

16 The English Language and the Word of God

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I have found the chapters in this part of the book elaborate and thoughtful, and the authors did a very good job outlining the intricacy of an issue that is inherently complex for at least two main reasons: on the one hand, it involves the interface between worldly and spiritual goals, ambitions, and standards, thereby touching upon some of the most fundamental questions of faith and human existence. On the other hand, it also concerns the uncomfortable association of both the Christian faith and the English language with some of the wealthiest and most powerful nations in the world, nations that have left a legacy of colonialism in many countries and whose contemporary reputation as world leaders is far from spotless. Given that the question of language globalization is already a difficult and emotionally loaded one, with English seen by many as the main culprit, and given that this ambitious book adds to this topic the equally divisive question of evangelism and the rapidly growing influence of Christianity worldwide, we should not be surprised that none of the chapters can offer straightforward answers and simple recipes.

So, what can a respondent add to this discussion in a few pages? As I was contemplating this question, my thoughts kept returning to three points that I felt had a special significance in clarifying matters. As such, the following response describes these three points, not because I believe that there is anything particularly new or original in these thoughts, but because they were helpful to me in bringing some clarity to this confusion-ridden area. I hope that others will also find these clarifications useful.

Christians and the Great Commission

Christian believers have been given a task by Jesus Christ, which is usually referred to as the “Great Commission.” The most familiar version of this is recorded in the Gospel of Matthew (28:19–20):

[Jesus said:] All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

(NIV)

Therefore, every follower of Christ is, to some extent, a potential missionary, trying to figure out where and how we can best serve the Lord and carry out the Great Commission. This may be seen as a “hidden agenda” in Christian life, except that it is not really hidden because it is stated more than once in some of the best-known verses of the most read book of all times, the Bible. In this sense, this must surely be the most widely publicized hidden agenda in the history of mankind!

Living and Working Abroad

Because the Great Commission mentions “all nations,” many Christians feel that they are called to travel to foreign countries to make disciples there. To do so, they need to establish some kind of an “interface” with the host country, a way of entering the society and immersing into it. One option that has been frequently exercised over the past centuries has been to engage in some professional work in the host country, as this can both benefit the particular community and can sometimes also provide the means to support the missionary. As Mary Wong explains in Chapter 5, the most famous missionary of all times, the apostle Paul, started this practice by working as a tentmaker. Teaching English as a foreign language is an obvious “tentmaking” engagement for many native speakers of English, but by no means the only one. My church in Nottingham, for example, has sent out missionaries abroad to be medical workers, carers in an orphanage, teachers of subjects other than English as a foreign language, and even aircraft engineers. These missionaries have all faced the fundamental question of how to be a Christian in the workplace, that is, how to live out our Christian beliefs and exercise our professional competence in a complementary manner. I don’t think there is a uniform Christian answer to this question and the chapters in this book present several possible models. Returning to Paul, he said the following about this in his first letter to the Thessalonians (2:8–9):

We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us. Surely you remember, brothers, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you.

Did Paul keep his tentmaking business and his public teaching about Christ separate? I cannot find any relevant details about this in the Bible. I suspect that from his point of view, making good tents (because they were of high quality, that I am sure of) and teaching about Jesus were part of the same process, the modeling of Christian life and values. In fact, in his second letter to the Thessalonians (3:8–9) he did specifically write the following:

we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to make ourselves a model for you to follow.

So, how can we “make tents” in the English language classroom? Don’t we wish sometimes that we could receive specific instructions from someone like Paul about concrete questions, such as whether or not to mention Jesus while teaching grammar? Unfortunately, Paul never wrote a “Letter to TESOL” and therefore Christian language teachers need to decide for themselves on the best strategy to follow the Great Commission. I myself really like the advice attributed to St. Francis of Assisi: “Preach the Gospel at all times. Use words if necessary.”

The Special Status of English in Evangelism

As is clear from the above, I feel that in many ways teaching English as a foreign language is no different from other “tentmaking” occupations. However, this may be only part of the bigger picture, because I also believe that there is something special about English in contemporary Christianity. Let us, for example, consider one of the most anointed evangelists of the turn of the twenty-first century, Reinhard Bonnke: he is a German missionary to Africa who preaches in English, which is then often translated simultaneously to the local African language. The point about this illustration is that few people would find this practice unusual, even though it involves a twofold language transformation process—someone preaching in his L2, which is then translated into an L3—because the mediating language is English. And if we also consider the international impact of Christian books, journals, and daily devotionals published in English (with many written by nonnative speakers such as Korean pastor David Yonggi Cho), it seems to me indisputable that Global English is becoming the *lingua franca* of Christianity in the twenty-first century.

Why is it significant that Global English is increasingly used to enhance intercultural and interethnic communication in Christian work, just as it is in so many other areas of life? To understand it, let us step back 2000 years and consider evangelism in New Testament times. The intensity of this evangelistic movement was unprecedented and, quite frankly, almost unbelievable: in less than 300 years the radical teachings of a tiny and oppressed sect of a marginal religion in a small and insignificant province of the Roman Empire reached official world religion status with Christianity becoming the official religion of the Roman empire. This was about as likely to happen as, for example, contemporary United States adopting the radical views of a handful of Hungarian extremists as their new constitution. Interestingly, however, this amazing movement was closely linked to the world language of the time, Global Greek. This is so clearly explained by Michael Green in his seminal book *Evangelism in the Early Church*:

Greece, too, made signal contributions to the spread of Christianity. Perhaps the most important was the Greek language itself. This was now so widely disseminated through the Mediterranean basin that it acted as an almost universal common tongue. Captive Greece captured her conquerors, as Horace complained; and from the second century B.C. when she fell under Roman control, the Greek language rivaled Latin. The conquests of Alexan-

der had already made Greek the common language of the East more than a century before, and now the West followed suit ... Quintilian, the celebrated educationalist of the first century A.D., insisted that a boy should begin by learning Greek, and many of the official Roman inscriptions that century are in Greek. Fifty years earlier Cicero had observed that Greek was read by practically the whole world, while Latin was confined to its own territory. The satirists, Juvenal and Martial, scornfully pointed out that even the womenfolk did their lovemaking in the Greek tongue! It was, therefore, quite natural that Paul the Jew should address the Latins of Rome in Greek, or that Ircnacus, himself a native of Asia Minor, should write in Greek as he conducted his missionary and apologetic work in France in the second century.... The advantages for the Christian mission of having a common language can hardly be overestimated.

(1995, pp. 17–18)

As a Christian, I simply cannot believe that it was sheer coincidence that Jesus came to our world at a time when language globalization had created an ideal situation for the Word of God to reach the civilized world of the time, and in the present age we see a similarly dramatic wave of language globalization: then, Paul the Jew addressed the Latins of Rome in Greek, now Bonnke the German addresses the Africans of Sudan or Nigeria in English. Therefore, I suspect that contemporary language globalization is somehow related to the amazing Christian revival that we see worldwide: people living in the Western world often find it hard to believe that there is an ongoing explosion of the Christian faith in Africa, Latin America, and Asia (see e.g., Aikman, 2006; Hattaway, 2003; Jenkins, 2007), which can only be compared to the events of New Testament times. Then, the Word of God reached the whole of the civilized (i.e., known) world; now it is literally being taken to the “ends of the earth.” Interestingly, Green (1995) also adds the following comment about the use of Greek in early Christianity: “Missionaries using it [Greek] would incur none of the odium that English speaking missionaries might find in some of the underdeveloped countries; for Greek, the language of a captive people, could not be associated with imperialism” (p. 18)—this is an important issue that has been discussed in several chapters of this book.

Thus, I do not believe that it is accidental that the portentous spread of English coincides with the contemporary Christian revival. And neither am I surprised, therefore, that teaching English and teaching about Jesus appear to fit so comfortably together.

References

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