

Like Bright Sunlight

The Benefit of Communicating in Heart Language

by Rick Brown

Communication only occurs when a message is both successfully transmitted *and* received. In human communication, the sender's use of the receiver's heart language is a sign of love and respect, and it is an essential (and humbling) element of incarnational ministry. In their article "Seven Themes of Fruitfulness" (pp. 75-81 of this issue),¹ the authors cite quantitative research demonstrating the benefits of using the heart language of people rather than a second language. Their statistics show that ministry in the local language, as opposed to a regional language, correlates with four to five times greater likelihood of seeing multiple churches emerge and movements begin.²

There is an abundance of qualitative evidence as well. In an African country, a national mission leader told me they had shown the JESUS film for years to millions of people, using an official language, with only modest results. When they started showing the film using local languages, however, people responded in a marvelous way. He said, "It was like people were seeing a different film, even if they had seen the former one before. It was worth all the effort to put it into their dialect."

A believer in the Philippines said, "Now that I am reading the Bible in my own language, I have a clearer grasp of Christian doctrine. My confidence in the truth of God's Word is stronger because it is as if God is speaking directly to me."

A pastor in Asia had been using the regional language for twenty years before he discovered the clarity and impact of presenting the Gospel in the local language. The pastor said that using the regional language "was like reading in moonlight," but using the local language "is like bright sunlight."

Missions across the world have found it especially fruitful to conduct evangelism and discipleship through Bible storying and audio Bible discussion groups in the heart language of the people.³

Use of a people's heart language affirms their personal worth and opens hearts and minds to hear the message. Lamin Sanneh's historical research in this area concludes that it is Christianity's use of local languages, especially for Scripture, that "turned Christianity into the possession of the worldwide human family"

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and that “without translation there would be no Christianity or Christians.”⁴

This language issue is not, however, a simple dichotomy between heart language and second language. Many ministries in the 10/40 Window use a mixed form of “local language” that is not the community’s heart language at all. The ministries do this by rejecting the people’s own religious terms and names and using ones from outside their socioreligious community. Some churchmen and missionaries, for example, have rejected local names for the Most High God and introduced foreign names like ‘Dio.’ Some have rejected the name ‘Isa Messih’ for “Jesus Christ” and used phrases like ‘Yezu Kristo.’ Some have rejected local words for priest, prophet, and prayer and used words from outside. This gives a foreign taint to the Gospel and those who follow it, estranging them from the rest of the community. While affirming the people’s language can open minds and hearts, rejecting their vocabulary still conveys rejection of their identity and worth. This in turn prompts people to reject both the communicators and their message. Muslims may be no more hostile or resistant than anyone else to the biblical Gospel of Jesus Christ but they are quite sensitive to rejection of their language, culture, and social identity. When presented with the biblical Gospel in their own style and vocabulary, open-minded Muslims often respond with exclamations of joy, saying “This is *our* Book!”⁵

The consequences of rejecting religious vocabulary are evident in the “Seven Themes of Fruitfulness” article, in the analysis of responses to the following statement: “When communicating the Gospel, I intentionally use terms that local Muslims will understand from their own culture, language, or religious background.” Correlations among responses and self-reported results indicate that ministries that *always* use authentic heart-language terminology are four to six times more likely to see churches emerge from their work than

ministries which never, rarely, or only occasionally use heart terminology. This huge difference boils down to a simple decision: to communicate with the audience using their own vocabulary or to reject that in favor of outside religious terminology. Looking at the history of Christianity, Lamin Sanneh observes that “in the relevant cases, Christian expansion and revival were limited to those societies that preserved the indigenous name for God.”⁶

There is a human tendency to try to restrict God’s Word to a “sacred” language. Muslims around the world pray

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and recite Scripture in ancient Arabic, while Jews do the same with ancient Hebrew.⁷ Does God really want His Word presented in “sacred” language, as so many people seem to think? Does not the Bible itself demonstrate that God reveals His truth through humble people in humble tongues, rather than in prestigious or “sacred” languages?

Consider the patriarch Abraham. He probably knew one or two of the international languages of his day. Growing up near Ur, he would have known Akkadian, the language of urban Mesopotamia. He probably learned the Egyptian language while he was in Egypt, since he talked to people there. As a shepherding nomad, Abraham would have known Amorite or some form of proto-Arabic, probably as his mother tongue.⁸ He likely knew Aramaic, because he lived for some time in Haran, an Aramean region.⁹ Abraham, however, moved on to Canaan. His two sons grew

up speaking Canaanite, as did his grandson Jacob.¹⁰ Jacob’s descendants continued to speak a dialect of this Canaanite language, which we call “Hebrew.”¹¹ Canaanite was not a major language used for literature or diplomacy. It was used locally for religion, but Canaanite religion was an abomination. Nevertheless, God used this Canaanite language, including its religious terms, to reveal His message to the children of Israel through the prophets and authors of the Hebrew Bible, no doubt because it was the language they spoke and understood. *If God had wanted to use a prestigious, literary language, He could have revealed His eternal truths in Egyptian or Akkadian, but he chose instead to use the language of the recipients of his message.*

By the time of Christ, the situation had changed. Most Palestinian Jews and Samaritans spoke Aramaic, but some knew colloquial Greek and some spoke colloquial Hebrew. Biblical Hebrew had become archaic and was treated as a sacred language for religious texts and ritual. Across the whole region, literary Greek was the language of literature and higher education. The common people, however, spoke colloquial (*Koiné*) Greek and used it to write personal letters. God could have used any of these languages. Jesus, however, chose to speak in everyday Aramaic, while the apostles He sent westwards used colloquial Greek. The New Testament was written, not in the sacred Hebrew language used for religious texts, nor in the Literary Greek used for literature and philosophy, but in colloquial Greek, no doubt because it was the mostly widely understood language of the time. *Instead of using sacred or prestigious language, God chose to reveal His Word to all levels of society by using everyday language.*

Jesus told His disciples to spread the Gospel to every people group, but not until they had received the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4–8). When that happened on Pentecost, this power manifested itself in proclamations of God’s goodness in a multitude of

languages, such that those who heard this “were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language” (Acts 2:6 ESV). The miracle of Pentecost clearly indicated that God wanted the Good News was to be shared with the nations in their own languages.

It is instructive to look at the ministry of the Apostle Paul. He had success using Greek in Greek-speaking communities, but when he went to Jerusalem and faced a mob, the people did not listen to him until he began speaking their heart language: “When they heard him speaking in their own language, the silence was even greater” (Act 22:2 NLT).¹² Paul’s success was more limited with people whose language he could not speak. When he and Barnabas preached in Lystra (Acts 14:8–20), the local people failed to understand their Greek-language message and said in their own language, Lycaonian, “The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!” (Act 14:11 ESV). Paul and Barnabas tried to explain who they were, but “even with these words they scarcely restrained the people from offering sacrifice to them” (Act 14:18 ESV).

The early church spread the message to many places. In most places, the believers translated the Gospel into the local languages: into multiple dialects of Coptic, Syriac, and Aramaic, and into Latin. When they encountered people speaking languages that were not written, the early Christian missionaries preached the message in the spoken languages, and in many cases they developed alphabets and translated the Bible into them. These include Armenian, Ethiopic, Nubian, Georgian, Slavonic (Old Russian), Gothic (Old German), and others. When Saint Jerome translated the Bible into Latin, he did not use the Literary Latin used in all books up to that time; instead, he wrote in a colloquial Latin so that the common people could understand it. Lamin Sanneh describes the principle followed by the early church:

Each of the ancient people groups who had the Scriptures in their own language held on to the biblical faith.

The general rule that people had a right to understand what they were being taught was matched by the view that there was nothing God wanted to say that could not be said in simple everyday language. God would not confound people about the truth, and that made the language of religion compatible with ordinary human understanding. The gospel proclamation stripped religious discourse of the hocus-pocus and elevated the voice of the [common people].¹³

If these people groups had not been given God’s Word in their own spoken languages, their knowledge of the biblical faith would have been weak and unsustainable over the generations. This is evident from one of the tragedies of history, namely that the Scriptures were not translated by the early church into Persian, Arabic,¹⁴ Himyaritic (ancient Yemeni) or Berber, even though there were many believers among them and many churches and clergy. The churchmen in these places, many of whom were foreigners, insisted on presenting God’s Word in prestigious languages, namely Syriac, Greek and Latin. The result was that everyday believers lacked a good understanding of God’s Word and were vulnerable to other winds of doctrine.¹⁵ When Islam arose in the seventh and eighth centuries, these Bibleless churches nearly disappeared.¹⁶ Although the prophet of Islam had endorsed the Christian Scriptures and urged study of them, the lack of a Bible in Arabic prevented this, leaving the Islamic tradition to develop in a direction that lacked biblical foundations or any use for the Bible. *In contrast to this tragedy of dependence on second-language Bibles, each of the ancient people groups who had the Scriptures in their own language held on to the biblical faith.* Today, when the message of the Bible is made available to people groups in their own spoken

languages, through the JESUS Film, Bible storying, and new translations of Scripture, the result is that many people come to a fresh understanding and appreciation of the Gospel.

The lesson of Scripture and history, then, is that God’s message should be presented in common language that is clear and memorable and not just in language that is prestigious, sacred, or traditional. In the words of Lamin Sanneh, “We would do well to remember that the language of Christianity is the language of the people, whoever they happen to be.”¹⁷

The calling to use heart language was reiterated in the summer of 2000, when over 12,000 evangelists gathered in Amsterdam from over 200 countries for Billy Graham’s World Conference for Evangelists. They summarized their conclusions in the “Amsterdam Declaration” on evangelism. Their eighth point highlights the importance of communicating God’s message in the local language, and it is a fitting conclusion for this article:

The Bible is indispensable to true evangelism. The Word of God itself provides both the content and authority for all evangelism. Without it there is no message to preach to the lost. People must be brought to an understanding of at least some of the basic truths contained in the Scriptures before they can make a meaningful response to the Gospel. *Thus we must proclaim and disseminate the Holy Scriptures in the heart language of all those we are called to evangelize and disciple. We pledge ourselves to keep the Scriptures at the very heart of our evangelistic outreach and message, and to remove all known language and cultural barriers to a clear understanding of the gospel on the part of our hearers.*¹⁸ [emphasis added] **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ Eric Adams, Don Allen, and Bob Fish, "Seven Themes of Fruitfulness," *International Journal of Frontier Missiology*, 26/2 (2009), pp. 75-81. See also in this issue Dye, T. Wayne "The Eight Conditions of Scripture Engagement," (pp. 89-98) where it discusses the use of "local languages" as "the key" to engaging people effectively with Scripture.

² Some situations, however, require use of the regional language because the community includes speakers of diverse mother tongues or ones who speak the regional language as their mother tongue. These situations may account for many cases where church multiplication occurred in a context of regional language use.

³ See www.chronologicalbiblestorying.com and www.faithcomesbyhearing.com/faith-comes-hearing-program. See correlations with fruitfulness in the "Seven Themes of Fruitfulness" article.

⁴ Sanneh, Lamin, *Whose Religion Is Christianity? The Gospel beyond the West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), pp. 107, 97.

⁵ Unfortunately, many Bible translations are produced by and for cultural Christians, with little thought for the Scripture needs of other major cultures, such as Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, etc., who generally need a version of their own, in authentic heart language and style.

⁶ *Whose Religion Is Christianity?* pp. 31-32.

⁷ This tendency is widespread. Hindus treat Sanskrit as a sacred language, and Theravada Buddhists use Pali, neither of which are living languages. The Greek Orthodox Church conducts ritual and Bible readings in ancient Greek, the Russian Orthodox Church in Old Church Slavonic, the Syriac churches in ancient Syriac, and the Armenian Orthodox churches in ancient Armenian. The same was once true of Latin in the Roman Catholic Church, and many Anglophone Protestants used to regard the archaic English of the King James Version, with its many borrowings from the Latin Vulgate, as a "sacred" language.

⁸ Traces of Amorite survive in some Amorite names written in Akkadian. If proto-Arabic was distinct from Amorite at that period (2000 B.C.), there is no evidence of it.

⁹ Abraham's brother Nahor, who settled in Haran, is called the father of several "Aramean" tribes (Genesis 22:20-23).

¹⁰ When Jacob and Laban named a monument they had built, Laban named it with an Aramaic phrase, but Jacob named it with a Canaanite name (Genesis 31:47).

¹¹ Their dialect is never called "Hebrew" in the Old Testament, but it is called "the language of Canaan" (Isaiah 19:18), while the variety used in Judah was called "Judaeen" (2 Kings 18:28; Isaiah 36:11, 13) or "the language of Judah" (Nehemiah 13:24, 2 Chronicles 32:18).

¹² This verse uses a term that means the language of the Hebrews, but it is not known which language Paul used. Some translations put 'Hebrew' and some put 'Aramaic', while the New Living Translation just puts 'their own language.'

¹³ *Whose Religion Is Christianity?* p. 98.

¹⁴ In *The Arab Christian: A History in the Middle East* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), author Kenneth Cragg points out that Arabs were present at Pentecost and that Arabian bishops attended the Council of Nicea.

¹⁵ The churches of St. Thomas on the Malabar coast of India have used a Syriac Bible and a Syriac liturgy since ancient times. On the other hand, they have also had a rich oral tradition of Bible stories and ballads in their own Malayalam language, which they say goes back to the disciple Thomas, and this heart-language "oral Bible" nourished their faith through the centuries (from personal correspondence with Rajan Mathews).

¹⁶ The Scriptures were eventually translated into Arabic, many times in fact, but for centuries the churches continued to use Syriac and Coptic, even when these had become dead languages.

¹⁷ *Whose Religion Is Christianity?* p. 69.

¹⁸ *The Amsterdam Declaration*, §8 <<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2000/augustweb-only/13.0.html>>