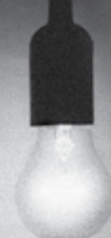


TOUGH CHOICES:

WITHOUT A BIBLE, BUT WITH A CHURCH OR WITHOUT A CHURCH BUT WITH A BIBLE?



GREG PARSONS
/ GLOBAL DIRECTOR,
U.S. CENTER FOR
WORLD MISSION

I have a friend from high school who worked in SIL's literacy program in South America. He had the privilege helping many among the people group to which he was assigned to develop a deepening understanding of the Bible

and seeing that understanding impact the lives of many people. But during this same time period, another worker from my home church labored for years with a Native American group in northern Canada. Eventually they had the New Testament in their language, but there was no response. I vividly recall this missionary coming back to the church and sharing. It was not the kind of story you would highlight for "missions week." His story was the story no Bible translator wanted: nothing happened. The people were (are now?) still in sin and living painfully difficult and tragic lives that resisted the Word they so desperately needed.

As I reflected on the difference between these two stories I was reminded of a conversation I had back in the 1980s at a conference I attended in the Philippines. Back in those days I worked in our Frontier

Media Productions department and produced a low-budget video series called "Mission Update." I attended this particular conference so I could film some interviews with experienced mission leaders who were in attendance. One of those interviews was with a highly respected and well-known international leader of Wycliffe Bible Translators. What he told me stopped me in my tracks: 85% of the translations Wycliffe was working on were for people groups (usually "tribes") that already had a church. That means that only 15% of their translation projects were among people groups without a church or a Christian presence. I have been told these figures are nearly the same now—or possibly even more disparate!


Here is my point: As much as people need access to God's Word, the vast majority of the world's unreached populations—even those with completed translations—have yet to hear and understand a clear message of God's saving and transforming grace through Christ. There are so many that have the Word but do not have a viable church.

Consider Bihar. This one state in India includes 105 million people. That is about one-third of the population of the entire U.S. living in a land that is about the size of the state of Michigan. It has been a place where workers go but do not stay—the so-called "graveyard of missions." It has Bibles in a number of its most common languages.

Bengali, Hindi and Urdu alone cover approximately 95 million people in this state.

So, the task there is not mainly a translation task—they have the Word. But there remain massive human and spiritual needs. Here's the good news: God has been moving brothers and sisters to go there, and things are beginning to shift. But they need our prayers and support!

We must pray for, invest in, and work towards Bible translation efforts. But we must also pray for, invest in, and work towards impact from the transforming power of the Word. In many places, newer translations may be what are needed—as languages continually change and translation techniques and tools are improved. Pray for this especially among the unreached peoples in places like South Asia.

A Bible translation is an amazing and necessary tool—be it for print or for oral use. But seeing the Word impact every people is the "coalface" of the great commission. This is not an either or choice. There must be both a Bible and a church in "every tribe and language and people and nation." (Rev. 5:9, NIV) Will you pray with me to this end? 

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