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GOD'S LIVING WORD FOR ALL PEOPLE

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*A Faith-based Ministry Sustained Through the Faithful Prayers and Partnership of God's People*

## Understanding Co-locational Clash, Part II

### "Potential Challenges in Thai Bible Translation"

By Ron Myers

Dear Friends and Supporters,

In my March newsletter, I explained the term *Co-locational Clash* as two or more conflicting concepts trying to occupy the same space in the hearer's mind simultaneously, hampering clear communication. This clash results in either a lack of clarity or total misunderstanding. It occurs when missionaries or lay Christians seek to present the Gospel in an effectual and impelling manner among unreached people groups. As an example, I used the phrase "God Loves you and Jesus Died for your sins." It's easily understood by the Western mind, and misconstrued by the Eastern mind, those not having grown up under a Judeo-Christian biblical worldview.

**Co-locational Clash:** Collisions or incongruity between opposing worldviews occur while translating the Bible into the heart languages of people without a Judeo-Christian worldview. The opposite of Co-locational Clash is *concordance*, meaning congruity or harmony. Also, the greater a translator's fluency and range of vocabulary in the target language, and astute working knowledge of their way of life, the lesser the incidence of the *Co-locational Clash* problem occurring.

The Bible is God's living Word, inspired by the breath of God and inerrant in the original autographs. It is the only means of knowing the revealed truth about God, His character, Creation, Angels, Lucifer's fall, Adam and Eve—our original parents, the Fall of mankind, the present human condition, God's Love and Plan of Redemption, His will for our lives, future events, etc. It is humankind's only hope and answer for a lost and dying world. Therefore, Bible translation is both a science and an art; a bridge of communication that brings God's eternal Word from ancient times into our contemporary cultures and societies.

According to "Translating the Word of God," a classic written by Beekman and Callow (ISBN 0-310-20771-1), old-school Wycliffe Bible translators, the formal or literal approach is best in seeking to accurately render the sacred message from the original Koine Greek and ancient Hebrew texts into present-day languages. However, if a formal or literal translation approach is not workable, they suggest sequential steps in translation technique.

**Metaphor and Simile** (i.e., idioms and analogies): Languages and cultures are inseparable since one reflects the other. This is often seen in idiomatic expressions. American Baseball is a good example, of which there are many examples. Two of these are: If I tell you something is fairly close, I might say, "It's in the ballpark." Or, if someone is trying to accomplish something undoable, I might remark that "He'll never get to first base doing it that way." An American or Canadian audience readily understands these expressions; however, to the native-born people of Thailand, *unfamiliar* with baseball and its idiomatic expressions, these expressions draw a blank. And, if I translate these expressions literally into Thai, the result would be unreadable wordage.

**Sports Analogies:** Paul, an obvious sports enthusiast, used many Olympic analogies *familiar* his hearers throughout his letters to the churches of the region. Following are descriptive sports-related terms the Apostle Paul used in his epistles (with approximate counts): run (9); race (3); win (5); beat (1); lose (4); loss (5); wrestle (1); compete (3); complete (1); crown-ed (4/3); excel (1); strive/-ing (3/6); prize (3); fought (2); fight/box (4/1); finish/finished [the race] (1/1).

**Note:** "Fight the good fight of faith" (1 Timothy 6:12), translated literally is, *Strive for excellence in the arena of faith.*

The idioms and analogies in the Bible are more easily understood by those of us with biblical exposure. Yet, these same terms can be misconstrued by the uninitiated reader who does not understand the point of reference or attribute being alluded to. Take Jesus' statement concerning Herod for instance, "Go, tell that fox, 'Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I shall be perfected'" (Luke 13:32). Jesus is referring to His earthly goal being finished—dying as the Sacrificial Lamb of God for the sin of the world (John 1:29).

In this passage, Jesus used a metaphor, naming only the subject, Herod, without the point of reference, a fox. This was understood by His hearers. We too understand what Jesus meant, that Herod was a sly and crafty individual. We even have the expressions, “Sly as a fox,” and “That sly old fox.” But what about the ethnic people group into whose language the Bible is being translated? How might they interpret a *fox* as Jesus referred to Herod? They may attribute Jesus’ statement as meaning Herod had bushy red hair, skinny legs, or was a fast runner. Using proper translation principles, we might need to turn the metaphor into a simile (point of reference) by saying “Go, tell that sly fox, Herod, Behold, I..”

**Grace:** A primary theme of the Thai culture is to recompense for a kindness shown or to return in kind the favor done. It’s called Boon Koon (บุญคุณ – *recompense for a favor shown*), not to be confused with the negative term *payback*. The Thai Bible’s term for Grace is Phra Kun (พระคุณ), meaning divine favor or goodness. I wasn’t aware of the close proximity in the minds of newly-saved Thai Christians to their (not always negative) cultural practices until I held a meeting to check the newly finished book of Ephesians for accuracy, fluency, and correct understanding.

Participants of these informal conversations are known as *Uninitiated Native-born Speakers* (UNS), i.e., anyone not having assisted with the translation. They can give a fresh, unbiased opinion, either affirming a passage’s validity or uncover unforeseen anomalies. When I asked what *Phra Kun* (*Royal-Favor*) meant, they all replied, *Grace*. All except one man, a new believer, who said, “I think Phra Kun is like Boon Koon (*recompense for a favor shown*). Now that I’m saved, I need to return the favor by doing good things for God.” Hmm, that’s a fresh approach. Not bad, I thought, since it aligns with Ephesians 2:10. Paul encouraged believers to do good works which God foreordained (prepared beforehand) that we should walk in them. I also felt that reviewing Ephesians 2:8-9 was in order in case the man had confused Grace alone, apart from works, with Grace reinforced by works, very common among Thai Christians

**Savior:** One word, like Savior, in Greek or English, becomes a phrase in Thai. The term for Savior used by Thailand’s Evangelical Christendom is “The Deity Who Helps to be Saved” (พระผู้ช่วยให้รอด). This term was translated by the Thai Bible Society in all their translations. The *intended* meaning is the one who stoops down and saves the helplessly lost. Sounds perfect. Yet this phrase creates a huge cultural collision, or, Co-locational Clash, since it has the very real potential of confusing Thai Christians (and unbelieving onlookers) as to Jesus’ role as Savior. The same term, “the one who helps,” means *an assistant* in the Thai language. This turns Christ’s eternal position as God the Son into a mere assistant, i.e., one who “helps” Christians to complete their quest for Salvation. *I strive to do my part and Jesus helps me by doing the rest*. I believe most Thai translations unwittingly promote a *works salvation*, causing Thais to doubt their security in Christ.

Many Thais live in small towns and rural villages, and every rural village has a villager appointed to be their *Village Headman*. Each Headman has at least one appointed assistant, a *gofer* whose duties include running errands or doing the “small stuff” for the headman. A headman’s assistant’s roles, among other duties, are to sweep the meeting hall floor, and set up the chairs for meetings, run errands for the headman, etc. So, to Thai Christendom, is Jesus truly their Savior (The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, including theirs) or merely their *assistant*?

When I did the Isan translation, I modified the Thai Bible Societies’ version of Savior from helper to The Merciful Deity Who Saves (พระผู้โปรดให้รอด) by replacing the word *help* (ช่วย), with *mercy* (โปรด). This phrase speaks way more accurately to the Thai or Isan reader. I’ll be using this same term for Savior in my new *Spoken Thai Colloquial New Testament* Thai Christians have asked me to do. It’s now in its pre-production stages. Incidentally, there’s a perfect shorter term used by Thai Catholics: The Redeemer (พระผู้ไถ่), which means The Redeemer.

**Salvation:** As I elaborated on in my previous newsletter, trying to approach a Thai person using western methods fails most of the time due to Co-locational Clash, incongruity of cultures and worldviews. As I wrote above, the Thai have cultural theme of “return good a favor done,” or, “recompense for a kindness shown.” This affects their understanding of Salvation by Grace alone, through faith alone, apart from good deeds. The potential problem is, believing they should recompense God for the Salvation. What to do? It’s simple. Teach God’s Word directly using Titus 3:4-6 and Ephesians 2:8-9 & 10 (Salvation by faith apart from works). Emphasize verse ten (recompense), saying that since we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, we should recompense God for granting us Salvation by living in a manner glorifying to Him, doing the good works which He ordained, that we should walk in.

One problem is, the Thai have grown up in a society where the state-ordained religion, Theravada Buddhism, teaches them that practicing a list of good deeds will gain them salvation, i.e., make enough merit to attain a metaphysical state called Nirvana where nothing remains of them to be reincarnated back into this world, fraught with pain, sickness, suffering, and death. Their worldview lacks the important knowledge of the Creator, and origins. Although all Thais adore nature, they’re totally oblivious of the Creator God who made all things. Nor do they know the true identity of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. He’s the eternal God-man, the I AM, the “Lamb of God who came take away their every sin,” not the foreigner’s Buddha who teaches people to practice good deeds.

**An Example:** The following passage, Mark 2:1-12, is a sample incongruous cultural problem where culture and lifestyle differences cause Co-locational Clash. The points of potential misconstruing the text are (1) the house and its roof, (2) the paralytic's bed, and (3) the miracle that took place. Christ's physical healing of the life-long paralytic, whereupon he was able to arise and walk caused the people present to exclaim they saw a great miracle that day. What might have been the perceived miracle in the minds of the Thai reader in light of these three points?

The house was ordinary, possibly belonging to a friend where Jesus stopped by and began to teach, resulting in a packed house. Homes of that era were of single-story adobe construction with an outside stairway leading to a flat roof, possibly with a capped off hatch. Whereas, homes in Thailand are two-story wood framed structures with wood siding around the top floor, and bricked-in outer walls on the lower section, a cement floor, and pitched roofs with galvanized tin or ceramic tile. That style is what Thai might picture while reading in this account.

All present exclaimed they had witnessed a great miracle that day, having seen the formerly helpless paralytic rise, gather up his bedding and walk away by Jesus' command. What might the Thai who read the Bible account thought in light of their culture? Was the miracle they perceived the same as the witnesses, or, might be the four men defying gravity walking up the house wall with the paralytic? ...an interesting thought in light of how their houses are constructed.

**Translation Analogy:** Translation from biblical languages into other languages has been compared to pouring water from a container of one size and shape into one of different dimensions. The water being poured is God's written Word being translated from the original language into another, filtered through the translator's own language. The message *must* remain the same. The differences in size and shape of the containers corresponds to differences between the language and culture of the people into which God's Word is being translated from Bible times. To do an effective job, the translator needs specific tools and skills.

**Skills:** These include correct translation philosophy (cf. Beekman and Callow's textbook), dedication, basic linguistic training, a working knowledge of language and culture acquisition principles. Most of all, one needs friendly acceptance and a comradery with the people whose heart language into which her or she is attempting to translate God's living Word. In short, any translator must be able to speak the language fluently and know the culture. Both are important since one reflects the other.

**Tools:** In years past, before the digital age (pre-1980s), translators used pencil, paper, and many erasures. And, a large table to spread out their array of Bibles, commentaries, dictionaries, and lexicons, including old manual typewriters. That's how I started. Steve Jobs' not new invention, the now-primitive Apple II, had hit the worldwide market. Despite my year-long prayers for an Apple II, they went unanswered. God seemed to be saying, "No, Ron, I've got something much better for you."

**Answered Prayer:** Later, I was invited to an office products exhibition in Bangkok by owners of the Thai Olympia Co. where I bought an electronic Thai-Eng typewriter. Among the myriad of displays, I saw a high state-of-the-art-tech, desktop computer, a Victor 9000 (Sirius in Europe and Asia). It had a high-definition screen, plenty of on-board memory, and 2.4 meg capacity disks—all unrivaled at that time. It came bundled with utility software able to create Thai characters on-screen, and a programable text editor. Everything I needed for only \$6,000, *way* beyond my meager budget. After circling back numerous times to stare wistfully, I sensed the Lord whispering in my heart, "Do you think I could supply that for you?" I managed to squeak out a weak affirmative, then continued on, telling no one. God worked and people responded. Two months later I owned one, along with a new state-of-the-art Olympia electronic Thai-English typewriter that doubled as a printer.

**Conclusion:** The further a Bible translator's target language and worldview from that of the Bible, the more likely *co-locational clash* may occur, to which translators must remain aware since it can affect both accuracy and fluency of their work. For instance, the Thai people's oriental worldview is metaphysical and abstract in nature, transcending physical and natural laws of rhyme and reason.

May God Bless and Prosper You,



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Consequently, unlike our Judeo-Christian worldview, the Thai lack any awareness of biblical origins, like a Creator God, and Jesus' identity as Savior, Lord, and sustainer of all things, not the foreigners' religious guru. These pose unforeseen witnessing challenges. Praise God, after decades of missionary endeavor, the Thai are beginning to acknowledging God's existence. Though they don't seek Him, they are beginning to have a God-consciousness.

**Pray** with us that the Holy Spirit's convicting power will flood over Thailand, that storybook land of golden temples and spirit shrines. **Pray** for a spiritual awakening in the hearts of the Thai people. My Considering Creation booklet helps do that as they read it and give it to others, saying, "I never thought about it, but there must be a Creator." We must print more. **Pray** that my coworker Baaw-Ter's wife, Ju', will leave Buddhism and receive Christ. **Pray** as I return to Thailand in mid-May to advise the Chinese house church and do Bible translation.