Unity in Translation: The Role of Translation in Building Up the Unity of the Body of Christ

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Abstract
This is an article about the role that translation can play in building up the unity of the body of Christ. It rests on two fundamental assumptions: the first that Christianity is essentially a faith which has no existence independent of its translations; the second that the proclamation of the Christian message is truest to itself when expressed in the natural idiom of a culture. In this article, I examine the arguments supporting these assumptions. These fundamental theological axes are then related to a practical analysis of the power shifts which inevitably occur when translation of the Christian message occurs, with particular reference to Baptist congregations in Wales, and the potential for disunity generated by linguistic and cultural difference. This in turn leads to a consideration of what constitutes good practice in bilingual worship. I conclude that even in seemingly monoglot congregations, the social and linguistic background of individuals means that we are operating in an essentially multilingual and multicultural environment. There are two main ways of ensuring unity in such a situation — one is to impose a cultural and linguistic hegemony, and the second is to surrender control and seek to encourage the flourishing of multiple readings of the Christian message in line with the language and cultural idioms of those present. I suggest that the second way is truer to the model of translation which God demonstrated in the incarnation.

Christianity: An Essentially Translatable Faith

The Bible is a translatable book — Dewi Hughes[1]

Christianity is not a set of doctrines, a collection of laws, or an anthology of stories and myths. It is a movement founded on a person, Jesus Christ. Because of this, the first Christians moved away from recording their sacred scriptures on scrolls (like the beautifully ornate ones which housed the Torah) to recording them on codices, a sort of notebook

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[1] Dewi Hughes, *Castrating Culture* (Glasgow: Paternoster Press, 2001), p. 80.

available for common trade use. They moved away from recording their sacred scriptures in a sacred language — instead, the gospels and epistles were written down in the local Greek vernacular, which was not even the first language of Jesus himself. This was consistent with their belief that God's supreme act of self-disclosure was actually to be found in the life, person, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and that all other forms of God's communication were to be subject to this one and interpreted in its light. The early church, and particularly the Syriac fathers, spoke often of the three divine modes of self-revelation, each superior and chronologically subsequent to the previous: God reveals Godself in creation, God reveals Godself in Scripture, and supremely, God reveals Godself in the incarnation of Jesus Christ.[2]

God's self-revelation is essentially an act of translation. Like all translation, it is both restricted and given freedom of play by the choice of words, idioms, shades of meaning, ideas, and metaphors available in the target (or host) language. One of the Syriac fathers, Ephrem Syrus, expressed this as God having to limit God's self-revelation according to our capacity to receive:

> The Lord who is beyond measure
>
> > Measures out nourishment to all,
>
> Adapting to our eyes the sight of Himself,
>
> > To our hearing His voice,
>
> His blessing to our appetite,
>
> > His wisdom to our tongue.[3]

This means that when God chooses to *reveal* Godself through the sacred Scriptures of both Old and New Testaments, God also chooses to *clothe* Godself in the limitations of human names and metaphors. And God does this in order to bring men and women to Godself. For the church fathers and mothers, this saving love is always the motivation behind God's giving and God's restraining of Godself

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[2] Sebastian Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem* (Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1985), pp. 40–42.

[3] Ephrem Syrus in Sebastian Brock, *St. Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on Paradise* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1990), IX. 27.

— and the restraining is necessary because of our weakness and littleness. Here is Ephrem again:

> Do not let your intellect be disturbed by mere names,
>
>> for Paradise has simply clothed itself
>
> in terms that are akin to you
>
> […]
>
>> your nature is far too weak
>
> to be able
>
>> to attain to its greatness,
>
> and its beauties are much diminished
>
>> by being depicted in the pale colours
>
> with which you are familiar.[4]

For Frances Young this is a sacramental view of language. Without abandoning the referential nature of language, it recognises that

> the Reality referred to transcends all possible linguistic expression, and so is explosive of both literalism and conceptual deciphering […] it ultimately validates an 'expanding' or open-ended sense of ever more meaning to be discerned, the polyvalence recognised in poetry.[5]

Because of these linguistic restraints, even God's self-revelation in the Bible is inferior to God's self-revelation in his Son. The incarnation itself is of course an act of translation, where God takes on the limits of human flesh, but it is *the* superior and decisive act of translation to which all others must bow.

The complication, though, as the early church understood only too well, is that our understanding is mediated through language. Those who encountered Jesus Christ heard him speak in human words, interpreted those words, wrote them down, repeated them, and translated them. Very, very few of Jesus's spoken words in Aramaic survive in the gospels. The vast majority of his teaching has been translated into Greek. But translation is not just about language — it is

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[4] Ephrem Syrus in Brock, *Hym. Par.*, XI.7.

[5] Frances M. Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 144.

about cultural idiom and belief, habits and customs. And therefore, translation of the Christian message is as much about how the events of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection (as well as the other events described in the Bible) are described, received, and understood not only by the culture within which these things originally happened, but also by whichever host culture the message is translated into:

> Christianity is a religion of historical events that are decisive in the meaning people ascribe to them. That process of attaching meaning to events contains the seeds of personal as well as cross-cultural engagement, and it defines the task of mission.[6]

Lamin Sanneh argues that the early church had two ways of sharing the gospel. The first of these was what he calls *diffusion.* In this mode, the culture of the missionaries is both 'the carrier and the arbiter of the message'. It is necessary for the host culture to adopt the language of the message, but also its cultural assumptions. In the book of Acts, the debates over whether Gentile converts should be circumcised reflect a resistance by Paul and Peter (under the influence of the Holy Spirit) to this model of diffusion, which would have imposed Mosaic law on new converts. Sanneh also sees Islam, with its insistence on using 'the sacred Arabic of Scripture in law and devotion' as an example of mission by diffusion.[7]

> The second mode is what Sanneh terms mission as *translation,*

> to institute the recipient culture as a valid and necessary locus of the proclamation, allowing the religion to arrive without the requirement of deference to the originating culture.[8]

This mode of sharing the Christian message requires indigenous theological inquiry, because it does not assume that the original cultural forms (both language and idiom) within which the message was originally couched must be adopted by the recipients. It also demonstrates different priorities: 'Cultural hegemony violates the gospel by giving primacy to conveyance over the message.'[9]

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[6] Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, 2nd edn (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2009), p. 33.

[7] Sanneh, *Translating,* p. 33.

[8] Sanneh, *Translating,* p. 33.

[9] Sanneh, *Translating,* pp. 34, 36 (quotation p. 34).

The key point here is that in this model, the message is not just translated into a different language, but undergoes 'a fundamental vernacular reconstruction of the message'.[10] In other words, the act of translation, when done faithfully, requires a distinction between the Christian message itself and the cultural idiom (presuppositions, customs, etc.) used to convey it. Therefore, the act of translation requires considerable theological work by the host culture in order to find a way of expressing the message in their host language which conveys God's revelation in Christ as adequately as possible.

Sell your Shirt and Buy a Welsh Bible …

> The translation of the scriptures into the vernacular was one of the foremost linguistic and cultural developments of sixteenth-century Europe.[11]

> *Er mwyn prynu hwn rhag trais; Dos, gwerth dy bais, y Cymro.*[12]

> There is no such thing as a church without language, or without the Scriptures […] A mother-tongue response is in tune with the gospel.[13]

The patristic tradition is clear that God translated God's self-revelation into human language, borrowing our metaphors and idioms to clothe himself in human language. Even if we allow a 'dictation' model of inspiration, we still need to allow for the fact that human categories of language are unlikely to be able to express the fullness of God. In fact, God went further than that — God clothed Godself in human flesh, in order to translate it as completely as possible into terms that we could understand. And there is ample evidence down the ages that when translation of the Christian message into the vernacular has occurred, the effect has been transformative. In his *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*, James Joyce talks of the three nets which both hold people back from flight but also enable them to fly: nationality, language, and religion. And because religion must be expressed in a language, and

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[10] Sanneh, *Translating*, p. 60.

[11] Glanmor Williams, *Wales and the Reformation* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997), p. 356.

[12] 'In order to buy this and be free of oppression, go, sell thy shirt, thou Welshman.' Thomas Jones, writing about the Welsh Bible in 1588 (the same year that the translation of the entire Bible into Welsh was completed), cited in Williams, *Reformation,* p. 358.

[13] Sanneh, *Translating*, p. 97.

because language is intimately connected with nationality, these three nets are all intimately connected. William Morgan, who was responsible for the first translation of the entire Bible into Welsh in 1588, believed that the earlier translations (1567) into Welsh of the New Testament and the Prayer Book, while having serious orthographical deficiencies, had extended the knowledge of English as well as Welsh — as well as improving preaching and general knowledge of the Scriptures.[14]

It is worth quoting at length from (the English translation of) William Morgan's dedication to Queen Elizabeth 1 in the 1588 edition of his Welsh language Bible, in which he picks up so many of these issues:

> For besides the fact that our common people were then comparing together the Welsh and English versions of the Scriptures, they became of late more conversant with the English tongue […] For at that time scarcely any one was able to preach in the British tongue, because the terms in which the sacred mysteries which are in the Holy Scripture should be explained, had either entirely disappeared, swept away as if in Lethian waters, or laid on one side, buried and hidden in a measure in the dust of disuse, so that neither were the teachers able to set forth satisfactorily what they wished to teach, nor the hearers to understand clearly what they did set forth […] they departed in uncertainty and doubt, like men who had found a great treasure which they were not able to dig out, or who had been to a sumptuous feast of which they were not allowed to partake. But now by the exceeding goodness of Almighty God and your very kind interest and the watchful solicitude of the Bishops and by the labours and industry of this your translator this has been accomplished so that we may have both more numerous and better prepared preachers, and hearers more apt to learn […] everyone lives through faith, and faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God which hitherto lying hid in a foreign tongue had scarcely sounded into the ears of our countrymen. When therefore I saw that the translation of the rest of the Scriptures was so useful, nay so necessary (though long deterred by the sense of my weakness, and the magnitude of the work, as well as the evil disposition of certain people) yielding to the wishes of the pious, I allowed myself to be persuaded to undertake this most important, troublesome and to many, unacceptable task.

> […]

> If there are any who maintain that in order to retain agreement our countrymen had better learn the English tongue than that the Scriptures

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[14] Williams, *Wales and the Reformation*, pp. 348–349.

should be translated into our own, I would wish that while they study unity, they would be more cautious not to hinder the truth, and while they are most anxious to promote concord they should not put religion on one side. For although it is much to be desired that the inhabitants of the same island should be of the same speech and tongue, yet it is to be equally considered that to attain this end so much time and trouble are required, that in the meantime God's people would be suffered to perish from hunger of His word which would be barbarous and cruel beyond measure. Further there can be no doubt that similarity and agreement in religion rather than in speech much more promotes unity. To prefer unity to piety, expediency to religion, and a certain external concord among men to that extraordinary peace which the word of God impresses on the souls of men, show but little piety. Finally how unwise are those, who are of opinion that the prohibition of the Divine word in the mother tongue makes for the learning of another. For unless religion is taught in the vulgar tongue, not knowing its sweetness and value, no one will undergo any trouble for the sake of acquiring it.[15]

The Bible must be translated into the vernacular for people to read and understand it, but this involves a translation not just of words but of cultural idiom. Thus, there is a significant amount of theological and not just linguistic work to be done. A simple example of this is the translation of the words *shalōm* and *eirēnē* into Welsh. In both Old and New Testaments, these words are translated by the single English word *peace*. But there are in Welsh two words for peace: *heddwch* and *tangnefedd*. Dictionaries[16] give slightly differing definitions of these, and acknowledge that their semantic ranges overlap, but they generally agree that *tangnefedd* is an internal state of peace, perhaps more likely to be used of our relations with God and each other, whereas *heddwch* is more to do with external circumstances, perhaps in the context of political situations. The Welsh word for police is *heddlu,* or 'peace force'. It is not *tangnefeddlu*. One Welsh speaker commented to me that '*tangnefedd* is the internal condition that makes external peace (*heddwch)* possible'.

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[15] The English translation of the dedication to the 1588 Beibl William Morgan can be accessed in full through the online archives of the National Library of Wales <https://www.library.wales/discover-learn/digital-exhibitions/printed-material/1588-welsh-bible/english-translation-of-the-dedication-in-the-1588-bible/#:~:text=Dedication%20in%20the%20Welsh%20Bible%20of%201588%20by,etc.%20Ever%20grace%20and%20benediction%20in%20the%20Lord> [accessed December 2022].
[16] I consulted *Ap Geiriaduron,* a smartphone app, *Geiriadur yr Academi* (geiriaduracademi.org) and *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru* (geiriadur.ac.uk) in December 2022.

This means, then, that while an English speaker might struggle to reconcile Jesus's words in Matthew 10:34 or Luke 12:51,

> Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. (Matt 10:34, NRSV)

> Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! (Luke 12:51, NRSV),

with those in John 14:27,

> Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. (John 14:27, NRSV),

a Welsh speaker reading the BCND Welsh Bible would not encounter the same level of hermeneutical challenge.

> *Peidiwch â meddwl mai i ddwyn* **heddwch** *i'r ddaear y deuthum; nid i ddwyn* **heddwch** *y deuthum ond cleddyf.* (Matt 10:34, BCND)

> *A ydych chwi'n tybio mai i roi* **heddwch** *i'r ddaear yr wyf fi wedi dod? Nage, meddaf wrthych, ond ymraniad.* (Luke 12:51, BCND)

> *Yr wyf yn gadael i chwi* **dangnefedd;** *yr wyf yn rhoi i chwi fy* **nhangnefedd**[17] *i fy hun.* (John 14:27, BCND)

In this Welsh translation, the hermeneutical task is considerably simplified for the reader because the translators have chosen two different words for peace: *heddwch* to describe the external, worldly peace that Jesus does not promise, and *tangnefedd* to describe the inner peace that he does promise.

However, it has to be said that the question is even more complex than presented here. I am quoting here from the 2004 edition of the *Beibl Cymraeg Newydd Diwygiedig* (BCND). The most recent translation of the Bible into contemporary Welsh by Arfon Jones (*beibl.net*, 2015, 2021) does not use *tangnefedd* at all. The 1955 edition of the 1588 Beibl William Morgan translation uses *tangnefedd* in Matthew 10:34 (and in John 14:27), but *heddwch* in Luke 12:51.

But of course, this all confirms the point that I am making (after Sanneh): translation into a host language involves theological inquiry and theological decisions. It requires knowledge of the idiom of the host

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[17] This is actually the same word as *'tangnefedd'* but has undergone a grammatical mutation.

culture. It restricts some meanings and opens up others. Reading the Bible is not the same experience in English as it is in Welsh — even for the same reader.

Language as a Spiritual Force

> The power of the Welsh language and identity is the spiritual force which unites supporters in a long and difficult struggle to save the language.[18]

> Bible translation as the cause of people everywhere challenged the idea of God being quarantined between prohibited walls, and accessible only by licensed retail.[19]

When the Christian message is translated into the vernacular, by translators who understand the cultural idiom into which the message is being translated, there is a shift of power towards the host culture. We can see from the sixteenth century that when the English language became the common standard of faith and worship, it also became the language of reform.[20] This is the practical consequence of the surrender of power to the host culture, and Sanneh uses the term *recipiency* to describe this phenomenon:

> A necessary precondition for effective translation is surrender to the terms of the target culture, whatever exalted notions the translator may have about faithfulness and accuracy to the original forms […] the mother tongue acquired the significance of a revelatory medium, becoming more than an autonomous linguistic device (though that was important), and carrying the implication that the God at work in that medium is the God of other idioms too […] Jesus Christ was assumed to be universally accessible through the medium of particular vernacular cultures, so that universality could propagate the spirit of unity without demanding cultural conformity for its real efficacy […] translation, particularly in its Christian form, stripped language from its idolatrous, fixed power and invested it with a potential for mutuality.[21]

Huw Thomas considers this issue of power shifts associated with use of the vernacular in his discussion of Welsh medium education.

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[18] Huw Thomas and Colin Williams, *Parents, Personalities and Power – Welsh-medium Schools in Southeast Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013).
[19] Sanneh, *Translating,* p. 98.
[20] See Sanneh, *Translating,* p. 103.
[21] Sanneh, *Translating,* pp. 237, 243, 245.

> Welsh medium education is special […] in terms of grassroots movements as distinct from top-down language planning […] There is no understanding of Welsh-medium education except through politics and power, and through aspirations, assertiveness and ambition.[22]

Thomas uses the terminology of Xish and Yish to describe two languages which have unequal power and influence within a community. Xish is the language under threat and Yish a stronger and therefore threatening language in a country or region.[23] These thought categories will come in useful as we consider good practice in bilingual worship in the next section of this article. But for now, let us pause for a moment and consider in more detail the issues of power associated with translation into the vernacular. In my context, as in Thomas's, the Yish language (stronger) is English, and the vernacular Welsh is the Xish language (under threat). But which Welsh is the true vernacular? The eminent Welsh historian Glanmor Williams is a case in point. His grandmother on his mother's side was a country girl from West Wales, while his grandfather on his father's side had been born into a cultured, Welsh-speaking household in Breconshire.

> Welsh was the language of the hearth and of worship for the Williams family, but in any other public domain its use, in Glanmor's words, was considered artificial or an affectation. […] The upshot was that, although Glanmor was never ill at ease while speaking Welsh throughout his life, he never believed it to be his first tongue or that he had gained the fluency which young people raised in Welsh-speaking communities could boast. […] In view of the fact that he expressed himself more easily in English than in Welsh, it is all the more remarkable that he committed himself all his life to publishing a regular flow of books, articles and reviews through the medium of Welsh […] Why he should have chosen to write in Welsh was never properly explained […] [As Glanmor himself put it]: It would be idle of me to pretend that I do not often veer uneasily between the Welsh-speaking Welshman and the non-Welsh-speaking Welshman. And I have to confess that my grasp of Welsh is not as good as I should like it to be. […] A creature who is too British for many Welsh-speaking Welshmen, and too much of a Welshman for the non-Welsh speaker.[24]

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[22] Thomas, *Parents, Personalities, Power*, p. x.

[23] Thomas, *Parents, Personalities, Power*, p. xxxi.

[24] G. H. Jenkins, '"Am I walking a tightrope?": Religion, Language and Nationality', in *Degrees of Influence: a Memorial Volume for Glanmor Williams*, ed. by G. H. Jenkins and G. E. Jones (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008), pp. 142–163 (pp. 149–150).

In other words, there are many vernaculars: there is the Welsh of the countryside farm hearth, the Welsh of the cultured university lecturer. There is the Welsh of the traditional chapel and the Welsh of the young people streaming out of a Welsh-medium school. Each of these occupies a position along the Xish/Yish spectrum, and we will need to bear these multiple vernaculars in mind in when we consider good practice in bilingual worship.

Bilingualism as Unity in Christ

The Welsh theologian Dewi Hughes has written about his experience of establishing a bilingual church in Bangor, North Wales.[25] As a first language Welsh speaker, steeped in Welsh at home and in chapel, the only places where he found a corporate expression of vibrant faith were English-speaking:

> I was very aware that I was something of a spiritual schizophrenic — torn between my Welsh upbringing, my Welsh devotional life and rich evangelical history on the one hand, and my English corporate spiritual life on the other.[26]

Hughes talks about the 'very real tension'[27] that this caused him and other Welsh-speaking Christians. Before looking any further at Hughes's story, it is worth taking some time to understand why this tension is still very apparent in Welsh chapel life today, and so the next section will look at the Welsh Baptist context in general before returning to Dewi Hughes's specific experience.

The Welsh Baptist Context

For many Welsh-speaking Christians, choosing a lively, vibrant church involves not only a missing out on the opportunity to worship in their mother tongue, because many lively 'evangelical' churches are English language ones, but also a loss of their rich Welsh, evangelical chapel culture. This is because English language churches, even in Wales, are

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[25] Hughes, *Castrating Culture*, pp. 50–56.
[26] Hughes, *Castrating Culture*, p. 51.
[27] Hughes, *Castrating Culture*, p. 14.

so strongly influenced by the variety and richness of resources which are available from American and English publishing houses and churches.

Baptist churches in Wales have a choice of two Unions to belong to: the Baptist Union of Great Britain, and the Baptist Union of Wales. Their membership is usually historically determined. The Baptist Union of Wales has been shaped by Welsh non-conformist history, practices, and heritage. It has two wings: the Welsh language wing and the English language wing. Usually, the wings have separate presidents, who have a year's term of office (although at the time of writing, both wings have the one president, the Revd Dr Densil Morgan). The Baptist Union of Wales has one general secretary, which is a permanent position over both wings. There is not a homogeneity of language across the Welsh language wing, because, as Glanmor Williams lamented, different people and different churches have a different level of perceived or actual competence in Welsh. Some churches only have historic ties with the language. To give one example, early on in our time in Wales, my husband and I went to a Welsh Baptist chapel which was very proud that all its hymns were in Welsh (although the rest of the service was in English). We did not speak any Welsh at the time, so my husband asked one of the (very Welsh-sounding!) older ladies what one of the hymns was about. She replied that she had no idea, but she loved singing the words. This is not in any way a criticism; the important point here is that for her, singing in Welsh was an essential part of her worshipping God. The Welsh hymns were her vernacular, her mother tongue of worship, even though she did not understand the words — but in a wider and deeper sense, she understood the language! At another church, a woman whose first language was Welsh heard the Bible being read from the beibl.net version (in simpler, more informal Welsh) for the first time. She was astonished that she understood it, and said that she had become accustomed to believe that the Bible was not read in order for people to understand it.

Then, at the other end of the spectrum, there is my current church, Tabernacle Baptist Chapel in Cardiff, where not only are all the services in Welsh, but the entire life of the church, including all social events, is conducted in Welsh. The hymns and carols sung are not usually translations of classic English hymns, but often original Welsh

language compositions. The Welsh of this chapel is not a translated Welsh, Yish cultural idiom being expressed in Xish, but a genuine grassroots Welsh culture, and an environment where English is very, very rarely heard.

Nor is there a homogeneity of culture across the two language wings of the Baptist Union of Wales, because, inevitably, the English language wing has been more influenced by the Yish effect of English Christian culture. However, there is still a noticeable difference of culture between churches in the Baptist Union of Wales and those in the Baptist Union of Great Britain. Moreover, within the Baptist Union of Great Britain churches, there are those whose cultural idiom has aligned itself more closely with that of the Yish Christian culture. A classic example of this is the Alpha course which originated from Holy Trinity Brompton (HTB) in London.[28] This is an eleven-week course which has proved hugely successful all over the world, and involves a group of people meeting regularly over food and drink to watch the videos and discuss them. To quote their website,

> We believe that everyone should have the chance to explore faith, ask questions and share their point of view. Alpha is a series of sessions exploring the Christian faith. Each talk looks at a different question around faith and is designed to create conversation. Alpha is run all around the globe and everyone is welcome. It runs online, in cafés, churches, universities, homes — you name it! No two Alphas look the same, but they generally have three key things in common: hospitality, a talk and good conversation.

In the early 2000s I was minister of an English language Baptist church in the South Wales valleys. This church is entirely English speaking, but when Alpha was advertised in the area, there was no interest at all. People in the Valleys community could not relate to the people in the videos — they seemed so well-spoken, so 'posh', so 'sorted' — a different type of person altogether. Having said that, the husband of one of the church members, who was not a church goer, asked if he could keep a set of the videos. He said that when he was bored, he would just put the video on so he could hear this posh man speaking English so beautifully …

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[28] Alpha <https://alpha.org> [accessed December 2022].

The 'very real tension' which Hughes refers to is seen very clearly here — it is the tension between the vernacular of a Welsh Christian (both in the sense of their mother tongue *and* their cultural idiom) and the corporate expression of Christian 'church' which is available to them.

Is Bilingualism the Answer?

> I was faced with having to work out how expressing unity in Christ, which often meant living my corporate Christian life through the medium of English, fitted in with my growing appreciation of my Welsh-language Christian heritage. In my experience, this very real tension for many Welsh-speaking Christians was resolved in the bilingual church that I had the privilege of helping to establish and lead from 1969–75.[29]

Dewi Hughes sought the answer to this tension in helping to establish a bilingual church in Bangor, North Wales, where he had been a student. In Eglwys Efengylaidd Ebeneser, English and Welsh speakers met separately for the morning service, initially in separate places and then in the same building, consecutively. Eventually, when space became available, the two congregations met separately but simultaneously in the same building. They then had coffee together after the service. In the evening, both congregations came together for an English service. During the week there were separate Bible study groups, but a united prayer meeting with freedom to pray in the language of one's choice. Church business meetings were in English.

For Hughes, the motivation for establishing the bilingual church was not merely or even primarily practical. It was theological — a means, as we saw in the quotation above, of seeking to express unity in Christ. Sadly, the experiment only lasted for six years:

> As leaders, we had to contend with complaints from both sides. The Welsh speakers were unhappy about those aspects of the church's life that were exclusively in English, while some of the English speakers could not understand the need for anything in Welsh at all since all the Welsh speakers could understand English![30]

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[29] Hughes, *Castrating Culture,* 14.
[30] Hughes, *Castrating Culture*, pp. 52–53.

Eventually, the church separated into two congregations, along language lines, and both churches are still going today.[31]

Multilingualism and Unity in Christ

> Cross-cultural boundaries are accorded an intrinsic status in the proclamation of the gospel, and Christians who stood at such frontiers acquired a critical comparative perspective on their own cultural forms. They were challenged — as Paul was — to shed the blinkers of their cultural prejudice in order to face with unencumbered eyes the magnitude of God's salvific grace in other cultural settings. Cultural systems that turn in on themselves harden into xenophobia, with little relevance for the rights of neighbours. Trailing multiple idioms, mission helps to break the old wineskins with the pressure of cross-cultural experience, dissolving the barriers of cultural exclusion and suspicion.[32]

I started off this research because of a personal interest in how bilingual worship can be done well. My own journey has led me deeper and deeper into Welsh cultural and linguistic life, as I moved from being the minister of an English speaking chapel in Wales which was a member of the Baptist Union of Great Britain, to being the minister of a bilingual church in the Welsh Valleys which belonged to the Baptist Union of Wales (English Wing, then later Welsh Wing) but had affiliations with the Baptist Union of Great Britain, to my current church in the capital city of Wales which is entirely Welsh-speaking and only belongs to the Baptist Union of Wales (Welsh Wing). In the bilingual church, the Welsh-speaking and English-speaking congregations worshipped separately, but came together for coffee and church (business) meetings. There were exceptions though — for the sake of unity, at Easter, Christmas, and Harvest we would hold bilingual services, and these were very hard to do well. As Hughes comments, the fundamental problem is that the Yish language, English, is understood by everyone, and therefore those who do not speak Welsh see the obvious solution as being to hold everything in the common language, English.

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[31] The story of the church is told in this very interesting YouTube video, Eglwys Efengylaidd Ebeneser Evangelical Church, Bangor:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1mhLBYopVd0> [accessed 12 April 2023].
[32] Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, p. 35.

However, I have sought to show in this article that this approach of imposing a common language is a very dubious one. There are a number of reasons for this. The first is that it is not the pattern of communicating the Christian message which God uses. When revealing Godself in Scripture, God communicates ideas which are expressed by men and women (mostly men) in human language and a cultural idiom (thought categories, moral judgments, etc) specific to the sociohistorical locus of revelation. This was widely understood and accepted by the early church, and in fact John Chrysostom writes of the creation account that the Bible has not one creation account but many, and in each case the truth about creation is 'translated' into the local idiom:

> Don't be surprised, dearly beloved, if Moses followed this procedure speaking as he was at the beginning in the early stages to very down-to-earth Jews, when even Paul in the age of grace, when proclamation of the good news had advanced so much, was able, in the speech he was on the point of delivering to the Athenians, to base his teaching to them on visible realities […] In addressing his letter to the people of Colossae he did not keep to that approach, but addressed them differently, in these words: 'In him were created all things — those in the heaven and on earth, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones, dominations, principalities, powers — all were created by him and with him in mind.' John, the Son of Thunder, by contrast shouted aloud 'Everything was made through him, and without him no single thing was made'.[33]

The ultimate act of God's self-communication, though, is when God translates Godself into human flesh. In this way God in Jesus not only takes on human language but accepts all the limitations of human flesh and living in a human society, down to accepting a legal verdict which sentenced him to death. In Philippians 2:6–8, Paul describes God's act of self-translation as a kenosis, choosing the limitations of human existence at the cost of something we probably cannot imagine.

The point, then, is that the Christian message has only ever existed in translation. There is no privileged language for its communication, nor is there any privileged cultural idiom. God chose to use the vernacular, whether communicating through Scripture or the incarnation, and so should we.

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[33] Robert C. Hill, *Saint John Chrysostom, Homilies on Genesis 1–17* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1986), 2:8.

The second point, though, is that there is in fact only one gospel message, one Jesus Christ who calls all to be his disciples. But every time that gospel message is translated into the vernacular, theological enquiry is undertaken in order to express that message faithfully in the local cultural idiom and language. This means that power to control and define the message shifts away from the source language and culture to the host culture. This surrender of power is precisely what God consents to at some level in the incarnation — again, see Philippians 2:6–8. Thus, we have one gospel message, but a near-infinite multitude of expressions of it. This multiplicity is not a corruption of the purity of the message but is intrinsic to its very nature. The power shifts it produces are entirely consistent with the gospel message of liberation in Christ.

Paradoxically, then, and this is my third point, this diversity springs from unity. It is an inevitable product of remaining faithful to the one God revealed in Jesus Christ, and God's choice of the manner of self-revelation, that the proliferation of translations occurs. Thus, respecting and encouraging this multi-voiced expression of the Christian message is a way of expressing unity in Christ which is far more faithful to him than an imposed cultural or linguistic hegemony would be.

The discussion of the complexity of the Welsh situation should have made it clear that, in virtually any church in Wales, we are not dealing with a monolingual situation. We are not even dealing with a bilingual situation. Even if the only two languages spoken are English and Welsh, the range of formality and fluency within those languages as well as the variation of culture within any one church means that it would be far more appropriate to speak of multilingualism.

The task of the church is to express its unity in Christ by understanding, respecting, and allowing the multilingual and multicultural expressions of faith of its members. This will go much deeper than the simple choice of language use. Each church is going to have to do the hard work of translating the Christian message anew. This can only be done if those responsible for proclaiming the message understand the culture of the congregation, and are willing to surrender their own cultural and linguistic norms in order to provide a faithful translation of the message into the local vernaculars.

In so doing, I suggest that Sanneh's twin concepts of *recipiency* and *reciprocity* may come in useful to structure our thinking. In the context of this article, *recipiency* (as explained above) would describe the hard work of translation that each church leader must do in order to convey the Christian message in the local vernacular(s), thus recognising and yielding control to local culture. *Reciprocity* then occurs when the power shift results in a growth in confidence within the host culture — confidence in their own language, thought forms and idioms, and their ability to express the Christian message *in their own terms*.

> [W]e may say of this reciprocity that if people are trying to learn your language, they can hardly avoid striking up a relationship with you, however much they may wish to dominate you. Assuming that they do wish to dominate you, your best defence is the weapon they have grasped haltingly, namely, your language and all that belongs with it.[34]

Translation is hard work, and maintaining unity in diversity is harder work still. There is no simple algorithm or recipe for this, but instead it seems to me that a constant focus on the translation which God was willing to do of Godself in Christ, accepting its inherent risk of being misunderstood and misinterpreted, should serve as the model for those who wish to work towards unity by recognising and valuing multilingualism. Such an approach results in the reciprocity which Sanneh describes: a growth in confidence in people being able to express their faith with the dignity of children of God.

> God is no further — and no closer — than the language of common discourse, which makes translation a safeguard against believers becoming strangers to God and to one another, and against reducing believers to the status only of clients; translation exists to define the ground of our adoption as God's children, a God who speaks our language and who, in forming us in the accents of birth and nurture, calls us to a united, common purpose.[35]

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[34] Sanneh, *Translating*, p. 210.
[35] Sanneh, *Translating*, p. 98.