

Integrative Paper

The cultural and linguistic translatability of the gospel stands out as a major theme in the field of missiology, especially when studying the history of missions onward from the nineteenth century. In regard to religion, translatability refers to the ability of the said religion to cross over to other cultures and languages. Timothy Tennent describes the Incarnation as the ultimate example of what Christians call the translatability of the gospel. "In this context," says Tennent "the translatability of the gospel refers to the ability of the gospel to be articulated, received, appropriated, and reproduced into a potentially infinite number of cultural contexts."¹ Tennent remarks that Christianity is the only major world religion whose primary source documents are in a language other than that of its founder (i.e. the N.T. Text are in Koine Greek, and not the language of Jesus, i.e. Hebrew and Aramaic) which speaks to the *linguistic translatability* of the Christian message.² Additionally, the "linguistic translatability of the Scriptures provides the foundation for the full cultural and theological translatability of the Christian message" as the Word becomes a natural witness to a new believing community and other of their particular culture.³

Cultural translatability as it relates to Christianity is best captured by the practice of contextualization (i.e. translating and adapting the communication and ministry of the gospel to a particular culture). Missiologist Andrew Walls is quoted, saying "when God in Christ became man, Divinity was translated into humanity, as though humanity were a receptor language." The Incarnation is the ultimate premise for theological translatability; moreover, it is the chief testimony to how God contextualizes His gospel to a particular people group. Jesus embodied his Jewishness and the

¹ Timothy C. Tennent. *Invitations to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-first Century*. Grand Rapids, MI : Kregel Publications, 2010. (325)

² Ibid, 85

³ Ibid, 268

sensibilities of the larger Hellenistic society in his life and earthly ministry. Christ preached a gospel that crossed over cultural, ethnic, social and class barriers.

This integrative paper will further discuss the theme of translatability in the *missio dei* as revealed in the Scriptures translatability in the *mission dei* as revealed in the Scriptures, in Church history, and its role in the Global church today. This brief essay intends to reflect what Tennent calls the “infinite transferability of the gospel in all of the real and specific historical contexts and narratives that make up our world.”

First, we must go to the Scriptures for a basis and understanding of the translatability of Christianity. God reveals himself in Scripture as *transcendent* and *immanent* God as he is distinct from all creation but is intimately and constantly at work within creation. God took delight in creating humanity (Gen 1:26-27) and concerns himself with the well-being of his chief creation (Ps 8:4-6). Once humanity fell, we fell under the wrath of God; our relationship with him became estranged as Adam broke fellowship with God through breaking his covenant with God (Gen 3:6-19; Rom 5:12). In his judgment of humankind, God shows his mercy and grace to us by revealing his plan redemption plan of sending his Son, Jesus Christ, as the “offspring” of Eve (Gen 1:15) to redeem humanity and establish his New Creation. This promise to *redeem* humanity by the sending of a *redeemer* is at the heart of the *missio dei* or mission of God.

Even through the spread and escalation of sin throughout the earth (i.e. Cain and Abel (Gen. 4:1-16); the sons of God and the daughters of man (Gen 6:1-4); the flood (6:5-9:19); and Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1-9)) God’s kept his plan to reach all the nations by entering into covenants with Noah (Gen 9:9-13) and Abraham (Gen. 12:3, 18:18, 22:18). In the Abrahamic covenant we see God’s *sending principle* by commissioning Abraham to Go from his country to a new land in order to fulfill the mission God had for him (Gen 12:1-3; 22:18). The promised blessing to Abraham’s physical descendants extends to the spiritual children of Abraham who are his sons and daughters through faith (Gal. 3:6-9,26-29; Roman 4:16-19).” The Abrahamic covenant *reveals* God’s heart for all nations. Kaiser points to the representatives of Gentiles that are in the O.T. that are including in God’s mission such as “Melchizedek,

Jethro, the mixed multitude of Egyptians that went up out of Egypt with the Israelites, Balaam, Rahab, Ruth, the widow at Zarephath, and many others like them who responded through the preaching of prophets.” We see the Father’s heart for the Gentiles in the O.T. and its full realization of his plan for the Gentiles in Acts.

The transability of the special revelation of God to other cultures and language is reflected in Israel’s incorporation of gentile believers into its ingathering — Mosaic injunctions for the inclusion of foreigners into the religious life of Israel (Ex 12:48; 22:21; Num 9:14) the inclusion of Rehab and her family and the inclusion of Ruth the Moabite — but is fully realized upon the Incarnation of Jesus and spread of Christianity in the New Testament.

Hunsberger, states that “the gospel functions as the interpretive matrix within which the received biblical tradition is brought into critical conversation with a particular human context.” Hunsberger, also cites the missiologist Brownson in claiming that “the mode in which God is present among the faithful is irreducibly multicultural.” In his reflection on Brownson’s concept of the “interpretive matrix,”

Hunsberger shares:

In the dynamic of expressing the tradition in each unique place, the gospel functions as the interpretive matrix, “the implicit set of rules that govern the way tradition is brought to bear in a particular context”. The gospel, he takes it, is most fundamentally the good news that “in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God has revealed the completion of a saving purpose for the world, to be received by faith”. As told to us in the New Testament, the gospel exhibits the following structural features. It summons to allegiance and decision. (It makes a claim.) It presupposes a public horizon and universal scope. (It presents itself as world news.) It regards death and resurrection as paradigmatic. (It opens up a way.) These function as criteria that must guide every fresh interpretation of biblical message anywhere and at any time.⁴

In the Incarnation, the “Word and the world meet, time and eternity intersect, and transcendence and immanence find common ground. Incarnation, therefore, represents God’s embrace of human culture.”⁵

Jesus’ command to make disciples of “all nations” in Matthew 28:18-20 is a call to “social and ethnic groupings of peoples” and echoes language found in the Abrahamic covenant, “whereby God promises to

⁴ George R. Hunsberger. “Proposals for a Missional Hermeneutic: Mapping a Conversation.” *Missiology: An International Review*, Vol. XXXIX, no. 3, July. (316-317)

⁵ Tennent, 180-81

extend blessings to all the ‘extended families’ or ‘ethnic groups’ of the world.”⁶ Matthew 28:18-20 is call to “cross cultural” ministry to Gentiles reiterated in the Gospels of Mark, Luke and John and the rest of the New Testament. For example, Luke-Acts is written with a Gentile audience in mind. Luke “emphasizes Jesus’ interactions with Gentiles, with women, with the poor, and with others like tax collectors and Samaritans who marginalized.”⁷ Christ preached an enculturated gospel that spoke directly to the cultural, social and ethnic backgrounds of his hearers. On the day of Pentecost, as the Holy Spirit came and filled the disciples with tongues of fire, the gospel message was translated into multiple languages to “God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven” (Acts 2:1-13). We see both the *cultural* and *linguistic* translatability of the good news at work in Acts 8:5-13 when Philip—who is comes from a Hellenistic background and whose first language is Greek—takes the gospel to “the city of Samaria,” which at the time was a pagan Greek city where the majority of the people were actually Greeks. Implying that Paul takes on the same enculturated approach as Christ, Wagner concludes that the:

“... complex and dynamic interrelationship of scripture, theology, and mission within a particular cultural and historical context is nowhere more evident than in Paul's re-telling of Israel's story in Romans 9-11— Paul revises the scriptural story to give Gentiles a prominent part in the drama of Israel's restoration. In so doing, he even goes so far as to cast Gentiles in a role originally written for Israel.”⁸

The Jerusalem Council, as recorded in Acts 15, debates the terms of Gentile entry into the church and decides “in favor of *one* body of Christ but *multiple* cultures and lifestyles within the broad parameters of Christians morality. In short, the church embraced the cultural translatability of the gospel, opening the door to a potentially infinite number of cultural expressions that could all be authentically Christian.”⁹

Like the Incarnation, Christianity takes is embedded in the historical context, cultural, and linguistic context of its adherents. African missiologist, Kwame Bediako, views *mission* as the driving force or “logic” that shapes Christian history and produces theology. Bediako states that mission engenders theology, which in turn, should sustain missions; as a result, there exist “a

⁶ Tennent, 139

⁷ Ibid, 143

⁸ Hunsberger, 318

⁹ Tennent, 233

symbiotic relationship between mission as “cultural crossing” and theology as the process whereby the faith appropriated is lived, embodied and communicated.”¹⁰ From its inception, the spread of Gospel was “multidirectional” as it spread all throughout Asia minor, went east to India, west to Europe and south to Northern Africa. St. Augustine’s mission to the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms in 596 and Alopen’s Nestorian Mission to China in 635 demonstrate a commitment to three principles of cultural translatability still used by Christian missionaries today: 1) principle of *adaptation* in relation to cultural forms; 2) the principle of *exchange* in relation to pagan or non-Christian religious practices; and 3) the principle of *gradual transformation*, which means allowing the Holy Spirit to work in the lives of new believers.”¹¹

Yale historian Lamin Sanneh argues that missions in the early modern period functioned predominately as “missions as translation” in which missionaries learned the local languages of an unreached group and sought to successfully indigenize the gospel. In the same time period, the Scriptures were translated into the “vulgar” languages of European Christians initiated by Protestant reformers who understood the empowering impact of Bibles translated into a believer’s native language. Tennent affirms this point in his analysis of Protestant missionary efforts during 1792-1910 in which “Bible translations became a powerful tool of cultural affirmation and indigenous identity” claiming it “stirred ethnic consciousness, providing a linguistic base that nurtured nationalism and empowered local cultural agents.”¹²

The cultural and linguistic translatability of the gospel has proven to be a pivotal factor in the rapid growth of the Global church from 1910 to present day. The 1910 World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh set a vision for world evangelism and set the course for protestant missions in the twentieth century. One hundred years following Edinburgh, the center of Christianity has shifted from Western society to the Majority world. The church today looks closer to Jesus multi-ethnic bride

¹⁰ Kwame Bediako. “The Emergence of World Christianity and the Remaking of Theology.” *Nagel Institute, Calvin College 19 July 2007*. (6)

¹¹ Tennent, 239

¹² *Ibid*, 267

revealed to John while on the island of Patmos (Rev 5:9-10; 21:1-2). The church is thriving in regions of the world that at the time of the Edinburgh conference were largely unreached. Most remarkable about Christianity's global expansion is how it is driven primarily by indigenous agency. In his analysis on the development theology in the Global South, Bediako finds that "in general, Christian expansion has taken place in the midst of other religious faiths, compelling Christian thought to establish its categories in the interface of Christian convictions on the one hand, and the local alternatives, on the other. In the midst of other faiths, Jesus remains Lord, and gospel distinctives do not have to be imposed or surrendered, as one is so often tempted to do in a Western setting."¹³ We may sooner find answers for the challenges facing Christianity in the West from the Majority World — where tools of cultural and linguistic transability are succeeding — than from theological reflection centered on western culture and theology.

As cities continue to attract migrants from all over the world the need for gospel translatability has never been more critical to the church than it is today. For people living in urban context, many unreached people groups of every ethnicity are becoming ever more a part of our cities, neighborhood and the workspace. As part of a globalized society, contextualizing the gospel into the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the people we minister to will be vital for to church and its success as it endeavors to fulfill God's call to missions.

¹³ Bediako, 11