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Mother Culture and Mother Tongue

Did you know that in Mexico there are 214 active, pre-Colombian languages spoken throughout the country? Years ago, before I had become interested in Latin America, I thought there were only two principal languages active in this area of the world: Spanish and Portuguese.

But nothing could be farther from the truth. Tucked away throughout the Western Hemisphere are many ethnic communities, which employ a primary language other than Portuguese or Spanish.

This phenomenon is true throughout the world. Wherever there is a dominant culture and language in a particular country, if you look hard enough, you will find many other languages spoken throughout the country.

Not until I started my work with Presbyterian Frontier Fellowship did I realize, for example, that in Siberia alone in northern Russia, there are 147 different, non-Russian languages spoken within many different families, teepees, villages and towns.

In total, it is estimated there are approximately 6,912 active languages in the world today, used by the nearly 6.5 billion people on our planet. Since the time of Christ, but especially since the time of the Reformation in the early 1500s, followers of Jesus have dedicated themselves to translating the Scriptures into the common languages of the people. I personally love the image of Martin Luther hanging out in local taverns using the songs of the town as material for writing some of his most famous hymns. He also worked tirelessly to make the Scriptures available to the townspeople by translating the Bible into the common German language of the time.



It is utterly amazing what the worldwide, Christian community has done over the years to make the Word of God available for people to read in their common language. Christian mission organizations such as Wycliffe Bible Translators have helped provide a New Testament, complete Bible, Jesus Film, or other similar Christian materials to people speaking nearly two-thirds of the known languages in the world today; incredibly only 2,251 languages are now without a written or visual Christian witness.

If you look closely at the life of Jesus, you can see how much importance he placed on the Gospel being explained in the common language or vernacular of the people to whom he was speaking or teaching. Jesus was not some high-falutin,' stuffy theologian uptight to explain every last detail of the great and wondrous mysteries of God. Rather, he was gracious and bent over backwards to reach such people as farmers with agrarian stories, or the neglected and marginalized Samaritans using Samaritan literature and imagery.

We Christians today need to do the same. The easy road for us would be to demand that everyone in the world learn the dominant languages in order to know God; insisting for instance that all people use English, Spanish, Han Chinese, Russian, Hindi or Arabic as their mediums for becoming acquainted with the Gospel message. But, is that what Jesus would want?

We have a saying in my mission organization that every person in the world deserves to know Jesus within their own mother language and culture; that it is incumbent on those who do know Jesus to empty themselves and enter into the unique world of the other person in order to explain the beauty of the Gospel in a way and language that the other person will fully understand.

Unfortunately, this practice is not always followed by Christians. Too often the Church speaks its own language, becomes an inbred club, and demands that the seeker visiting them become like them culturally in order to know God.

Our own heart language, the language taught to us by our mothers, is the place where our most intimate, soulful thoughts dwell. Language is delicate; it is the humans' best attempt at articulating the ineffable, the beauty and grace of God. It is hard enough to know God within our own, born language let alone being forced to use a secondary language to accomplish the same goal.

In the book of Deuteronomy it is written: "Listen, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul, and all your strength. And you must commit yourselves wholeheartedly to these commands that I am giving you today.

Repeat them again and again to your children. Talk about them when you are at home and when you are on the road, when you are going to bed and when you are getting up. Tie them to your hands and wear them on your foreheads as reminders. Write them on the doorposts of your home and on your gates."(Dt. 6: 4-9).

I am grateful to have had a mother who taught me the word of God through her example and her teachings. My mother, Shirley Hamilton McNerney, just passed away last week, so my appreciation and love for her is still very fresh. The Gospel was within my mother and I sensed it in everything she did. It took me years to find faith, but my mother pointed me toward the kingdom and let me take the final leap of trust and belief on my own.

Now I have dedicated my life to helping all the people groups of the world to have the Gospel presented to them within the context of their own indigenous culture and language. My desire is for all the mothers (and fathers) of the world to be able to explain the Good News of Jesus to their children within the beauty and uniqueness of their own language.

Jesus desires it no other way.



Shirley McNerney with her son Dan in Scotland