

# Major Priorities in Eradicating Bible Poverty #2

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Why do more than one billion people not have adequate Scriptures in their language?

Here is a second question regarding Scripture in Mission. The first question focused on those who have Scriptures available but do not demonstrate the changed lives we would expect. In this second question we focus on those without any Scripture or without sufficient Scripture in their languages.

Some of the related questions to this second question include: Are the Scriptures only for those who speak major languages? Is God able to speak and understand any human language or only the major languages? What hinders churches around the world from providing the Scriptures for people who do not have them in their language? Why are only the largest languages so often treated as the important ones in the Church? Why do we ignore the needs of the 'bottom billion'? Cannot the churches around the world partner together in new ways to make sure ALL people around the world have God's words in the languages they understand the best?

We will begin with some statistics on languages. Approximately 6,900 languages are spoken in the world today[1]. About 6% of the world's population or about 350 million people speak 94% of the world's languages, all with fewer than one million speakers. Clearly these 350 million people speak the smaller languages of the world. By contrast, about 94% of the world's population speaks only about 6% of the languages, 389 by count, all with one million speakers or more.

Of the 6,900 languages, about 450[2] have a complete Bible. They represent about five billion people. These Bibles serve as a tremendous potential resource for evangelization and discipleship. One challenge for these languages concerns a lack of printed Bibles. Even though the complete Bible has been translated in these languages, millions of believers who speak them do not have access to a printed Bible. So, providing Bibles in these languages and engaging people with them so the Spirit can speak into their lives is a major challenge for the Church.

As we rejoice in the 450 complete Bibles translated into the languages of five billion people, a level of Bible translation never known before in the history of humankind, we are still faced with over a billion people who do not have the whole Bible available to them in their languages. These are not mere 'dialects'. They are distinct languages. Of these languages, more than 2,200[3] likely have a need for translated Scriptures but they have no translation of Scripture and nothing is underway. Approximately another 2,000 languages have translation programs in progress. This is a point of celebration. At no time in Church history have so many languages simultaneously had active translation programs. Some of them are just in the beginning stages while others have nearly finished with meeting their current needs for Scriptures.

Another 1,510[4] languages have fewer than 1,000 speakers remaining. These are the very smallest languages. Some are nearly extinct and others are too poorly researched to know their number of speakers or what their needs are for the Scriptures. The remaining languages of the 6,850 either have sufficient Scriptures at this time or have not been researched sufficiently to determine their status.

Particular concern at this time should be shown toward the approximately 2,200 languages that likely have a need for Bible translation but with nothing underway. Such conditions should not exist. They all should have active translation programs in place. Many unreached people groups speak one of these languages. They would benefit from a concerted effort on the part of the worldwide Church to see Scriptures provided for them. The people speaking these languages have limited access to the full counsel of God in their languages. In any of these situations, their ability to engage with the Scriptures is limited. They usually have to depend on another language, and often their

understanding of the other language is limited. So their barriers are a lack of Scripture in their language and limited understanding of the dominant language.

In addition, for the very smallest languages, it is unlikely that resources or sufficient time exists to provide them with a full Bible translation program. However, many of them would benefit from a Bible storying program. Such a program would include a set of Bible stories from the Old and New Testaments to provide a panorama of the grand story from Genesis to Revelation in their language. These storying projects could involve people from local churches or from outside the area. Those leading such projects need appropriate training and would need to be willing to engage in the process with speakers of the language for 2-4 years. This method of Bible storying could also be used to give a quick start to the approximately 2,200 languages mentioned above that need a full translation program.

As we consider these nearly 4,000 languages with various needs for Scriptures, we could be overwhelmed by the need. However, we should compare their numbers to the hundreds of thousands of churches and hundreds of millions of believers in the worldwide Church. The worldwide Church has both the people and financial resources to make a difference in the lives of the people speaking these smaller languages. We are only talking about 4,000 languages or so. That may seem like a large number when we think of the complexities of any one language, but when we compare it to the hundreds of thousands of churches around the world and the millions of believers, it should be a challenge that the global Christian community can address in the next decade or two. We could commit ourselves at least to begin programs in all languages needing translation. Can we dedicate ourselves to do so?

One of the hindrances in this discussion is an over-reliance on the Bible agencies to address these challenges. Certainly the Bible agencies will be part of the solution. They have experience and knowledge resources to provide, but they are not sufficient in themselves in terms of personnel or finances to meet this need. It will take thousands of churches around the world with the Bible agencies serving alongside them to reach out to these people who speak minority languages.

This brings us back to the questions at the beginning: Are the Scriptures only for those who speak major languages? Is God able to speak and understand only the major languages or can he speak and understand any human language? What hinders churches around the world from providing the Scriptures for people who do not have them in their language? Why are only the largest languages so often treated as the important ones in the Church? Why do we ignore the needs of the "bottom billion"? Cannot the churches around the world partner together in new ways to make sure ALL people around the world have God's words in the languages they understand the best?

Rather than address all of these questions, I would like to address one of the more important. One of the biggest challenges for churches to overcome is the attitude of their very own church leaders and church members. We in the Church easily accept the attitudes of our society toward smaller languages. Church leaders often do so. So, they believe that the smaller language communities can understand the majority language. Their society often believes so. And this is the language often used in the national and local church. This is especially true if the leaders are speakers of the majority language. It is common around the world for speakers of a majority language to believe that all people who speak the smaller languages also understand the majority language. So they believe there is no need to help meet the Bible translation needs of these smaller language communities. This attitude is not based on scientific studies, or theological reflection. Scientific studies would show a much more complex reality, and God's attitude seems to pull us in a different direction than human society.

So, what is God's attitude toward these languages? We can ask: Did the Spirit only respect the major languages on the day of Pentecost, or was it speakers of all languages present that could understand Peter when he spoke? Acts 2:6 says "each one was hearing them speak in his own language." No distinction is made according to size. We can ask: Will it only be people from the major languages that will be ransomed by the Lamb's blood and stand before the Throne and the

Lamb, or will it be people from every language? Consider Revelation 5:9 and 7:9 where God is the God of every locality, including the language that is at home in that locality. So from these references, what does God's attitude seem to be toward these smaller languages? Does God only respect the major, powerful languages? Clearly that is not the case. So, if God is not a respecter of any one language, how can the leaders of the worldwide Church commit themselves to gaining a more informed understanding, both theological and linguistic, of the needs of these smaller languages and respect them for whom God made them to be?

Question: Why do you think more than one billion people do not yet have the Scriptures in their language when most of the major languages do, and what can you do about it in your context?

May God direct our prayerful considerations for the smaller language communities of the earth!

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[1] See the Ethnologue at <http://www.ethnologue.com> for the variety of statistics used in this paragraph.

[2] See the United Bible Societies at <http://www.biblesociety.org/index.php?id=22>

[3] See <http://www.wycliffe.org/About/AssociatedOrganizations/WycliffeInternational.aspx> click on ?Translation Statistics?.

[4] See the Ethnologue at <http://www.ethnologue.com>

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