knowledge of the tempting serpent in the garden, how could we understand fully who is tempting Jesus and why he is doing so? Without any knowledge of the Garden of Eden, which was perfectly abundant but was still the site of the fall of humanity, how could we appreciate the magnitude of Jesus' accomplishment, succeeding where Adam failed although He was in the wilderness and in need of food? And without the story of Israel wandering in the wilderness, could we

appreciate appropriately the notion that Jesus is the new Israel, continuing God's plan of redemption in a new way?

As we humbly approach the task that God has given us, let's recommit ourselves to the task of translating, declaring, and teaching all Scripture to all people. Only then can we say that we believe what Jesus and Moses declared: we do not live by bread alone but by *every* word of God (Luke 4:4).