

## TRANSLATING "THE THINGS WHICH BECOME SOUND DOCTRINE"

The first group of English words and expressions are taken from the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds and the second group from other theological literature. Each of them presents some type of problem or difficulty which arises when a translation is attempted into one (or more) of the Bantu languages of Central Africa. The illustrations are taken mainly from the Chichewa (Chinyanja) language since the writer is most familiar with it, but in many instances they would also apply to other Bantu languages. Accompanying each English example is a brief examination of the problem involved along with proposed or effected solutions. It is hoped that this paper encourages a discussion which will:

- a. elicit similar translational problems from other fields (relating to the topics presented),
- b. produce comments (theological or linguistic) on these various problems and their suggested solutions, and
- c. provide alternative recommendations as to how such difficulties can be solved.

### I.

1. "virgin" (Jungfrau, virgine) - This word presents a bit of a cultural problem, for in Bantu society, although the state of virginity is recognized and in some tribes, at least, a very important factor in marriage customs, most Bantu languages (of Central Africa) do not have a single term to denote a girl who has not had sexual intercourse. In most cases the indigenous word referring to a girl who has undergone the initiation ceremonies and is ready for marriage is being used. Very likely she is actually a virgin, but then again (especially in urban areas), she may not be. An explanatory phrase, which in some cases is rather awkward (e.g., in a creed), would be required to express the full meaning of "virgin," e.g., an initiated girl (one word), who has not "approached" a man (namwali wosayandikana ndi mwamuna).
2. "was conceived" (empfangen ist, conceptus est) - Some Bantu languages (e.g., Chichewa) do not have a term to describe this particular event. A woman can "be conceived" or "become pregnant" (kuima - to stand), but there is no word to refer to the child itself as "being conceived." Chichewa uses the word for "to be given," which although it is rather general, adequately conveys the idea without necessitating a long explanatory phrase that in instances such as this can often get the translator into hot water.
3. "hell" (Hoelle, inferna) - There is naturally no word for "hell" in Bantu languages, since there is no such place in the traditional religious system. Loan words from the Greek or Hebrew (e.g., Hade, gahena) are not really satisfactory since they are "foreign" terms and do not always have the intended effect on new Christians. Words or terminology (excepting personal names) which are not expressed in the indigenous language, do not really "speak the language of the heart," and consequently can be rejected or compromised more easily if they do not agree with the traditional outlook and way of thinking. Is it not possible, then, to combine some of the more prominent components of meanings of "hell" into a compact phrase such as "the place of unending punishment of fire" (malo a chilango chosatha cha moto)? Such a phrase, of course, would have to be adapted to fit the context (e.g., Acts 2:27- the place of dead people -- malo a anthu akufa).
4. "saints" (Heiligen, sanctorum) - The term commonly used for "saints" in Chichewa (oyera mtima - clean/white/holy in heart) is misunderstood by the people (including evangelists) 99% of the time. They think that it refers to those who are without sin or who have died and gone to heaven (the phrase was coined by the R.C. church). In this case it may be preferable simply to use the word for "believers" (okhulupilira), even though it lacks the richness of meaning of the Biblical term. The full meaning can be more

easily taught by "adding on" meaning components to this word rather than trying to "subtract" wrong ones from the other. A statement made by Allbeck may be pertinent here: "The view that the(se) words represent the church of true believers, who are nourished by God's grace, was advocated by Luther, although not original with him."

- 5. "only begotten" (einigen, unigenitum) - At first glance, the words "only begotten" might seem to be rather difficult to convert into the vernacular. This is because the English, unlike the original Greek, is restricted for the most part to theological or liturgical usage and may, in fact, not be the most accurate translation of the Greek "monogenēs" (only-beloved, unique, only one of his kind). In any case, the English expression has picked up a connotation which is not present in the Greek and which, therefore, need not be translated (nor can it). So we follow the German text and translate "only begotten" simply as "only" (einigen-yekha), and "begotten of" as "born of" (geboren ist-wobadwa).
- 6. "before all worlds" (vor der ganzen Welt, ante omnia saecula) - The expression for "world" in Chichewa means literally "the land/country below" (dziko lapansi) and cannot be made plural to convey the meaning intended here. Thus, we again follow the German and keep "world" singular. However, the conjunction "before" cannot be expressed in the vernacular without an accompanying verb, and so the translation, "before the world was created" (dziko lapansi lisanalengedwe).
- 7. "God of God, Light of Light," etc. (Gott von Gott, Licht vom Licht; Deum de Deo, lumen de lumine) - Can someone suggest a simple transform of these genitive constructions that would clearly express their intended meaning? The English "of" linking two nouns is very ambiguous since potentially it can relate the two nouns in so many different ways (e.g., origin, possession, association, qualification, relation, etc.). The Bantu qualifying particle can be used to translate the English "of" in every occurrence -- and this leads to just as much ambiguity in the vernacular. Is there, then, another expression possible which would make the intended meaning more explicit (e.g., He is true God)?
- 8. "being of one substance with the Father" (mit dem Vater in einerlei Wesen, consubstantialem Patri) - Fortunately, we do not have the same theological problem as the early Church with this expression (i.e., homoousios vs. homoiouosios), but we do have a lot of linguistic difficulty in translating the word "substance." The word presently being used in the Chichewa is derived from the common English meaning of "substance," that is, the physical matter of which a thing consists (chipangizo, from kupanga - to make). This translation, of course, is not compatible with the Biblical teaching that God is a spirit "that hath not flesh and bones."

And so, following the German, we try to convert "being" or "essence" into the vernacular. The trouble with this is that there is no indigenous word in Chichewa (Tonga - bukale-?) to express this abstraction. We can follow the natural word forming patterns and coin the word "ukhale" (being-ness), which according to our way of thinking, should adequately convey the concept -- but does it work for the native speaker? In this instance, he would probably confuse our creation with the verb form which is spelled the same, meaning "you sit!" or with the common word "ukali," meaning "anger."

The only other possibility is to use the familiar word "ukhalidwe," which has a rather wide area of meaning ("disposition, character, custom, habit," and perhaps even "nature," depending on the context). At least we would be better off than the English!

- 9. "was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man..." (leibhaftig geworden...und Mensch geworden; incarnatus est... et homo factus est) -

The word "incarnate" also presents a number of difficulties for the translator. There is no one word

equivalent for this term and one has to be careful which expression he uses to translate it. "Became flesh, i.e., meat," would be nonsense, while "was given/took on a human body" could easily give rise to Nestorian ideas. Thus, in the interest of meaningfulness, some restructuring is necessary. Is it possible, then, to combine the above phrases and translate as follows: "became man with a true (real) body through the Holy Spirit (German-durch) and was born of (by) the Virgin Mary"? Such a translation would combine the two expressions, "was incarnate" and "was made man," and would also present the participants involved, i.e., the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, in a form easier to understand in the vernacular.

10. "crucified...under Pontius Pilate" (gekreuzigt...unter Pontio, crucifixus...sub Pontio) -

The preposition "under" in Bantu languages is used strictly in a locative sense -- it cannot be extended (naturally) in meaning as in English to denote "subject to the control, authority, sanction, etc., of someone." Therefore, the phrase has to be altered to <sup>something like</sup> "crucified according to the command of Pontius Pilate."

11. "the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of Life" (den Herrn, Dominum) -

The use of the title "Lord" to refer to the Holy Spirit presents a semantic problem in the vernacular since it is used almost exclusively as referring to Jesus Christ and sometimes to God in general (Ambyeye - sir, uncle, title of respect; Mwami - chief). And so it causes some confusion for the new Christian when the Holy Spirit is called "Lord;" to him it may seem just another name for Christ. Under these circumstances it would be advisable to substitute "(who is) ~~Lord~~" for "Lord" in the vernacular.

The Ruler/Controller

12. "one holy Catholic and Apostolic Church" (christliche/apostolische; catholicam/apostolicam) -

Most Christian churches since the time of Luther have altered the original "Catholic" to "Christian" so as to avoid confusing the term with the Roman Church. This is also necessary when translating into the vernacular, and I think we even have to go a step further and alter the "Apostolic" (also in English). The reason for this is that most pentecostal-type or holiness church bodies are called "apostolic" even in the vernacular. Therefore, either we should omit the term, allowing it also to be covered by "Christian," or we can restructure the entire expression to read "Christian Church, which began at the time of the Apostles (of Christ)" or "which teaches as the Apostles (of Christ) taught."

13. "life of the world to come" (ein Leben der zukuenftigen Welt) -

Since "world" (cf. No. 6) among the Bantu is thought of as referring only to physical life here on earth, this expression perhaps should be altered to "future (eternal) life in heaven." This would avoid any millennialistic interpretations.

## II.

1. "soul"- This is understandably a rather difficult word to translate into a Bantu language due to the different religious outlook of the people (traditional) and concept of man's nature. The terms which are presently being used ("moyo" - life - Chewa; "muuya" - breath - Tonga) are not often properly understood by the people. Perhaps a better word to use in both languages is "spirit" (mzimu, muzimo) which denotes the disembodied spirit of a person who has died. This "spirit" continues to communicate with the living (dreams, omens, etc.) and exerts its influence in various ways in the affairs of everyday life. Thus, the word also tends to have a negative connotation (from the Christian point of view) which warrants caution in using it. However, depending on the context, the Biblical concept of "soul" is more accurately communicated by "spirit" than by the other alternatives.

2. "this is my body" (das ist mein Leib, touto mou estin to soma) - The translation of the little demonstrative "this" leads to many problems in Bantu languages due to their characteristic concordial agreement, which does not distinguish only three noun classes (M/F/N) as in Greek and German, but as many as 18.

The Greek neuter "this" (touto) can not refer to "bread" (hos artos), which is masculine, and while it could grammatically refer to "body" (to soma), most Lutheran commentators have it referring to "the bread which is sacramentally one with Christ's body" (Luther).

The problem is that in the vernacular, there is no specifically "neuter" class, and yet "this" must be put into some class in order to translate it. The demonstrative "ili" (in Chichewa) would refer to "body" alone while "uwu" would refer to "bread" alone. However, there is a certain concord class which consists almost entirely of inanimate things or concepts and which covers the usage "this" in a general, non-specific sense; it is the closest we can come in Bantu to an indefinite, neuter class ("ichi").

And so this is how we have translated "this," even though it sort of "grates" on the ears of the Chichewa speaking people. It does not "sound" right to them, but seems to be poor grammar, for there is no noun of this particular class to which "this" can refer, and yet it is surrounded by two likely prospects (i.e., bread and body). Often an evangelist when speaking these words, either consciously or unconsciously will substitute one of the two other demonstratives for "ichi." To them, Lutheran doctrine is most clearly expressed by saying explicitly "this bread is my body" (mkato uwu ndi thupi langa). This is, in fact, how the Tonga most likely understand this sentence, for in their language "bread" happens to belong to this very "ci" class (cinkwa).

← NOTE:

In "this is my blood" (touto estin to haima mou), the "this" (ichi) in both Chichewa and Chitonga would be taken as referring to the "cup," which is of the same concord class (chikho, cinywido). It could refer either to the wine or the blood, which are of different classes in both languages.

In this connection, I think it would be advisable to add the words "of wine" after "He took the cup." This information is definitely implicit in the context, being mentioned both before and after the words of institution (depending on the account). Therefore, it should be made explicit for our people, many of whom perhaps, would not take it for granted that the cup contained wine due to their lack of religious and Biblical background knowledge. This would also serve to get all four elements which are present in the Lord's Supper mentioned by name.

3. Means of Grace - This seemingly simple expression, the proper understanding of which is so important for the Christian, presents some rather complicated problems for the translator into Bantu. It begins with a difficult noun to convert and ends with one, the situation being worsened by the ambiguous connector "of" in between.

By definition, the Means of Grace are "those things by which God offers and gives His gifts of forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation -- the Gospel of Christ in Word and Sacrament" (Catechism). Mueller (Christian Dogmatics) calls them "certain external, visible means through which the Holy Spirit works and preserves faith and thus accomplishes the sinner's salvation."

Let us begin by a consideration of the word "means." Webster defines "means" as "that by which something is done or obtained," that is, the "agency" through which an action is carried out. The actor and the action in this case can easily be supplied from Mueller's definition quoted above. But let us just note here that an agency must be closely connected with an action; this will be important when we consider some possible translations for "grace."

But would there be anything wrong in having "this" refer to the predicate noun "body"? This seems to be the simplest interpretation of the Greek text and it certainly would lead to a more acceptable and understandable translation in the vernacular (cf. Pieper - Dogmatics, vol. III, p. 300). Our Lutheran Doctrine on the Lord's Supper is not built on this passage alone!

Our difficulties begin as we try to find a word which corresponds to the English "means" in the vernacular. There is no exact equivalent. Therefore, we must search for a word (or phrase) that comes closest in meaning and usage. A native speaker will invariably give us a definition of "means" meaning "to signify, denote, convey, import" (as in "flee means to run away"). And so, our investigation process becomes one of suggesting and testing various alternatives. At first we came up with the word which means literally, "a container or vessel for carrying something" (chotengera, cibwezeelo). But there is a good chance that such usage could lead to a Roman conception of grace as an "infused" quality, given as a gift of God, which dwells in the soul of man and by the aid of which he is to do good and obtain forgiveness. The "container" idea tends to limit grace to some "thing" which can be conveyed to a person and may influence especially new Christians to focus their attention on some expected object instead of upon an event as intended.

Another possibility for translating "means" is the vernacular word for "way, path." This word, as in English, can be used in the extended sense of "a course of action; a method or manner of doing something" (cf. also German "Mittel" - way, measure, means). At first this alternative might seem to be an oversimplification of the concept of "means," but I think that if we carefully consider the essential meaning of the entire expression "Means of Grace," we will find that this is perhaps the closest we can come in the vernacular. Granted, the word "ways" is somewhat general, but it does contribute toward putting the phrase in a context of action which will make it easier to teach the people what the Means of Grace actually are. This may become clearer after we have discussed the second half of this term -- "grace."

Luther defines saving grace (charis soterios) as "God's love or favor, which He cherishes toward us in Himself." Koehler (Summary of Christian Doctrine) goes into more detail -- "the grace by which God saves is a personal attribute or quality in God, which manifests itself in His attitude toward man and in His promises and gifts, but which is not imparted to man. It is that merciful, affectionate disposition, that good will of God toward men, according to which He forgives sins to those who are worthy of eternal death. It is the unmerited love of God toward men (John 3:16; Titus 3:4,5)." We want to stress the fact that saving grace is an attribute of God which is revealed in God's actions or dealings with sinful men.

Some difficulty arises because Scripture also uses "grace" to describe the spiritual gifts, qualities, or powers which God graciously works in all believers (1 Peter 2:19; 4:10; Romans 15:15,16). In this case the effect or result, by way of metonymy, is named after the cause, the gifts of grace are named after their divine Source. Here is where the Roman Church goes astray and invents the notion of "infused grace," which results from their confusing and combining grace itself and the gifts of grace. So also, this figurative usage of grace (i.e., as a metonym for "gifts of grace") can lead to the same type of confusion for our African Christians if we are not careful to distinguish it clearly in our writing or translating. This is true not only for the expression "Means of Grace," but whenever we use the word "grace" in our literature. While the church is still young, it would be best to avoid potentially misleading expressions like: grant us Thy grace, God has given us grace, grace be to you, etc., and restrict our usage of "grace" to an attribute of God which He manifests in all of His saving actions toward us. This will better enable us to preserve a proper distinction between these two, that is, between God's unmerited favor and His benefactions in the believer's heart.

In both Chewa and Tonga there is no word which corresponds to the Greek "charis" or even the more restricted English word "grace" or "unmerited favor." Words denoting "love" and "mercy" are present, but that is as close as we can come with individual words. The Tonga seems to have a word (depending on the dialect area) which may be used as a substitute without too great a loss in meaning -- that is "luzyalo," which describes a deep, self-sacrificing love/mercy that moves one to take the problems of others upon himself. Chewa conveys "favor/kindness as shown by one's action" with a verbal phrase "kukoma mtima" (to be good/kind/pleasing in heart). A clear, though somewhat lengthy, expression for "Means of Grace"

would be "the ways which God uses in favoring us" (literal translation of -- njila zimene Mulungu azigwiritsa nchito potikomera mtima). A shorter and less explicit phrase would be "the ways of God's favor" (njila za kukoma mtima kwa Mulungu) or using the word for "love" plus a defining verbal -- "ways of the unexpected/undeserved/unawaited for love of God (njila za chikondi chosayembekezera cha Mulungu).

I feel that "God" should be included in whichever expression we use. Otherwise, it will not be sufficiently "marked" in the vernacular to be recognized by the people, or worse, they may be led to think that these "means/ways" work of themselves ex opere operatum to convey their blessings. The word "grace" marks the English since it is used only in religious contexts, i.e., it is a "technical" word.

The main consideration in our search for a translation of "Means of Grace" has been to try to find an expression which will not deny or obscure the fact that they are ways/means through which our gracious God works His salvation in the hearts of sinful men.

The preceding examples are merely a sample of the many theological terms and expressions which require some type of alteration or restructuring if we intend to translate them meaningfully into a Bantu language. We hope that they have served to illustrate and explain the methods involved in carrying out this process. There are many other, similar terms which we have to deal with in like manner as we carry on our work of preaching the Gospel in Central Africa, such as: "natural man," "spiritual gifts," "sinful flesh," "real presence," "personal union," "confirmation," "dedication," and so on, to mention some of the more important. And we have not even begun to grapple with terms like: "communication of attributes -- idomatic, majestic, apotelesmatic," "concurrence of God," "enthusiasm," "dichotomy," and others (some of which have not even been translated into English), which develop the fine points of Lutheran theology as set forth in our Confessions.

Now, what does all this have to do with the subject for which we are gathered here in Zambia -- how does it apply to our Worker-Training Program? And what does it mean for us as instructors at Bible Institutes and Seminaries? The simple answer is -- everything!

We may instruct our students largely or even entirely in English (or some other trade language), but is this the language which they will use when communicating the Gospel message to their people? Even if it were possible, that is, to preach and teach the people in English, it would not be desirable for the following reason:

Language has three primary functions -- (1) the informative, (2) the emotive, and (3) the imperative function. We can readily see that English learned as a second language since it is the language of government, a widely used trade language, or the language of education, easily fulfills function No. 1. It does transmit information. However, it seldom has emotive value for the non-native speaker; he does not express his inner feelings (joy, anger, hope, sorrow, etc.) by means of it. Likewise, English learned as a second language is often very restricted in its imperative function. As a result, any message conveyed in it can do little to change a person's moral and religious values.

As bearers of the Good News of salvation through Jesus Christ, we are very much concerned about the imperative function of language. We want our people to believe and obey the Gospel, that is, not only to "speak" the things which become sound doctrine, but to live them. And to accomplish this we must use the "language of the heart." By this we mean the language in which a person normally experiences and expresses his deepest feelings, the language he uses at home with family and friends -- his "mother tongue." This is the language used when he wishes to receive or transmit the most important things in life, as far as he is concerned. And it is this language which must also be used to bring the Gospel message to him -- if it is to have any real and lasting effect on his life, for he, too, wants God to "speak his language."

And so, it is one of our most important tasks to see to it that the students whom we instruct are able to convert the "sound doctrine" which they have learned into their own language, both idiomatically and accurately. As the preceding examples have shown, this is not always an easy thing to do. It takes a lot of time, toil, and testing. Many times we will be forced to give up the form of a word or expression in order to convey effectively its true meaning. But with the help of God, who has commanded us to preach His Word to people of all nations, our efforts toward this end will not be in vain. And as a result of the Holy Spirit working through that Word, we, too, will experience the joy that the first disciples must have felt on Pentecost Day as they saw the people "all excited, because each one of them heard the believers talking in his own language. In amazement and wonder they exclaimed... 'all of us hear them speaking in our own languages of the great things that God has done!'" (Acts 2: 6,7, 11 - TEV).

E. R. Wendland  
Lutheran Bible Institute and Seminary

Lusaka, Zambia  
April, 1972