

When the Gospel Gets Lost in Translation

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Accurate translation is vitally important. A wrong word changes everything. This article contains illustrations from non-TBS translations of the Bible to demonstrate this important principle, and why it is so important to faithfully translate the Word of God.¹

Most people may never notice anything wrong. They trust their Bibles. Yet key doctrines, including how sinners are saved, have been quietly altered across versions, changing meanings in one language after another. These aren't minor word choices; they materially affect core doctrines.

The changes are not always meant to deliberately obscure the Gospel but as an unintended consequence the meaning may be lost. It might happen because translators either fail to realise that culturally familiar terms carry baggage from false religious systems, or they might believe that making the Bible immediately accessible is more important than preserving what God actually said.

Grace diluted

Inaccuracy can weaken the understanding of grace as revealed in Scripture. The standard Chichewa translation (*Buku Lopatulika*) translates the same Hebrew word for grace as anything from 'liberty' to 'sorrow' to 'good appearance'—preventing readers from tracing God's grace through Scripture.

Translation into tribal languages presents genuine challenges, especially where Biblical concepts have no cultural equivalent. Yet some translators seem to feel they must always use a cultural idea to represent a Biblical truth, rather than enrich it with new truths by coining new words.

For instance, the Uma translation in Indonesia renders 'grace' as 'white insides' to represent a pure emotion. But grace cannot be reduced merely to love, even pure love.

Perfection lost

'Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect' (Matthew 5.48). This absolute standard reveals our inability to keep the law's demands: we need a Saviour. Yet the most popular Turkish Bible (YC 2008) says, 'be competent'. One drives you to your knees for grace, the other sounds like achievable self-improvement.

The Yakan translation for the southern Philippines also sets a reduced standard: 'Therefore you shall be good like your Father in heaven is good'.

Repentance reversed

Every major Tagalog Bible translates 'repentance' as 'pagsisisi', the exact word Filipinos use for Roman Catholic penance, doing acts of remorse to earn God's forgiveness. The Latin Vulgate translated repentance as 'do penance' but when Martin Luther read Mark 1.15 in the Greek New Testament, he realised Biblical repentance was something altogether different.

Similarly, many Hindi translations use 'pashchatap' for repentance (painful regret as penance to earn merit) combined with 'prayashchit' for atonement (rituals to cleanse yourself from sin), creating a works-based Gospel: 'perform rituals to cleanse yourself, feel deep regret to earn forgiveness'.

Readers of 1 John 1.9 in the Spanish *Traducción en Lenguaje Actual* understand that they only have to recognise that they have sinned before God 'reconocemos ante Dios que hemos pecado' rather than actually confess their sins 'confesamos nuestros pecados'. It shapes their understanding of confession and repentance. This is misleading because various individuals in Scripture like Saul and Judas recognised their sin without repenting.

Justification confused

Justification is God's legal declaration that believers are righteous through Christ's work, not a gradual moral transformation (as Roman Catholicism erroneously teaches). Yet the widely distributed Portuguese *Nova Tradução na Linguagem de Hoje* says that God 'nos torna justos' (makes us righteous). Thus, Brazilian readers are in danger of confusing justification (God's declaration that we are righteous through Christ's merit) with sanctification (God's work of making us holy).

Similar issues arise in other translations, such as in the Isthmus Zapotec language (Mexico), which renders justification as moral transformation—'clean hearts'. In Uma it is being 'straight'. In the Indonesian *Bahasa Indonesia Sehari-hari* renders 'justified' in Romans 5.1 as 'kita sudah baik kembali dengan Allah', or 'we are back on good terms with God'. This translation (derived from the Good News Bible) carries the sense of restored social harmony, which, however, obscures the Gospel truth that justification is a formal judicial verdict from God, not merely a subjective shift in a believer's relational status.

Readers of the Spanish *Traducción en Lenguaje Actual* (TLA) likewise have 'aceptado' rather than 'justificados' in Romans 5.1. The idea that God has accepted us may come within the overall idea of justification, but it fails to communicate the fullness of the Biblical doctrine.

Propitiation diminished

Romans 3.25 contains one of the clearest statements of propitiation and the turning aside of God's wrath at the Cross. Yet translations such as the English NIV translate it merely as 'a sacrifice of atonement'. Something similar appears in many cross-cultural translations. An interconfessional translation of the Bible in Chichewa, published in 1999, translates 'nsembe yopepera machimo athu' (a sacrifice for saying sorry for our sins) which entirely misses the satisfaction of God's wrath.

In Ajië (Melanesia) the translators used a term which referred to a leaf used in a traditional religion to heal a wound after the proper sacrifices had been made. But this blending of the ideas and practices of traditional religions risks distorting the truth.

Christ actively turned away wrath but the Louis Segond Bible, the standard Protestant translation in French, calls Christ a 'victime propitiatoire'. This shifts emphasis from Christ's active work to His passive suffering.

Modified Gospel

These mistranslations don't exist in isolation. They accumulate across Scripture, creating texts that deviate increasingly from the original message. At best confusion arises.

The irony cuts deep: these translations were created to make the Bible more accessible. But they've made Biblical Christianity less accessible. For example, when you remove the distinctive vocabulary of grace in Scripture, Christianity sounds like every other religion: be good enough, feel sorry enough, try harder, earn Divine favour, hope for the best.

Dangerous principle

These translators mean well, devoting themselves sacrificially to making Scripture accessible, yet many have embraced a dangerous principle. They think their job is to ensure readers immediately grasp what the text means, even if that requires changing what it says—replacing theological terms with culturally familiar alternatives.

This assumes human understanding trumps Divine revelation, treating the specific words God inspired as disposable packaging rather than the very words the Holy Spirit gave. But God didn't just inspire general concepts—He inspired actual words, and the key question remains: will these translations provide what God said, or replace them with their own reductions of them?

Trusting God

The heart of this issue is simple: Do we trust that God chose His words carefully, or do we think we can improve on them? Christians worldwide deserve Bibles that preserve what God actually said, with the full vocabulary of Biblical faith—justification, propitiation, grace, repentance—accurately rendered so that they can understand the Gospel as God gave it.

These examples from other organisations underline the need for more accurate translation work in these languages and we are thankful for the progress made in TBS projects.

The work of faithful Bible translation continues as we choose accuracy over convenience, trust God's words over human wisdom, and believe what God said is exactly what people need to hear.

First published in Quarterly Record 655. Online edition updated 4 May 2026.

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